

21 March: St Benedict

Benedict was born of a noble family at Norcia, about the year of our Lord 480, and studied letters at Rome. Desiring to give himself altogether to Christ Jesus, he betook himself to a very deep cave at the place now called Subiaco. In this place he lay hid for three years, unknown to all except the monk Romanus, by means of whom he received the necessaries of life. While he was in the cave at Subiaco, the devil one day assailed him with an extraordinary storm of impure temptation, and to get it under, he rolled himself in brambles till his whole body was lacerated, and the sting of pain drove out the sallies of lust. At last the fame of his holiness spread itself abroad from the desert, and some monks came to him for guidance, but the looseness of their lives was such that they could not bear his exhortations, and they plotted together to poison him in his drink. When they gave him the cup, he made the sign of the Cross over it, whereupon it immediately broke, and Benedict left that monastery, and retired to a desert place alone.

Nevertheless his disciples followed him daily, and for them he built twelve monasteries, and set holy laws to govern them. Afterwards he went to Cassino, and brake the image of Apollo which was still worshipped there, overturned the altar, and burnt the groves. There, in the year 529, he built the Church of St Martin and the little chapel of St John; and instilled Christianity into the townspeople and inhabitants. He grew in the grace of God day by day, so that being endowed with the spirit of prophecy he foretold things to come. When Totila, King of the Goths, heard of it, and would see whether it really were so, he sent his Spatharius before him, with the kingly ensigns and attendance, and feigning himself to be Totila. But as soon as Benedict saw him he said: My son, put off that which thou wearest, for it is not thine. To Totila himself he foretold that he would go to Rome, would cross the sea, and would die after nine years.

Some months before he departed this life, Benedict forewarned his disciples on what day he was to die; and he ordered his grave to be opened six days before he was carried to it. On the sixth day, being the 21st of March, in the year 543, he would be carried into the Church, where he received the Eucharist, and then, in the arms of his disciples, with his eyes lifted up to heaven, and wrapt in prayer, he gave up the ghost. Two monks saw his soul rising to heaven, clothed in a most precious garment, and surrounded with lights, and One of a most glorious and awful aspect standing above, Whom they heard saying This is the way whereby Benedict, the beloved of the Lord, goeth up to heaven.