

Balanced Life: 'Work and Pray' or, 'My Work is My Prayer'?



Saint Benedict, way back in the fifth century, wrestled with the big question of how to live a balanced life. Benedict concluded that moderation was the key concept – too much of any one thing was likely to corrupt and endanger the possibility of living a godly life. So, balance, moderation, reasonableness, to which we might now add 'common sense', were values which he eventually wrote down in what became known as 'Benedict's Rule'.

A balanced life in the Benedictine tradition is summed up in the motto, *Ora et Labora*, the Latin for 'pray and work'. For Benedict, a balanced life was striking the right mix between being active and being contemplative. That sounds quite simple until you dig deeper into the negatives, e.g. too much work is not good for you. Sometimes that means having to push back against the adage that 'hard work never did anyone any harm.' We know, today more than ever, that that is not true. Too much hard work can be very damaging – true for those who work from home as it is for those who work in the office!

On the other hand, Benedict also calls out that too much contemplation can lead you to become so introspective that you become so self-absorbed that you end up with no capacity to think about anyone else. Benedict would say that too much contemplation leads to laziness! A balance needs to be struck between 'prayer and work.' Some of us are given more to the active – we sometimes need to be helped to slow down and even to stop. Others are drawn to the contemplative – we sometimes need to be encouraged to 'do something!'

Six hundred years after Benedict, St Bruno of Cologne came up with another idea. He, too, was concerned with the question of how to live a balanced life. He came up with the idea that well-being is best achieved by centring on simplicity – less talk, less ‘stuff’ - care for the soul and body together, as an integrative whole. Bruno’s model focused less on compartmentalising life into segments, ‘pray and work’ as Benedict taught. Bruno came up with the understanding that is best summed up as, ‘My prayer is my work, and my work is my prayer.’ He draws no distinction between the two. God is present in both, and it is recognising this that engenders a balanced life.

So, two models which challenge us on how to live a balanced life – Benedict’s model, ‘Pray and Work’ and Bruno’s model, ‘My work is my prayer, and my prayer is my work.’ Both challenge us to think about options for a healthy lifestyle. Which would you choose?

God Bless.

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