

# The Many Faces of Benedictine Life – The Benedictine Confederation: Witness to Diversity-in-Unity



*Brother John*

**BENEDICTINE MONKS ARE MEMBERS OF LOCAL MONASTERIES OR COMMUNITIES**, called either abbeys or priories. Monastic profession, or commitment, is made to the local community, not to the larger congregation or religious order. Benedictine monks are not, strictly speaking, members of a world-wide "order." There is, really, no such thing as a "Benedictine Order." There is, however, *a confederation of autonomous monasteries which follow the Rule of Saint Benedict*, which is known as the "Benedictine Confederation."

The Benedictine Confederation came into being only at the close of the nineteenth century. Its formation was an effort of Benedictine communities to accommodate the wishes of Pope Leo XIII, as he sought to bring more unity to monastic and religious life in the church. Paradoxically, the creation of the Benedictine Confederation was at the same time something of a resistance, on the part of the abbots and priors, to the pressures for greater centralization within the Catholic Church.



From its inception, monastic life in the church has been a spiritual *movement*. As the church succumbed to the temptation to assume power and adopt the ways of the empire in the fourth century, monastic communities sprang up as a reminder of the Gospel call to simplicity, service, and humility.

The early monastic communities gathered locally around spiritual leaders. Gradually, in order to hand on the wisdom of these early communities to new generations, *monastic rules* began to be written. In time, Saint Benedict's sixth century *Rule for Monks* became the uniting element for monastic communities in the West.

Each monastery existed as a Christian family, united from within by the authority of the community, the Gospel, and the Rule of Benedict. The understanding of the Rule of Benedict as a wise guide to a Gospel way of life was developed within each monastery. Over the course of time, some monasteries joined together in their understanding of the Rule, either with communities which had sprung from them, or with others already established in their region.

While they combined some resources, and shared some understandings of the Rule of Benedict, they remained autonomous monasteries within "Congregations." They prized their autonomy, ensuring a variety of communal expression rooted in a shared monastic spirit.

Diversity has thus been characteristic of Benedictine life since its beginnings. This diversity-with-unity remains an important contribution of Benedictine monastic life today: as the church and society become more and more centralized, all must seek to respect and honor the variety of differences among us, even as we affirm our unity.

The Confederation of Benedictine monasteries respects the autonomy of each local monastery. The *Lex Propria*, or constitutional document of the Benedictine Confederation, provides for communication between the Benedictine monasteries and with the authoritative agencies of the church. In accordance with this document, an Abbot Primate is elected by the abbots or conventual priors of all autonomous Benedictine monasteries. The role of the Abbot Primate is designated in the *Lex Propria*. He presides at the regular Congress of Abbots and Priors, and is resident abbot of the monastic community at the Benedictine College of Sant' Anselmo in Rome. His position is more fraternal than hierarchical, serving as a facilitator of unity and communication.



While most Benedictine communities today are affiliated with one of the several Benedictine congregations, the *Lex Propria* also recognizes the autonomy of communities which are not so affiliated.

Benedictine communities which are joined in congregations are united by common constitutions, in addition to the Rule of Benedict. These constitutions facilitate relationships between communities in the same congregation, and may determine elements of their monastic observance, juridical structure, and the sharing of some resources. At the same time, each community retains a certain amount of autonomy.

Because of their special historical circumstances, some Benedictine monasteries, such as Weston Priory, are not affiliated with any of the existing congregations. The Rule of Benedict, the lived tradition and authority of the community, and interaction with other Benedictine communities, influence the life and observance of the Weston community. The Abbot Primate has oversight of monasteries not in congregations.

A foundation of Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, Weston Priory became a conventual Benedictine monastery outside of any established congregation, and thus directly related to the Abbot Primate in Rome.

As a member monastery of the Benedictine Confederation, Weston Priory is represented regularly at the Congress of Abbots and Priors. Exchanges with other Benedictine communities take place on both a regional and international basis. The vision and experience of the Weston Priory community is enriched and widened by contact with monastic communities in Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, and Nicaragua, as well as in the United States. ■