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# ST. SCHOLASTICA: FINDING MEANING IN HER STORY

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**S**t. Scholastica, based upon centuries of tradition, is considered the twin sister of St. Benedict of Nursia, founder of monastic communities and compiler of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, a guide to common-sense living and monastic organization. Over the centuries, icons and other religious works have often depicted Scholastica and Benedict together.

**A**lthough some aspects of Benedict's life have been described, little is known of Scholastica. Only a few short paragraphs from the *Dialogues, Book II*, which tradition suggests were written by Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), discuss the last few days of her life.

This brief information, augmented by centuries of tradition, suggests she was probably a nun, who was a deeply devoted and strong woman.

**S**cholastica is the patron saint of Benedictine women's religious communities. Although the narrative material about Scholastica (translated below) is very brief, she is considered significantly more important than might appear by this short description. Lessons can be learned from her actions and the symbols and paradoxes surrounding her story.

## A translation of Scholastica's story<sup>1</sup>

Book II, Ch. XXXIII:

1. *Gregory [said to Peter the Deacon]:* Tell me, Peter, who in this life was lifted higher than Paul? Still he asked the Lord three times to take away the thorn in his flesh, but he was not able to get what he wanted. Likewise, I must tell you about what the venerable Father Benedict wanted to do but could not.

2. Now Benedict had a sister named Scholastica, who had been consecrated to the Almighty Lord from the time of her childhood. She had the custom of visiting him once a year, and the man of God would come down to meet her at a place belonging to the monastery not far beyond the gate. One day she came, as was her custom, and her venerable brother came down to meet her with his disciples. They spent the whole day in the praise of God and in holy conversation. The darkness of night was already falling when they took their meal together. The hour grew later and later as they sat there at table carrying on their holy conversation. His sister, a holy monastic woman, then made a request: "I beg you. Do not leave me this night so that we may

talk until morning more about the joys of heavenly life. But he responded, "What are you talking about, my sister? Under no circumstances can I stay outside my cell."

3. Now the heavens were so calm that no cloud appeared in the sky. When this holy monastic woman heard her brother's refusal, she folded her hands and put them upon the table. Leaning down, she put her head on her hands to make a prayer to God. When she raised her head from the table, there broke forth such powerful lightning and thunder and such a flood of rain that neither the venerable Benedict nor the brothers with him could set foot outside the door of the place where they were sitting. Indeed, while resting her head on her hands, this holy monastic woman had poured out a flood of tears on the table, and in this way she had attracted the rain to the calm skies. The flood followed her prayer in an instant. The connection between the prayer and the storm was such that her head rose from the table together with the thunder as if both the raising of her head and the falling of the rain were one and the same action.

4. When the man of God saw that he could not get back to the monastery because of the lightning and thunder and the great flood of rain, he was irritated and began to complain: "May God have mercy on you, my sister. Why have you done this?" And she replied to him: "See, I asked you, and you would not listen to me. So I asked my Lord, and he has listened to me. Now then, go, if you can. Leave me, and go back to the monastery." But unable to go outside, he stayed against his will in a place where he had been unwilling to stay on his own. So it happened that they spent the whole night in vigil, and during their holy conversation about the spiritual life they found fulfillment for themselves in their relationship with one another.

5. I have told this story about what the venerable man wanted but was unable to have. And when we examine his mind, there can be no doubt that he had wanted the sky to remain calm, as it had been when he had come down. But contrary to what he wanted, he found a miracle worked by a woman's heart with the power of the omnipotent God. It is no wonder that the woman who had desired to see her brother that day proved at the same time that she was more powerful than he was. For as John says: "God is love," and according to that most just precept, she proved more powerful because she loved more.

*Peter:* I confess that your story gives me great pleasure.

Book II, Ch. XXXIV:

1. *Gregory:* The next day the venerable woman went back to her own cell, and the man of God to his monastery. Three days later while in his cell, he looked up at the sky and saw the soul of his sister after it had gone forth from her body. It was in the form of a dove, and he saw it penetrate the hidden mysteries of heaven. Rejoicing because such glory was hers, he gave thanks to the omnipotent God with hymns and praises, and he announced her death to his brothers.

2. Moreover, he sent people at once to bring her body back to the monastery and to put it in a tomb which he had prepared for himself. And so it happened that even the tomb could not separate the bodies of these two who were always of one mind in God.

## A Biography for St. Scholastica? Contributions from Fifth- and Sixth-Century Culture and Institutions

To synthesize a possible life-history for Scholastica, we need to examine the circumstances of Benedict's life and the role of women in the early Middle Ages. By conjecture, we can then paint a possible biography for her. Benedict (c. 480-547?), as told in *Dialogues, Book II* (D for short) appears to have been born into a wealthy late Roman empire family in Nursia (Norcia) of Umbria in the mountains of central Italy. It was probably a Christian family, as Scholastica "had been consecrated to the Almighty Lord from the time of her childhood."

Benedict was sent to Rome for his education, but became dismayed by the city's worldliness: degeneration of the culture, low standards of classical education, sexual debauchery, and general corruption. He left school, fled Rome, and lived in a church in the rural area of Effide. His only companion was his nurse/housekeeper, whom he subsequently left to live by himself in a cave near Subiaco, about 30 miles east of Rome.

Over time, he attracted a following and established several monastic communities. After several clashes with some monks and clergy, he built a large monastery on top of Monte Cassino, a mountain about 60 miles south of Rome, about halfway between Rome and Naples. Benedict wrote his rule (*Regula Benedicti*, or RB), based upon parts of the "Rule of the Master" (*Regula Magistri*), other rules for monastic living, and perhaps from his own experiences in organizing monasteries.

Scholastica, as the daughter of a good Roman family, would have been under the direct control of her father, the *paterfamilias*, until marriage or a religious vocation. Marriages were arranged and young women generally had little choice in a husband inasmuch as marriages were frequently accomplished for political and economic reasons. If no suitable marriage could be found, the girl generally dwelled in her father's house. Upon his death, a brother or other male relative would have authority over her and be responsible for her care. However, wealthy women could inherit property, divorce, and were generally literate. Sometimes several young women would live together in a household and form a religious community.

At the turn of the sixth century, western Europe was led by Germanic leaders. Theodoric (d. c. 534), who respected Roman culture, headed a relatively tolerant regime in Italy; however, terrorist attacks by Germanic groups sporadically continued to terrorize the country. An underlying anxiety concerning attacks and the growing strength of the Church would have formed the social and political background in which Scholastica lived (Brown 1971, 122-131; Hollister 1990, 9-10, 30-33).

Tradition suggests that, at some point in her life, Scholastica moved to a religious community or a large convent in Plumbariola several miles from Monte Cassino. However, it has been proposed that it is more likely that she lived in a hermitage with one or two other religious women at the base of Mount Cassino in a cluster of houses, *vicus*, as there is an ancient church

named after her. Rome often dedicated chapels or churches where saints or martyrs resided (Schuster 1951, 338-342). No evidence of a convent during her lifetime exists at Plumbariola.

Since *Dialogues* indicates that Scholastica was dedicated to God at an early age, perhaps she lived in her father's house with other religious women until his death and then moved nearer to Benedict. Several times, *Dialogues* mentions she was a holy woman or nun. Some suggest that Scholastica might have been an abbess, but no information is definitively known about any of these points (Kessler 1996, 22, 25).

From *Dialogues*, it appears that Scholastica routinely visited Benedict once a year. He would come down to meet her a short distance outside the gate of the monastery. Some scholars suggest this was immediately before the Lenten fast and that their last supper together was February 7, 547, the Thursday preceding the first Sunday of Lent (Schuster 1951, 341). Her feast day is February 10. Of course, all kinds of associations and symbolism can be made with this meal and the subsequent miracle with biblical references--Christ's last supper with his disciples, the wedding at Cana, etc.

*Dialogues* then relates that, after a whole day of holy conversation, they ate their meal as night fell. Scholastica then requests that her brother not leave her that night so they can talk until morning about heaven. However, he tells her it is completely impossible to remain outside his cell overnight. It is interesting to note that Benedict needed to get back to the monastery. If Scholastica were a nun, she also would probably have had to get back to her community.

On the other hand, the shelter likely provided sleeping accommodations for women, since they were not allowed inside the monastery and it would be too far for them to walk down the mountain before dark. Therefore, it might have been acceptable custom for her to spend the night in this hospice. Or if the shelter were on the bottom of the hill, as suggested by some interpretations, it would have been too far for Benedict and his party to return up the hill before nightfall (Kessler 1996, 25).

### **Some Historical Interpretations: The Spread of the *Rule* and the Path to Sainthood**

Benedict's *Rule* and monastic tradition were not a continuous expansion from the first monastic foundations in the sixth century until the present. Within 30 years of Benedict's death, Monte Cassino was destroyed circa 577 by Germanic invaders, and the monks scattered. Some went to Rome and likely had contact with the future Pope Gregory, who based his writings upon their tales.

*Dialogues*, however, was not widely known before 670. In the years of the Germanic invasions in Italy, outside of a few monasteries, Benedict began to be forgotten and did not appear in official Church circles until around 720. Monte Cassino was not rebuilt until 730. He entered into "the liturgical cult" of sainthood between 670 and 750. Until the mid-eighth century, both

the "Benedict Rule" and the "Rule of the Master," an earlier, harsher rule of monastic living, along with several others, were used in monasteries.

**I**n the eighth century, a Benedictine resurgence emerged due to several factors. Northern people, now France and western Germany, were eager to receive whatever art, literature, religious writings and relics that came from Rome. Anything Roman was considered superior. *Dialogues*, which gives extraordinary praise to Benedict, was lauded and helped create a revitalization of Benedict and his *Rule*. Under the Charlemagne regime that began around 800, Benedict's more balanced *Rule* was preferred over others and spread throughout western Europe. The tradition of Scholastica and Benedict being twins dates from around the ninth century (Kessler 1996, 22; Hallinger 1985, 196-199).

**F**or decades, there has been a debate as to the whereabouts of the relics of St. Scholastica and St. Benedict, and whether they even left Monte Cassino. Some early manuscripts suggest that around 672, monks from a Benedictine monastery that had been founded in Fleury (on the Loire river near Orleans, France) went south and stole the relics from the Monte Cassino ruins. Capturing the relics usually happens at the start of a "liturgical cult"--the process of gaining sainthood. The monks reportedly found a double tomb with the remains and carefully washed the bones of each saint and wrapped them separately.

**H**owever, other manuscripts suggest they were wrapped together (Goffart 1967, 122-123; Hallinger 1985, 200-201). These relics were then brought north to Fleury and buried in a shaft under the crypt of either the main church of the Abbey, St. Peter's, or in the secondary church, St. Mary's on July 11, ca. 673. Other interpretations suggest that Scholastica's relics, once they had been brought north, were then transferred to a convent in Le Mans and that only Benedict's remained in Fleury.

**H**owever, little evidence of a convent near Le Mans for St. Scholastica's relics has been found (Goffart 1967, 107-108, 118-125). One interpretation of early manuscripts suggests that, in 936-37, Benedict's bones were dug up, transferred from the abbey church to St. Mary's and that his shrine was placed on the central altar of the crypt on his feast day of July 11. Some English communities began to celebrate the feast of St. Benedict on March 21, the traditional day for his death, beginning around 704 (Hallinger 1985, 201).

**W**hen Benedict's remains were dug up, no mention was made of Scholastica's bones and some speculate they remained in St. Peter's. The earliest evidence for the feast of St. Scholastica on February 10 appeared in the eighth century. By 1004, the celebration of her feast was well established among the monks in Le Mans (Goffart 1967, 129). To add to the mystery, after Monte Cassino was bombed during World War II, bones found in its crypt were claimed to be those of St. Scholastica and St. Benedict. Today, the monasteries in both France and Italy claim the relics of the saints (Kessler 1996, 25-26).

## A Scholarly Debate: History or Spiritual Instruction?

Since so little is known of St. Scholastica, in recent years some scholars have asked, "Was she even a historical person?" This has not been definitely answered one way or the other. The only information concerning her is found in Gregory's *Life of St. Benedict: Dialogues II*, Chapters 33-34. Inasmuch as the second *Dialogues* focuses upon Benedict exclusively, as opposed to many saints in the other three writings, it suggests that Benedict was an important figure worthy of a whole book. This could imply that Scholastica was also important. It is worth noting that, after Vatican II, many saints who were based purely upon myth were removed from the martyrology. St. Scholastica still remains, so she is likely more than legend.

Although scholars conclude that St. Benedict was a historical person, scholarly debate by academics centers on the historical nature of Gregory's *Dialogues*. Some suggest that Gregory, as a great teacher and pastor, wrote the *Dialogues* as morality tales or homilies for the spiritual enlightenment of his flock.<sup>2</sup> In the second volume, additional tales could have been added to the stories of Benedict's monks to make a teaching point for a spiritual truth (de Vogüé 1993, viii-ix).

Literary researchers suggest that lives of saints written at the dawn of the early Middle Ages were based upon a set pattern of other saints' or heroes' lives. These writings did not follow the rules expected of modern historical research methods, which did not evolve until the early 19th century. There was a certain "formula" or "authority," or *exemplum*, that the author was expected to follow and use (Cusack 1974, 145-146; 1976, 145-148). This would be similar to "formula plots" for a modern-day romance or mystery novel.

For instance, in the writings of male saints' lives, many had sisters. Of course, many monks did have sisters, so it is not always known if the sister mentioned in a saint's life was actual or was introduced for a purpose. Scholars suggest that a sister was often considered a mechanism to bring a feminine component of sisterly love into the story. The sister was generally only briefly mentioned. Introducing a sister added interest and showed that spiritual love and the connection to God transcends male and femaleness. In some cases, a sister contributed a symbolic attribute or human characteristic to the story. The sister was generally the weaker of the pair and "lets her emotions run away with her" (Cusack 1974, 148). The sister was in need of protection from the stronger brother. However, it is interesting that St. Scholastica goes against this convention and is the stronger of the two.

Many scholars today conclude that *Dialogues*, including the story of Benedict and Scholastica, is to be read as spiritual reading for the symbols and messages, as Gregory's objective was "not to conduct historical research but to instruct" (Wansborough 1965, 147). It is really not important if the story of Scholastica--or even if many of the tales concerning Benedict--in *Dialogues* was, or was not, historical. It is the narrative of Scholastica and its symbols and the lessons that can be uncovered that have, over the centuries, brought deeper self-knowledge, understanding and enlightenment for a better understanding of God.

## What St. Scholastica Says to Us Today: Some Paradoxes and Symbols

Paradoxes and symbols emerging from St. Scholastica's story have meanings for contemporary living and spiritual life. These include the daily struggle for balance, the transcendence of love and compassion over dogmatic law, strength of character, the ability to listen, the importance of prayer and love in mending relationships, the significance of talking to God, "seeing the light," and the ability to live within a framework that can open the door to eternity.

### *Finding Balance*

The attributes of Scholastica and her brother spiritually complement and balance each other. Benedict's name, from the Latin *benedictus*, "the blessed one," connotes great spiritual affinity with God, compassion, or "heart." Scholastica's name, on the other hand, from the word *scholasticus* or "student or teacher of rhetoric," connotes exactness of scholarly pursuit, discipline and "mind." Another interpretation of the two names suggests the "active" versus the "contemplative" life and that Benedict loved contemplation like a sister (Wansborough 1965, 147-148).

Although the two names were in use during the early Middle Ages for both pagans and Christians, it is interesting to note that these two names together form wholeness or completeness. Their attributes become the balance of *yang* and *yin* found in Eastern philosophy. When *Dialogues* reports that the siblings are buried in the same tomb, heart and mind, male and female, and the active and contemplative life are brought together in balance and wholeness. This balance found in "prayer and work," of course, is a cardinal principle of Benedictine spirituality.

### *Strength in Listening*

Throughout the many stories of *Dialogues*, Benedict shows compassion and love and is able to wrought miracles. However, in the Scholastica story, their roles are reversed. Scholastica receives God's blessings for her greater love and heartfelt prayer when Benedict does not listen to her need and attempts to rigidly stick to his monastic rule of not staying away overnight from the monastery. Law and order, or mind, is important and essential for daily living, but sometimes brotherly love and compassion need to overrule it.

For example, during the Nazi regime, it was against the rule to harbor Jews, yet compassion caused many to break this rule to hide Jews in monasteries and private houses. When Benedict severely admonishes Scholastica for her part in the thunderstorm by telling her, "May God have mercy on you, my sister. Why have you done this?", she stands up to him and tells him defiantly, "I asked you, and you would not *listen* to me. So I asked my Lord, and he has *listened* to me. Now then, go, if you can. Leave me, and go back to the monastery" [*italics mine*].

In daring him to go home, she showed her strength of prayer and conviction. Benedict, in his insistence on following the *Rule*, ironically breaks his own first rule of "Listen carefully...with the ear of your heart," the first line of the *Rule's* Prologue.

### *Mending Relationships*

Brotherly love is a basic premise of Christianity. Scholastica was one of two women mentioned in *Dialogues* who loved Benedict. Each woman shed tears resulting in a miracle that mended two broken parts. Benedict's nurse/housekeeper shed tears after she had broken a borrowed sieve into two pieces. Her tears of anguish, repentance and sorrow for breaking something not hers caused Benedict heartfelt concern and compassion. Through his tearful prayers, God brought the two pieces together and mended the sieve.

Scholastica shed tears of pleading to God to allow the two of them to stay together for a few more hours in their final earthly relationship as sister and brother. Since her conversations with Benedict concerned the "joys of heaven," she may have known this was to be her last meeting with him as she anticipated her death. Through a miracle of a thunderstorm out of a clear sky, God brings together again this relationship.

The stories of the two women who loved Benedict show the power of maternal and sisterly love. In both cases, God mends through earnest prayer and compassion. Both Benedict and Scholastica had an active prayer life and were used to talking to God, and God mended the situation.

### *Seeing the Light*

While praying in his tower cell and looking out the small window three days after Scholastica has left, Benedict "raised his eyes to the skies and saw the soul of his sister leaving her body and penetrating the secret places of heaven under the form of a dove" (D 34.1). He is ecstatic, as he knows she is now experiencing the glories of heaven. This dove, which is far away and which he longs to join, perhaps symbolizes her purity, spiritual attainment, and the non-sexual love that connects the two. He also hungers to join her in the glories of heaven.

This story is in contrast to the black bird that flew close to his face, symbolic of sexual temptation, found in an earlier story of *Dialogues II* (D 2.1-3; Cusack 1976, 148). Benedict wards off these sensuous passions with the sign of the cross and by rolling naked in nettles and thorns.

The window in Benedict's cell can have several meanings. A window lets light in, but it also allows a person to look out to see the light. After Scholastica's prayer results in a fierce thunderstorm out of a clear sky, Benedict admonishes her for her action. Perhaps in the vision of Scholastica's soul rising to heaven, Benedict finally "saw the light" in terms of what his sister was attempting to communicate, namely a premonition of her death and that this would be their last earthly supper and time together. He may have also seen the glories of heaven that awaited

him. At Benedict's death, he was buried in the tomb with Scholastica and joined his soul mate in the womb of Mother Earth.

### ***Structure for Living the Rule***

**S**t. Benedict's visions, seen out of the confines of a narrow window, can have other meanings. In the next chapter of *Dialogues*, after Scholastica's death, Benedict sees "a light spreading from on high and completely repelling the darkness of the night...the whole world was brought before his eyes," perhaps the blinding brightness of the kingdom of God from creation to infinity. While looking at the light, he saw the soul of the Germanus, Bishop of Capua, being carried to heaven in a ball of fire. Benedict has an overnight guest witness this great event. In the next story, Benedict himself, "with his hands raised to heaven and breathed his last breath amidst words of prayer," was taken into the kingdom of heaven and reunited with Scholastica.

**P**erhaps the stories of the visions seen through the narrow confines and limitations of a window in Scholastica's and Germanus' deaths infer that living within the physical, mental and spiritual parameter of the *Rule* paradoxically permits one to experience God's eternal glory. Boundaries give structure and order to a life, just as laws do in society. For example, if vehicles were permitted to be driven on either side of the road, there would be chaos. The parameter of the rule is a guide to keep us on the right side of the road.

**S**t. Scholastica's attributes have important relevancy to Benedictine oblates, nuns and monks, and indeed anyone who is seeking a more spiritual life. She is not just an appendage to Benedict or a weak-willed sister for a brother to control and keep out of trouble. Her attributes are a necessary component for the balance that is taught in Benedictine spirituality. Rule and organization are necessary for living in a safe environment.

**H**owever, sometimes love and compassion are more important. Bringing love and rule together brings comfort and security. Scholastica personifies a strong woman assured of her convictions, one who is contemplative and pious. However, if necessary, out of love, she is willing to defy a rigid convention.

### **Footnotes**

1. *Dialogues II*, Chapters 33-34. Translated by Fr. Harry Hagan, OSB, Saint Meinrad Archabbey, St. Meinrad, IN. March 2002. Quotes from *Dialogues II*, in other chapters from de Vogüé.

2. Some scholars suggest that Gregory did not write the work, but rather it was written a hundred years later by a cleric who combined Gregory's writings with others. Clark (1988, 274-276) suggests that, compared to Gregory's more scholarly and theological writings as found in his *Moralia*, the *Dialogues* appear to be folk tales. Guevin (1999, 437, 441) suggests that another work, attributed to Gregory, might also have been largely written or compiled by someone else.

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