

## The Medal or Cross of St. Benedict

Medals, like crosses, statues and paintings, are a time-honored means of fostering and expressing Christian faith and devotion. They remind us who we are and stir us to prayer and service. They are not charms, though often enough folk custom attaches almost superstitious meaning to them. This enter discusses the origin of the Benedictine Medal/Cross, the form which it now has which was established in 1880 at Montecassino, the use of the medal, before giving the prayer used in blessings the medals.

### Origin

The cross is a key Christian symbol, one which Gregory the Great says Benedict used for blessing and working miracles. Through the centuries, St. Benedict has been shown holding a cross in one hand and his Rule in the other. It is not known when the first medal of St. Benedict was produced. In the late Middle Ages some letters were placed around the cross on the reverse of the medal. A manuscript from the abbey of Metten, dating from 1415, explains the meaning of the letters.

### Jubilee Medal of Montecassino

The most familiar form of the medal of St. Benedict today is one designed in 1880 by the monks of Montecassino to commemorate the 1400th anniversary of the birth of St. Benedict. The design was produced at the Benedictine Abbey of Beuron in Germany.

On the front side of the medal is the image of St. Benedict. In his right hand he holds a cross, and in his left, his Rule. On each side are pedestals recalling incidents from Gregory's life of Benedict in which Benedict was saved from poisoning. On a pedestal to the right is the cup of poisoned wine which shattered when he blessed it. On the pedestal to the left is the raven about to carry away a loaf of poisoned bread. Above the cup and the raven are the Latin words: *Crux S. Patris Benedicti* (The cross of our Holy Father Benedict). Encircling the image of St. Benedict are the words: *"Eius in obitu nostro praesentia muniamur!"* ("May we be strengthened by his presence in the hour of our death!"). Benedict said one should keep death daily before one's eyes. He died in a chapel at Montecassino with his arms raised to heaven, supported by his monks, shortly after he had received communion. In small letters under Benedict's feet is an inscription which reads in Latin "From Montecassino, 1880."

On the back of the medal there is a cross. On the arms of the cross are the first letters of a poetic Latin prayer: *"Crux sacra sit mihi lux! Nunquam draco sit mihi dux!"* ("May the holy Cross be my light. May the dragon [devil] never be my guide!"). The letters C S P B in the angles of the cross stand for *"Crux Sancti Patris Benedicti"* ("The cross of our holy father Benedict"). Above the cross is the word *"Pax"* ("peace") which is an ancient Benedictine motto. Around the edges of the back of the medal the letters V R S N S M V M Q L I V B are the initials letters of a Latin prayer of exorcism: *"Vade retro satana! Nunquam suade mihi vana! Sunt mala quae libas. Ipse venena bibas!"* ("Get back, Satan! Tempt me not with your vanities! The things you offer me are evil. Drink the poison yourself!").

## Use of the Medal

The medal can be worn around the neck, or attached to a rosary, or kept some place. One custom is to put a St. Benedict medal in the foundations of buildings. In all cases, the purpose is to ask for God's blessing and protection through the intercession of St. Benedict.

As the inscriptions indicate, the medal is many things: a prayer of exorcism, a prayer for strength, a prayer for a peaceful death, a prayer for peace, a prayer that the Cross of Christ and the gospel will be our light and guide. The medal is a reminder that we need to take up our cross daily and "follow the true King, Christ our Lord," and so "share with patience in the sufferings of Christ so that we may one day share in his heavenly kingdom."

Earlier, Benedictine oblates, like third order members of other religious congregations, wore a special scapular (as mini-version of the scapular many religious wear). The medal is the equivalent and is preferred by most people.

The medal may also be used with the Blessing of St. Maurus for the sick in place of a relic of the true cross.

Kathleen Norris speaks about the St. Benedict medal in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* under the entry for "exorcism" (p. 45). She says that one reason she became an oblate was that the medal was blessed with an exorcism and she felt she needed all the help she could get. She was told that in the Roman Catholic church only the blessings for holy water and the Benedictine medal include an exorcism. She goes on to say that the medal itself is an exorcism, as the prayers on it show. She says that though the ancient formula comes from an earlier age, "I value it as a reminder of God's daily care for us. But it is not magic: while putting on the medal is a good way for me to start the day, I do not panic if I forget to wear it or to say the prayer. That would be to ascribe too much power to the forces of evil."

## Blessing of the Medal of St. Benedict

Priest: Our help is in the name of the Lord.

Response: Who made heaven and earth.

Priest: In the name of God the Father + almighty, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, I exorcise these medals against the power and attacks of the evil one. May all who use these medals devoutly be blessed with health of soul and body. In the name of the Father + almighty, of his Son + Jesus Christ our Lord, and of the Holy + Spirit the Paraclete, and in the love of the same Lord Jesus Christ who will come on the last day to judge the living and the dead.

Response: Amen.

Priest: Let us pray. Almighty God, the boundless source of all good things, we humbly

ask that, through the intercession of St. Benedict, you pour out your blessings + upon these medals. May those who use them devoutly and earnestly strive to perform good works be blessed by you with health of soul and body, the grace of a holy death, and remission of temporal punishment due to sin. May they also, with the help of your merciful love, resist the temptations of the evil one and strive to exercise true charity and justice toward all, so that one day they may appear sinless and holy in your sight. This we ask through Christ our Lord.

Response: Amen.

*The medals are then sprinkled with holy water.*