



*Collection:* **SAINTS**

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**SHALOM**  
editrice

Via Galvani, 1  
60020 Camerata Picena (AN)  
Italy

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# *The Life of Saint Benedict*

BY DOM MARIANO GROSSO

The life of Saint Benedict was written by Saint Gregory the Great (540-604) in the years 593-594. Benedict was born in Norcia in about 480. He had a sister, Scholastica, who is thought to have been his twin. He was sent to Rome to study literature and law, but because he did not wish to be led astray by his dissolute fellow students, he left Rome with his nurse, and travelled to Enfide (today Affile, in the province of Rome), where through the power of prayer, he repaired a sieve, which had been lent to his nurse but fell off a table, breaking into two pieces. He then left Affile and travelled to Subiaco to become a hermit. Near Mount Taleo, he met the monk Romanus, who showed him a cave, appointed him a monk and brought him food.

After three years, on Easter day, a pious priest from the area saw the young hermit in

a vision and went to visit him, bringing him food. After some time, Benedict was also discovered by shepherds. Many people came to him, asking for advice and his prayers. One day the devil, in the form of a blackbird, prevented him from praying; Benedict drove him away by making the sign of the cross, but immediately afterwards a strong and impure desire arose in him through the memory of a girl; to overcome the temptation, he rolled naked among the thorns and defeated the temptation forever!

His reputation of holiness had spread throughout the surrounding area. Some monks invited him to be their superior, but after a while, not happy with him, they decided to kill him with poisoned wine. When Benedict blessed the cup of wine, it shattered and he realised that it had been poisoned; he left the monks and returned to the cave. Of the many people who came to him, some asked to be his disciples. Benedict left the cave and, near the ruins of Nero's villa and the artificial lake, he founded the first monas-

tery and wrote the first draft of the Rule, later going on to build another twelve monasteries. Several interesting events occurred in the monasteries: in one of the monasteries, during the *lectio divina*, a monk who had been tempted by the devil, rebelled; Benedict beat him and chased away the devil. The monks of three monasteries, which were a long way from the Aniene river, wanted to build their monasteries elsewhere, so that they would not need to go down to the river every day to draw water; Through prayer, Benedict caused a spring to flow near the monasteries. One day, a Goth, who was working near Nerone lake, lost the blade of his scythe in the lake; Benedict plunged the handle in the water and the blade, which emerged, reattached itself to the handle. Placido, a boy, fell into a lake while drawing water; Mauro, a young monk, was ordered by Benedict to save him and when he reached Mauro and pulled him out of the water he realised that he had been walking on the water. Fiorenzo, the parish priest of Subiaco, became envious

of Benedict's fame and sent him poisoned bread to kill him, but the Saint realised that the bread was poisoned and gave it to a crow to carry it away. Fiorenzo did not give up: he sent girls to tempt the monks while they were at work; Benedict drove them away, but after this decided to leave Subiaco. He set off towards Cassino. During his travels he learned that Fiorenzo had died, when the terrace of his house collapsed, but Benedict did not return.

On reaching Cassino, Benedict went up into the nearby mountain and, after destroying the pagan temples, founded a monastery there. While constructing the monastery, the devil made one of the stones so heavy that it was impossible to lift, but the Saint blessed it to make it light enough to carry. On another occasion, the devil started a blazing fire, which frightened the monks, but the Saint told them that it was only an imaginary fire created by Satan.

Benedict had the gift of knowing hidden and future events: on one occasion he grant-



ed forgiveness to a number of monks who, when questioned by him, had not confessed to having eaten away from the monastery; another time he forgave the brother of the monk Valentinian who had been fasting when he went to visit, but along the journey, accepted lunch from someone who was indeed the devil. In 542 he met Totila, king of the Ostrogoths, to whom he predicted the year of his death; he also prophesied the destruction of Rome by hurricanes, in the time of Saint Gregory the Great. He told a cleric, who had been freed from the devil, not to enter the priesthood, otherwise the devil would strike him to death; the cleric wished however to become a priest, but the devil led him to his death. He also predicted the destruction of Montecassino by the Lombards in 583.

Benedict was very charitable with the sick and poor: he healed a person whose skin was swollen and purulent; he helped a poor man in debt; he healed another who had been poisoned. He ordered that the last bottle of oil

in the monastery be delivered to the deacon Agapito; the bursar monk did not obey him and the Saint had the bottle thrown out of the window; it did not break, it was recovered and handed over to the deacon; he then gathered himself in prayer with the brothers and obtained oil in abundance. He freed a monk, to whom the devil, in the guise of a veterinarian, had given a purgative. A farmer oppressed by the Goth Zalla claimed that he had given his worldly possessions to the Saint; upon being bound and taken to Benedict, the saint freed him and admonished the Goth. A farmer, whose son had died, begged the Saint to bring him back to life; and in the end obtained the grace he had asked for.

Benedict, and his sister, St. Scholastica, whose monastery was on the Cassino plain, met once a year in a small house, not far from Montecassino. Their last conversation took place in 547. Scholastica, who wanted her brother to stay for the whole night, prayed and was granted a very violent thun-

derstorm, and Benedict was forced to return to the monastery only the next day. Three days after their conversation, he saw his sister's soul, in the form of a dove, going to heaven. He arranged for her to be buried in Montecassino.

One night, while praying, Benedict had a vision of the world in a ray of sunshine and the soul of Germanus, the holy bishop of Capua, rising to heaven. On 21 March 547, after receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist, Benedict, assisted by two monks, he surrendered his soul to God. Two monks saw a luminous path: it was the path on which he had ascended to God. His was buried in the parish of San Giovanni, next to his sister. In the end, Saint Gregory recounts that a madwoman spent the night in the cave of Subiaco and in the morning was found to have been healed. After the study carried out in 1950, it was confirmed that the bodies of Benedict and Scholastica had always remained in Montecassino.