

A Litany for St Scholastica's Day (10th February)
in the Spirit of St Benedict's Rule.

We thank you, Lord, for our sister, St Scholastica. May we, like her, offer our prayers to you, the Lord God of all things, with all lowliness and purity of devotion.

V Lord, may your eyes be upon us.
R And your ears open to our prayers.

Let us remember that not for our much speaking, but for our purity of heart and tears of compunction shall we be heard.

V Lord, may your eyes be upon us.
R And your ears open to our prayers.

Grant that our prayer may at all times be short and pure, but our hearts always alert for the promptings of your grace.

V Lord, may your eyes be upon us.
R And your ears open to our prayers.

Though leave to speak is seldom to be given, open our hearts to know the time, not to be silent, but to sustain one another with a word.

V Lord, may your eyes be upon us.
R And your ears open to our prayers.

It is the Spirit not the letter which gives life. With the prayers of St Scholastica, may we strive, like her, to fulfil with discernment the Holy Rule of her brother St Benedict.

V Lord, may your eyes be upon us.
R And your ears open to our prayers.

We are all one in the service of One Lord. Help us to hold together the diverse gifts of men and women in your Church.

V Lord, may your eyes be upon us.
R And your ears open to our prayers.

*'That they all may
be one'*



Benedict and Scholastica - an icon of mutuality.

Benedict of Nursia (c480-550), still acclaimed by many as the 'Father of Western Monasticism', had a sister called Scholastica. Like Benedict, she too was dedicated to God, living in a convent for nuns near to her brother's monastery. Unlike him, however, she wrote no Rule, or at least not as far as we know. Nothing has come down to us. With dutiful femininity, she and her nuns no doubt followed the wise directives of Abbot Benedict and moulded their lives to a similar pattern. Thus it has been through the centuries. Benedictine nuns have lived by the same Rule as their brother monks. But have there been no differences of approach, no hints of an independent spirit? It would be surprising if not.

Saint Gregory the Great, writing his '*Dialogues*' (c593), describes a fascinating incident in the lives of the saintly brother and sister. Whether or not it is a literal account of what happened, or, as we might suspect, a legend already in the making, the story rings true and is rich in implication. Most significantly, perhaps, we are helped to see that the saints are ordinary human beings like ourselves. Sanctity is something to be worked at, and it is often enough our relationships with those closest to us that can cause us the most friction. But then, rubbing each other up the wrong way doesn't have to be a major calamity.

Saint Benedict was in the habit of visiting his sister from time to time, Saint Gregory tells us. Doubtless there would be practical things to sort out, but the main reason for their meeting seems to have been to share the deep things of the spirit in mutual giving and receiving. Both were very close to God. On one such occasion Scholastica, with womanly

intuition, and probably a good deal of realistic facing of the facts, knew it was to be his last visit. She was a dying woman. Benedict seems to have had no inkling of this and his sister kept her counsel.

Their fellowship together in God was profound and all-absorbing. Time lost its meaning. But suddenly Benedict was jolted back to reality. It was getting late. He must go back at once since all the rules of monastic enclosure and respectability demanded it. His legalistic bristles were up. But Scholastica demurred. She wished him to stay, she wished to continue all night. Benedict was adamant, insisting . . . Then Scholastica used her trump card: she prayed and she wept.

As she wept the heavens opened, the lightning flashed and the rain fell in torrents - it became totally impossible for her brother to return home. St Benedict was stunned. "What have you done, my sister!" he cried. "You would not listen to me", she retorted, "but *God* has done so; he has heard my prayer". So Scholastica had her wish. They continued all night together in prayer and spiritual converse until the storm abated. A few days later, Saint Benedict, at prayer alone, saw the soul of his sister rising to heaven in the form of a dove. She had died and he understood.

We can learn much from this little vignette. It is not simply that Scholastica was manipulative and could get her own way, using skilful womanly diplomacy. Obedience to the rules was as important to her as to her brother. Such obedience is axiomatic to the monastic life and would have been second nature to her by this time. There is a question, however, of interpretation and priorities. If as Christians we seek to deny ourselves and overcome our wrongful self-will, it must not be because we want to opt out, seeking an immature dependence on others or a set of safe and unchangeable rules to follow. Instead it must be because we desire earnestly that God's will should be done in us, whatever the cost, and this might sometimes mean seemingly breaking the rules.

Scholastica knew she was soon to die. The minutæ of the day to day regulations in monastery and convent had their place as a framework for obedience but God was not bound by them. The converse between herself and her brother had to be prolonged, to come to its full term before her death. Scholastica sensed it and prayed. The divine will accomplished itself in answer to her prayer and she was sanctified.

There is rich complementarity here, a sort of male/female balance between a pragmatic, rationalistic approach and a more intuitive emotional one. Both aspects are needed and must be held in creative tension, as much in the individual, the family and the Church as in the monastic life. Over the centuries it has been far from easy to find the right balance in monasticism. Clericalism and male domination have sometimes had their effect. But it has also been possible for women to exercise a considerable degree of autonomy in the monastic life. Abbesses of the medieval Church, many of whom were of royal descent, rank among the most highly cultured and influential women of all times, and their powers in the Church were not inconsiderable. There were even instances, as with Saint Hilda of Whitby, when double monasteries of men and women were established with an Abbess at the head.

At heart, the monastic vocation is the same for men and women, and so monasticism could be a powerful force for unity in the male/female debate. It is of interest that in our own time attempts are being made to re-establish and develop shared patterns of monastic life for men and women. It is not an easy venture but obviously a valid development from tradition.

But it isn't only from the monastic angle that Benedict and Scholastica speak to us. Is there not also something to be said about the Church in general? Benedict's legalistic, rational stance seems to illustrate the way the Western, Latin Church has largely developed and expressed itself, summed up in such things as Scholastic Theology and the intricacies of Canon Law. Then, by contrast, may we not perhaps see, in Saint Scholastica, something of the Orthodox ethos, that deeper penetration into the mystery which is wary of definition?

Again there is complementarity here. East and West need each other, and there can be no fullness of unity in the Church without their mutual interpenetration. But since Saint Benedict is revered in the Eastern Church, and since he drew much of his inspiration from his monastic predecessors in the East, there is surely ground for hope. If all our schemes seem to fail and our dialogue to flounder, maybe, like Saint Scholastica, we need rather to pray, with tears of compunction. It may then well surprise us what our Lord will do in response.