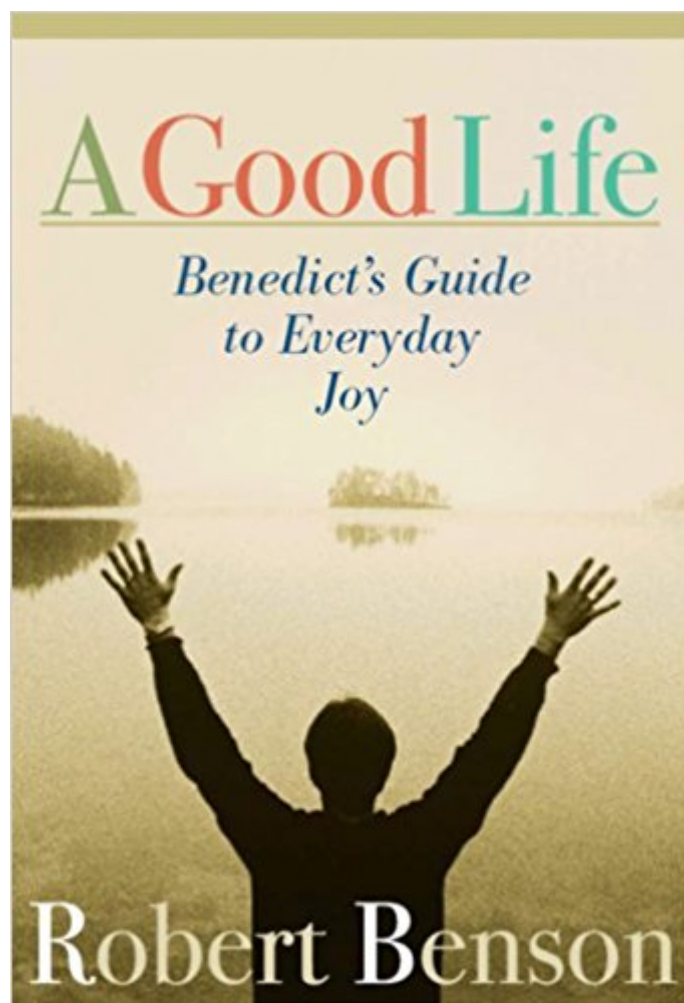


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# A Good Life: Benedict's Guide To Everyday Joy



## Synopsis

"There is no shortage of good days," writes Annie Dillard. "It is good lives that are hard to come by." Reflecting on what makes a "good life," Robert Benson offers a warmhearted, humorous guide to enriching our lives with the wisdom of Benedict, a 6th century monk. Each chapter is shaped around a Benedictine principle: prayer, rest, community, and work, and reveals the brilliant and infinitely practical ways that Benedictine spirituality can shape our lives today. Benson is honest and wise, sharing his own failings and the constant tension that he feels between the demands of the temporal and the spiritual. For anyone who feels caught in a web of conflicting priorities, or who finds the pace of modern life more draining than fulfilling, *A Good Life* will come as a welcome treat for the soul.

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## Customer Reviews

What is a "good life" in a world of worry and hurry? Perceptive spirituality writer Benson offers readers "a sixth-century guide for life in the twenty-first century" with this short primer based on the Rule of Saint Benedict. Benson once prepared to enter a monastery but soon realized he was not called to be a monk. Now a husband, father, and busy writer and retreat leader, he seeks to live the Rule internally, applying its direction about four major issues—prayer, rest, community and work—to his own life. Each chapter of the book begins with Benedict's guidance about one of those four topics, followed by Benson's personal and theological musings on the Rule's contemporary application. Readers will begin to imagine how they can order their lives

around the discipline of fixed-hour prayer, connecting themselves "to the whole community of Christ for all time past and for all time to come." They will also be moved to ponder the value of silence and solitude, seek greater humility in their relationships with others and prevent work from dominating life. Ultimately, says Benson, we live not by the Rule of Saint Benedict but by "the rule of Saint Whatever Our Name Is," applying the abbot's teachings to our individual situations. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

You know, I don't get paid to write these reviews. I receive a copy of the book (for which I'm grateful), but my personal test of whether I really like the book or not, is if I'm willing to spend money for it. I have already started planning who will be getting *A Good Life: Benedict's Guide to Everyday Joy* for a birthday or graduation or Christmas. It is a lovely and fresh articulation of the most essential of Benedict's truths, concerning itself not with the "what we do" of monastic life, but instead the "why we do it" and the implications that "it" has. The book is comprised of six short reflections dealing with key themes: longing, prayer, rest, community, work and living. The author also includes brief notes at the end on the life of Benedict and other books he finds helpful. Each reflection begins with a collection of quotes from the Rule which sets the tone (some collections more effectively than others) for the thoughts that follow. Allusions to a wide array of famous and lesser known spiritual writers are used well throughout. Benson makes it clear at a number of points that his purpose is not to act as if he or his readers are monastic, ("If you do not have a uniform, so to speak, you cannot be on the team.") but rather, to suggest how people can use monastic values to write the "Rule" they live by in the context of their own lives. What is best about *A Good Life* is how it does not pretend to be anything other than what it is. It makes no claims for doing exegesis of the Rule or monastic history or ecumenical dialogue (the author is Episcopalian) about what Benedictines have to offer the world. Having said that, however, I want to note that there is sound liturgical history in the section on prayer, and intriguing anecdotes in several sections about how the author uses the Rule in the retreats he facilitates. The text is written from an authentic and personal perspective which, as we all know, can yield the most universal insights. The author's language is graceful and his ideas, graced. At just about the halfway point of the book, he writes: "Some of the things that regulate our lives are things we can choose or change. Some are not. What is important is that we look at them from time to time and recognize which things are which, and which things can or should or might be adjusted in ways that help us to balance our lives." Simply stated ideas like that might seem obvious, but a genuine examination of one's life reveals that Benson's advice might be just what we, non-monastic and monastic alike, need to hear. My only quibble about the

book concerns the gathering of Rule quotes at the beginning of the sections. Benson culls the most quotable quotes and weaves them together without citing what chapter each comes from individually. In one of the end-notes, he talks about the translation he uses and the fact that, in places, he paraphrases. The overall effect, though, is something of a distortion, albeit a potentially flattering one, of the Rule of Saint Benedict. A reader unfamiliar with the Rule, who picks it up after *A Good Life*, will be unpleasantly surprised, I suspect, by its detail, pickiness, and sometimes harsh tone. A scholarly text this is not. But it is a delightful one, I want to give it to friends who are new oblates, relatives who wonder at this seemingly arcane lifestyle of mine, and students who seem to be discovering their own Benedictine hearts. At a meeting a couple of weeks ago, I even floated the author as a possible retreat director for my community. At any rate, the ninety minutes it will take to read this book would be a worthwhile investment in the questions it will prompt about one's own longing, prayer, rest, community, work and living. Susan Quaintance, O.S.B., St. Scholastica Monastery, Chicago, IL *American Benedictine Review* September 1, 2006  
Selected as one of the Best Spiritual Books of 2004 by *Spirituality Health*". . . a fine primer on everyday spirituality bolstered by practice." Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat *Spirituality & Health* June 24, 2005  
He calls us to remember that what we each do on this Sabbath day is "not even for us, it is for the Living God." Lois Sibley *Episcopal Life* November 24, 2002

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Robert Benson shares insights on how Christians can more meaningfully prepare for the Eucharist. *Ecumenism* June 24, 2002

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This is an unpretentious book, simply written, truly felt.... It reminds us of things we have half forgotten. It opens our eyes to things we have only half seen." Frederick Buechner  
Author, *Speak What We Feel* January 24, 2002

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"There is no shortage of good days," writes Annie Dillard. "It is good lives that are hard to come by." Reflecting on what makes a "good life," Robert Benson offers a warmhearted, humorous guide to enriching our lives with the wisdom of Benedict, a 6th century monk. Each chapter is shaped around a Benedictine principle: prayer, rest, community, and work, and reveals the brilliant and infinitely practical ways that Benedictine spirituality can shape our lives today. Benson is honest and wise, sharing his own failings and the constant tension that he feels between the demands of the temporal and the spiritual. For anyone who feels caught in a web of conflicting priorities, or who finds the pace of modern life more draining than fulfilling, *A Good Life* will come as a welcome treat for the soul. "If one has never read anything about the Rule of St. Benedict, this is a great place to start. I strongly recommend that you have a copy of the Rule also. In fact, I recommend you read the Rule of St. Benedict and then read this book. If you are well acquainted with the Rule, as I am, you may

still from joy reading it because the author shares his own personal stuff with us and illumines the RB through his experiences. I've been living a Benedictinesque (I made that word up) since Feb, 1982 and I had much enjoyment reading it.

Direct and lovely written book re: St. Benedict order. Loved it!

Practical and clear. Written by a family man. Short and profound.

have read it and reread it and find it inspiring approach to every day spirituality

Robert Benson's measured prose is well-suited to his topic of following St. Benedict's advocacy for an ordered life. Using personal experience and just enough challenge to the reader, Benson draws us in to believe that a good life is possible and worth pursuing. Along the way, he explains how this can take place. A takeaway for me comes out of Benson's chapter on Work, where he speaks of Benedict's recognition of three roles in community: abbot, artist and cellarer. Abbots lead, out of humility and from experience. Artists contribute the skills of hand and mind to the immediate community's well-being, often by being active in the outlying neighborhood. Cellarers are busy behind the scenes, doing what's necessary so that all else runs smoothly. But once he identifies these 'roles', Benson points out that a simple 'division of labor' does not always apply. That is, it's not like in each community (a family, a church, an intentionally gathered group of friends) there are individuals assuming each position for the duration, but rather that all members are likely to fill each role on different occasions. A friend loaned me this book and I've been glad for the gift. Highly recommended.

The subject of Spiritual Disciplines is gaining in popularity and some books on the subject are quite overwhelming, especially for those of us who work 40 hours a week and have a family. "A Good Life" gleans insights from the Rule of St. Benedict to transpose into our 21st century lives. He divides our lives into four areas, which is slightly hard to do but interesting nevertheless, prayer, rest, community, and work, and discusses ways to pursue relationship with God in each of those areas. This is a great starting point for exploring how to be faithful in each of those areas of our lives.

Unpretentious, straight forward, and inspirational, this little volume (85 pages) makes an excellent

devotional booklet for the Benedictine oblate. It has seven short sections. Taken one each day, this book will take a week to read. I usually read a chapter in place of compline and give myself something to think about as I go to sleep. Non-Benedictines might want use this book as a one-week retreat to experience a flavor of benedictine spirituality.

This is a very simple and short book on how to balance your life - work, rest, exercise, family etc. Has made me feel less guilty about putting the computer aside and spending time on other activities.

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