

*Emil Salim***Working from Home: Insights from The Rule of St. Benedict*****Delo od doma: spoznanja iz Pravila svetega Benedikta***

*Abstract:* In this article, I present a rereading of Benedictine spirituality of work in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, delineating four major points. First, I show that the Benedictine work ethic is grounded primarily in the vow of obedience, with supplemental utilitarian considerations. Second, I explore the various work functions within the monastery, which is akin to a home, as reflected in the monastic spaces. Third, with respect to the concept of time, monastic work is both scheduled and done according to needs, providing flexibility while imposing temporal order. Lastly, monastic work is also a communal endeavour and must be done by monks to the best of their abilities. Even while the monks are apart from each other while travelling, they still consider themselves as working together. I argue that these Benedictine perspectives on work offer valuable insights for individuals working from home (WFH) during and beyond the coronavirus pandemic.

*Keywords:* spirituality, monasticism, work, pandemic, labour, obedience, Benedictine

*Povzetek:* V tem članku predstavljam ponovno branje benediktinske duhovnosti dela v *Pravilu svetega Benedikta*, pri čemer izpostavljam štiri glavne točke. Prvič, pokažem, da je benediktinska delovna etika utemeljena predvsem v zaobljubi poslušnosti, z dodatnimi utilitarističnimi premisleki. Drugič, raziskujem različne delovne funkcije v samostanu, ki je podoben domu, kar se odraža v samostanskih prostorih. Tretjič, v zvezi s pojmom časa je samostansko delo načrtovano in opravljeno v skladu s potrebami, kar zagotavlja prožnost in hkrati vzpostavlja časovni red. Nazadnje, samostansko delo je tudi skupno prizadevanje in ga morajo menihi opravljati po svojih najboljših močeh. Čeprav so menihi med potovanjem ločeni drug od drugega, še vedno menijo, da delajo skupaj. Trdim, da ti benediktinski pogledi na delo ponujajo dragocen vpogled za posameznike, ki delajo od doma (WFH) med pandemijo koronavirusa in po njej.

*Ključne besede:* duhovnost, samostan, delo, pandemija, delo, poslušnost, benediktinci

## 1. Introduction

Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, many people have found themselves working from home (WFH) for the first time. In December 2020, The Pew Research Center reported that 71% of American workers worked predominantly or entirely from home, while only 20% had worked from home before the pandemic (Parker, Horowitz, and Minkin 2020). While some people have always worked at home, such as those who run home-based businesses (Rodríguez-Modrño 2021, 2258–2275), during the pandemic, many people who had never worked at home before were forced to do remote work in their own residence. The advancements in communication technology have enabled this shift in work style (Baruch 2000, 35).

Although remote work is not a new concept (Friedman 2006, 31), WFH during the pandemic presents a unique scenario. Unlike pre-pandemic remote work, which was often optional, WFH during the pandemic was often mandatory. Moreover, while remote work can be highly mobile and be done at various locations, such as at coffee houses or co-working spaces, WFH during the pandemic was working from one's own home (home-based) with few other options (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés 2020, 2–3). This particular constraint poses challenges for certain individuals, such as those with young children at home, limited technology resources, and smaller living spaces (Cuerdo-Vilches, Navas-Martín, and Oteiza 2021, 22).

While only few institutions have begun making plans to keep WFH as a long-term arrangement after the pandemic is over, McKinsey's survey shows that more than 50% of employees express a desire to work at least three days a week from home (Alexander et al. 2021). Nicholas Bloom of the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research predicts that 20 per cent of working days will be spent at home in the post-pandemic world. In his words, WFH is "here to stay" (Bloom 2021). The surveys from Gallup in September 2021 indicated that 45% of full-time US employees worked from home either partly (20%) or all the time (25%) (Saad and Wigert 2021). By September 2022, the US Census Bureau reported a threefold increase in number of those who work from home between 2019–2021 (United States Census Bureau 2022). The Pew Research Center reported in March 2023 that 35% of workers who can work from home do so all the time (Parker 2023).

Research on Benedictine spirituality of work (Vest 1997; Heisey 2014) as well as on the relevance of the Rule of St. Benedict to the world of work (Tredget 2002, 219–229; Kleymann and Malloch 2010, 207–224) has been performed. This article, however, will discuss how people who are WFH during and after the pandemic can benefit from Benedictine perspectives on work.

The structure of this article is as follows. In Section 2, I explore four aspects of Benedictine spirituality of work, viz., the ethic, the spatial and temporal dimensions, and the communality of work in the Rule of Benedict. In Subsection 2.1, I propose (*pace* Kardong) that the Benedictine work ethic is primarily obedience-based, although complemented by utilitarian considerations. Subsections 2.2.

and 2.3 will show that Benedictine spirituality of work is spatiotemporally bounded, necessitating various physical manifestations, flexibility, order, and sensitivity to what needs to be done. Subsection 2.4 underscores the interrelatedness of responsibilities among different constituents within a Benedictine monastery. In Section 3, I suggest ways in which insights from Benedictine spirituality of work can help individuals in navigating WFH, including through mutual obedience (3.1), seeing the equal value of different kinds of work (3.2), embracing flexibility and order (3.3), and fostering a sense of community despite working remotely (3.4). I anticipate and respond to objections in Section 4 before providing a brief conclusion in Section 5.

I should state at the outset a limitation of this article, namely, that it is most relevant to individuals who adopt spiritual values within either the Benedictine framework or other traditions. The reason is that without some form of divine reference, work itself could become addictive, idolatrous, Sisyphean, or illogical (Platovnjak 2022, 262). In the same way, mutual accountability could become oppressive or panoptic, rest or leisure could become profane, and vicious capitalism could be seen as an unholy ideal for one's 'salvation'. With this disclaimer in place, let me begin discussing the idea of work or labour in the Rule of St. Benedict.

## 2. Work in *Regula Benedicti*

From the beginning of the *Regula Benedicti* (RB), St. Benedict (480–547 AD) has indicated that the monastic life is a working life. In Prologue 14, St. Benedict states that the Lord seeks his laborer (*operarium suum*) to pursue the monastic vocation in good works (*in operibus bonis*) (2.21). The monastery as a whole is depicted as a workshop (*officina*), where monks must work diligently (*diligenter operemur*) (4.78). In the following, I discuss the fundamental aspects of work in the RB, beginning with the Benedictine work ethic.

### 2.1 Ethics

In his commentary on the RB, Terrence Kardong suggests that St. Benedict's work ethic is utilitarian, given the emphasis in the RB on what is necessary to be done (48.6).<sup>1</sup> Kardong writes, "The utilitarian predominates over the ascetical or aesthetical when it comes to work" (Kardong 1996, 388). And again, "[St. Benedict] sees work as primarily utilitarian" (398). I presume that what Kardong means by 'utilitarian' is not in the sense of Bentham or Mill, who see pleasure as the ultimate moral value or use a strict utilitarian calculus (as in Bentham's case), but rather in a broader sense of what is beneficial or profitable. This broader understanding is the one I adopt in this paper. I agree with Kardong that utilitarian considerations are conspicuous in St. Benedict's philosophy of work. For example, he exhorts

<sup>1</sup> The Latin texts and the English translation are taken from Terrence Kardong's *Benedict's Rule* (Kardong 2016).

the monks to pursue what is useful (*utile*) for the common good (72.7). He also suggests that monks be provided with more food and drink if their workload is heavy if the superior deems that expedient (39.6).

Kardong's understanding of utilitarianism in the RB, however, excludes spiritual profit as one of the utilities. In discussing *lectio divina*, for example, he considers it to be "strictly nonutilitarian" (Kardong 1996, 401). The problem with this narrow read of the concept of utility is twofold. First, it is in tension with the general meaning of *utilitas*, which can mean service, akin to *ministerium*. Second, *utilitas* can indeed be rendered as profit, including spiritual profit. When specifying the texts to be read during night hours, for instance, St. Benedict refers to utilitarian considerations: the Heptateuch and the Book of Kings are omitted during these times because they wouldn't be useful (*utile*) for weary minds (42.4). Arguably, some types of *lectio* are done out of utilitarian considerations, given that the *lectio* is part of the monks' spiritual regiment (42.5). Utilitarian considerations, then, permeate not just physical work, but also other kinds of work within the Benedictine monastery.

I also think that St. Benedict sees obedience as integral in the notion of work. This is because obedience is one of the three vows Benedictine novices must take upon joining the monastery. In Prologue 2, St. Benedict characterizes obedience itself as a form of labour (*oboedientiae laborem*). The work in the monastery, then, is firstly that of obedience. Other kinds of work performed by the monks stem from the labour of obedience.

Surely, given that obedience is merely one of the three Benedictine vows alongside stability and *conversatio morum*, there is a sense that work must also be approached with consideration for practicing stability and making daily progress in one's monastic lifestyle (Salim 2021, 345–353). However, the vow of obedience is more directly intertwined with the notion of work compared to the other two vows. Monks receive tasks from their superiors and must obey them obediently even when the tasks are arduous or seemingly impossible (68.1).

Obedience itself is a character trait, not merely a mechanical compliance to one's superior. St. Benedict underscores that obedience without delay is the first grade of humility (*primus humilitatis gradus*) (5.1). My own reading is that obedience is the first manifestation of humility, not just a first step towards humility (Scott 2020, 299–314; Bugiulescu 2018, 530). The reason is that obedience is a matter of the heart, not just of the hands: one is not obedient if one performs the tasks from the superior with murmurs (RB, 5.14–19). But avoiding murmuring seems to require humility in the first place. Furthermore, obedient labours must be done out of love (*amor*) for God and fellow monks (5.10), suggesting that obedience can be viewed as a manifestation of love (Day 2016, 277). Lastly, King argues that Benedictine obedience extends not only to God or the abbot (vertical), but also to fellow monks (horizontal) (King 2014, 266). The mutual obedience entails one's willingness to listen to the needs of others and to act upon those needs even before they are spoken (Kodell 2013, 410), thus manifesting love that is sensitive to others. The

intersection of humility, obedience, and love suggests that obedience is a character trait that either embodies or encompasses humility and love.

It would be a stretch to maintain that St. Benedict has a rigorous normative moral theory as understood in contemporary analytic debates (Timmons 2013) or philosophical ethics (Schockenhoff 2014, 14). While he may align closely with virtue ethics (Hursthouse 1999) due to the emphasis on character in the RB, he seems to be more relaxed in determining what makes a right action right. My suggestion here is that both obedience and utilitarian considerations (in the general sense of valuing what is beneficial, not as understood by Bentham or Mill) constitute his work ethic. Since obedience is one of the three Benedictine vows, it likely holds precedence over consideration of usefulness. Utilitarian considerations may supplement obedience as a pragmatic tool for adjudicating the best course of action when faced with two live options (provided they do not entail disobedience). It is important to note that utilitarian considerations should not endanger the moral and spiritual health of the monks (Ovitt Jr. 1986, 16).

One might object that the utilitarian consideration in RB is not a tool for doing utilitarian calculus of cost-benefit analysis, but rather something that is more general such as for thinking of what is useful for salvation (Scott 2020, 304). If utility is ultimately about attaining salvation, this notion of utility is not very practical in helping monks determine, for example, whether they should start brewing lager in addition to the pale ale they already produce. To answer this objection, I'd point out that in a Benedictine monastery, there are minor agendas in monastic affairs (*utilitatibus*) (RB, 3.12). Also, 32.2 states that the superior thinks of what is useful (*utile*) in determining who should oversee the goods of the monastery, such as tools and clothing. These passages indicate that certain practical things must also be done for the well-being of the monastery. Arguably, actions deemed more useful for the monastery would be preferable.

## 2.2 Place

The architecture of a monastery reveals not only its physical layout, but also the various kinds of work performed within its different spaces. The Plan of Saint-Gall for a Carolingian abbey in the 9th century AD, for example, illustrates the various spaces of the monastery: the church, cloister, dormitory, bathhouse and latrines, refectory, kitchen, infirmary, and many others (Coomans 2018, 35). Although it remains unknown whether the Plan was ever materialized, it shows an understanding that monks are engaged not only in prayers (in the church), but also in other activities such as cooking (in the kitchen) and caring for the sick (in the infirmary). Still, the center of the monastery building, especially after the Carolingian reform, is consistently the cloister, which symbolizes the afterlife or paradise (Coomans 2018, 36). This suggests that all the activities within the monastery must be useful for salvation (RB, 3.5).

RB mentions various kinds of work using three terms that are sometimes utilized interchangeably: *labora*, *opera*, and *ministerium*. As mentioned earlier, obe-

dience is the first labour that St. Benedict references in the entire RB (Prologue 2). The monastic life is a place for monks to excel in good works (*in operibus bonis*) (2.21), which are the fruits of faith (Prologue 21) and God's grace (Prologue 29–30). St. Benedict lists the tools for good works, which include prescriptions concerning love for God and neighbours, holy living, and practical matters such as proper manners in laughter and making jokes (4). He instructs the monks to work hard in utilizing these tools. It is possible that the angels would make a daily report on how the monks perform their works (7.28). Monks should ensure that they do not become useless (*inutiles*) (7.29). Accordingly, producing good works is a serious labour for Benedictines.

Given that the monastery is a spiritual place, monks customarily perform spiritual works such as acts of justice (Prologue 25). Within the oratory, monks perform the divine office (*divina opera*), which St. Benedict refers to as “the work of God” (52.2). In 43.3, he says that nothing should be preferred to the work of God (*nihil operi dei praeponatur*), suggesting the centrality of the divine office to the life of the monks. Another spiritual or intellectual work for monks is the practice of *lectio*, which takes approximately three hours daily (Kardong 1996, 399). Kardong has argued forcefully that the so-called Benedictine motto *ora et labora* should have been *ora, labora, et lectio* (2011, 278–279). The task of *lectio* entails not only devotional or meditational acts, but also studious efforts to understand what is being read (1996, 401). That the Benedictines have contributed so much to the Western intellectual tradition can't be denied, with towering figures such as Bede and Anselm (Rippinger 2012, 247). And in some early modern monasteries, Benedictine nuns were engaged in authorial and editorial works: writing is also a monastic labour (Goodrich 2014, 302).

Nevertheless, the monastery has a robust physical dimension not only due to its material structure, but also because its inhabitants are embodied agents. Consequently, a coenobitic monastic life inevitably involves physical labours, such as works in the cellar (RB, 31), the kitchen (35), the fields (41.2), the bakery, and in any other craft (*in arte aliqua*) (46.1). Kitchen duties are called a “service” (*ministerium*) (35.10), which indicates that the Benedictine idea of ministry encompasses more than praying or chanting alone. The arts and crafts can be sold to obtain income, suggesting that some form of business administration happens inside the monastery (57.4) (Ruppenthal 2020, 43). Yet Kardong thinks that manual labour is not intrinsic to the monastic vocation (Kardong 1996, 389). While this might be true, it is worth remembering that the vow of *conversatio morum* is about embracing the monastic coenobitic lifestyle as a whole, which includes some form of physical labour.

One thing in the Benedictine monastery that doesn't seem to be categorized as work is sleep. With respect to sleep, St. Benedict advises that monks should sleep with clothes on and girded with belts so that they can promptly resume the work of God upon waking up (RB, 22.6). This suggests that sleep is regarded as taking a break from work. It remains unclear whether St. Benedict approves of leisure times (*otium*) (Ouellette, Snyder, and Carett 2011, 21–44). He warns instead that idleness (*otiositas*), which is negative, is the enemy of the soul (RB, 48.1).

Considering the varieties of work that a monastic must perform, it becomes evident that the monastic life is multidimensional and realistic. Feiss has argued that the Benedictines have not defined themselves within the framework of active vs. contemplative lives. He shows that medieval Benedictines were missionaries and active in charity work (Feiss 2016, 420–421). Gioia also mentions that some monasteries “run schools, universities, hospitals, or work in mission territories” (Gioia 2016, 155; Hollerman 2012, 303–320; Driscoll 2014, 372–388; Lotz 2012, 75–92; Massam 2015, 44–53). The Benedictines are also renowned for their hospitality, as every guest must be welcomed as Christ (RB, 53.1). Lastly, some Benedictine monks have been ordained as priests or deacons and have engaged in parish work, including preaching and administering baptism (Berlière 2011, 326). What is essential for Benedictine monks is to do all things for the glory of God.

### 2.3 Time

The monastery is structured not only spatially, but also temporally. The life of the monks is meticulously scheduled with the divine office as its temporal pillars. The monks dutifully pray together seven times daily (RB, 16.1–2). Other activities revolve around these times of prayer, emphasizing the centrality of prayer in their daily routine. This clear approach to when to do certain things and what work should be done helps the monks fight idleness. This exemplifies the virtue of having order in the monks’ life.

Although the seven daily prayers are considered non-negotiable, some flexibility is practiced by the monks. Given the different lengths of day and night throughout the seasons, St. Benedict suggests making adjustments to when the offices need to be said. For example, after October, Terce (which is the third hour prayer) should be said instead on the second hour (around 8 in the morning) (48.11).

Work must also be performed with an understanding of what is necessary to be done. When the monastery is poor and more work in the fields becomes necessary, monks should engage in more manual labour and without feeling sad. We can only guess the possible causes of sadness. It may be because they cannot participate in the divine office if they have to work in the fields, but it may also be because some of them come from aristocratic families that view manual labour as lowly (Kardong 2012, 62; Walker 1999, 400). But St. Benedict argues that if they sincerely work by the labour of their hands, they are true monks (*vere monachi*) (RB, 48.8), who don’t consider themselves to be too good to do any work (Böckmann 2008, 268). Hildemar of Corbie comments on RB 48 that active and contemplative lives are necessary for achieving monastic perfection (Corbie 2019, 94–112).

### 2.4 People

St. Benedict believes that every monk should have an apron (*scapulare*) for work (*opera*) (RB, 55.6), suggesting that each monk must do some sort of manual labour. Although tasks are assigned to individual monks (53.18) according to their respective abilities, the monastic life is communal and everyone must contribute to the life to

the best of their abilities. Occasionally, some monks must do the things that they dislike. The sixth step of humility in 7.49, nevertheless, suggests that monks should be willing to work on tasks that are even commonly regarded as low and dishonourable. While this is normatively ideal, it can be practically hard to do. A sociological study shows that some Cistercian monks, who also use the RB, are unhappy when assigned tasks they think are below their skill level (Sundberg 2019, 408–49). Consequently, when the abbot makes decisions, including on work assignments, he needs to be wise and impartial, out of fear of God (3.11), for he will have to answer to God at the Last Judgment (Byrne 1948, 384). After all, an abbot is not only an authority figure (as a father (Platovnjak 2008, 29) and manager), but also a caring shepherd, a physician, a steward, and a teacher to the monks (King 2016, 238).

In a discussion of skilled workers, perhaps referring to artists such as sculptors and or painters, St. Benedict says that they should do their work humbly and not think of themselves as a great gift to the monastery (RB, 57.2). This might imply that they shouldn't look at other types of work such as those in the refectory or infirmary as less prestigious. Every work in the monastery, however small, plays a vital role in maintaining the flourishing of the community.

This communal aspect of work in the monastery is very prominent in the RB. Malesic has argued that in Benedictine theology of work, work can serve as a "penitential practice" (Malesic 2015, 51). However, St. Benedict mentions penitence in relation to work only when a brother has conducted a serious mistake. In that case, he must work alone and maintain penitential sorrow (RB, 25.3). Aside from this case of penitential isolation, St. Benedict requires that work be done as a community to foster accountability. In 48.17, for example, St. Benedict suggests that one or two senior monks must patrol the monastery to ensure that other monks are engaged in *lectio* seriously and not succumbing to useless frivolity. This vision of working together is important to encourage monks to fulfil their duties responsibly. Even since the 1500s, the practice of accounting and transparency in Benedictine monasteries is not something out of place to manifest accountability (Payer-Langthaler and Hiebl 2013, 217).

The sense of responsibility is maintained even when brothers are physically apart, as seen in the case of travelling brothers. When brothers are absent from the oratory, St. Benedict instructs them to pray as they are able: they are to satisfy their level of service (*servitus*) properly even in the absence of supervision. When there is no fellow monk patrolling, they perform the divine office privately out of fear of the Lord (RB, 50.3–4).

Finally, monks sometimes may become sick or have bodily weakness. Their work assignments will be adjusted accordingly based on their abilities (RB, 48.24). In addressing kitchen duties, St. Benedict instructs the monks to help those who are weak (35.1–3). This care for fellow monks would arise out of the understanding of work as a communal enterprise.



### 3. Working from Home

The Benedictine understanding of work as presented in RB was intended for cloistered monks. In this section, I suggest ways in which the insights from the Benedictine spirituality of work can be applied by people who work from home.

First, we have seen that the Benedictine work ethic is grounded primarily in obedience, but with utilitarian considerations. How can this point be an insight for people lacking a superior figure like an abbot, and who are not religious? Vest suggests that those who work outside of the monastery would still have some form of superior, such as the boss, the client, and the trustees (Vest 1999, 121–122). This would inevitably be a diluted obedience, except in a few contexts where stricter obedience is required, such as in the military. In general, however, individuals need to pay respect to and obey relevant authorities to the best of their abilities, although in secular workplaces, more independence is usually present. For example, a study comparing the cellarer of a monastery with a company's CFO (Chief Financial Officer) suggests that although usually CFOs report to CEOs (Chief Executive Officers), the former must maintain a level of independence to be able to critique the latter (Hiebl and Feldbauer-Durstmüller 2014, 66). Such independence might not be present in the case of a cellarer and an abbot.

In the context of a household for individuals WFH, where there may be additional responsibilities such as cleaning the house and rearing. Children, the aspect of mutual obedience in Benedictine spirituality of work is particularly pertinent. Mutual obedience entails being sensitive to the needs of our brothers or sisters (Kodell 2013, 410). In this light, family members can practice mutual obedience by acknowledging each other's needs (reflecting the utilitarian aspect of the Benedictine work ethic) and addressing them to the best of their capacities. Family members can prioritize doing what is useful and what is necessary to be done.

Second, the spatial aspect of Benedictine work, which highlights the different functions within a monastery, holds relevance for people WFH nowadays. Just as a monastery resembles a home with many responsibilities (Scott 2010, x), our homes necessitate physical upkeep, culinary duties, and ideally, a designated space for personal or family devotions. A psychological study on boundary management during the pandemic shows that people who prefer segmentation between work and nonwork activities tend to lead more balanced lives than those who don't prefer segmentation. The definition of nonwork in that study, however, would include household works that do not directly contribute to income generation (Allen 2021, 60–84).

Questioning findings of this study, one may wonder whether the boundary between work and nonwork should be renegotiated: tasks such as at-home childcare, laundry, and cooking are surely types of work even though they do not result in monthly paychecks. In the same way, divine hours and *lectio* are necessary works for one's spiritual life. These activities that do not directly generate income are not mere distractions, but rather indispensable works within a functioning household. The use of language is important: the distinctions between work and

nonwork as well as between work and distractions in the current literature might prove unhelpful as they risk undermining the multidimensionality of life by unfairly assigning lower value to work that is less financially lucrative (Steidtmann, McBride and Mishkind 2021, 785–791; Xiao, Becerik-Gerber, Lucas and Roll 2021, 181–190).

Third, the temporal aspect of Benedictine spirituality of work emphasizes the importance of order, flexibility, and necessity, which could prove beneficial for individuals WFH. They can contemplate which works can serve as pillars in their daily schedule. They can also consider the circumstances that justify flexibility in finishing these pillar works. Finally, they can deliberate on whether some situations necessitate taking on additional types of work. Order without flexibility or consideration of necessity is unrealistic. Flexibility without order may result in capriciousness. Consideration of necessity without order seems to be a lack of effective work strategy.

Lastly, the community aspect of Benedictine spirituality of work can address the issue of isolation and aloneness in WFH during the pandemic (Sheldrake 2021, 50). Unlike monks who must work alone only temporarily as a penitential practice after a grave mistake, some people WFH nowadays must do it for an extensive period of time. The Benedictine insight on this matter emphasizes the importance of maintaining a sense of community. Given the inability of secular individuals to gather physically during the pandemic, many of them might find that they can only connect to their community through virtual meetings. The adoption of agile methodologies in remote teamwork, for example, would encourage people to meet frequently for check-ins and reviews (Neeley 2021, 88).

Another insight from the communal aspect of work in Benedictine monasticism is that every person at home must be ready to help with other work in the household. One should not harbour a sense of superiority over others in the household. An accountant wife shouldn't think of herself as better than her husband who works as an Uber driver, and a lawyer husband should not think of himself as superior to her stay-at-home wife. Wherever there is a need for help, each household member must assist one another. Ultimately, Benedictine insights are religious in nature. WFH should ideally be done out of fear of God. When Christians pray the divine office at home privately or together virtually, they are communally doing the same works of God.

## 4. Objections and Replies

There might be three possible worries about my proposal that people WFH can benefit from Benedictine insights on work. The first immediate objection to this idea might be that my comparison between secular employment and the various tasks at a Benedictine monastery is unfair, as the two are not directly comparable. A Benedictine monastery, for example, encompasses liturgical or spiritual work,

which is absent in secular employment. In response, I contend that it is precisely because the Benedictine understanding of work is broader than that of the secular world that Benedictine spirituality could offer fresh insights to secular individuals.

Second, my proposal seems to be rather office-oriented because it addresses individuals who can bring their work home. However, there are countless individuals whose work can't be performed remotely: construction workers, gig-economy drivers, police officers, etc. A study conducted in Norway, for example, found that only 38% of Norwegian jobs can be performed from home during the pandemic (Holgersen, Jia and Svenkerud 2021, 1–13). Despite these statistics, my proposal would encourage people to value more the different kinds of work at home, as Benedictine insights suggest that life is not supposed to be as segregated as previously assumed.

Lastly, my proposal cannot solve the real problems in households that are completely hectic or toxic. Helen Lombard reminds us that in Benedictine spirituality of work, complexities are embraced, not suppressed. She believes that there is a semblance of coherence and balance in a Benedictine way of life (Lombard 2019, 6–34). For those who are religious, I propose that the vow of obedience would be necessary to have such coherence because it aligns everything with obedience to God. Indeed, my proposal is applicable only to a decently functioning home where communication and negotiations among household members are possible. Even so, I believe the Benedictine insights can broaden one's perspectives on the multidimensionality of life and the communality of work.

## 5. Conclusion

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To summarize, this article begins with a recognition of the trend of working from home, especially since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. This significant shift in the world of work required adjustments in attitudes towards work due to the relocation of work settings to a distinct environment (*viz.*, home) with its own unique challenges. By a rereading of RB and extrapolating insights, this article advances the research on Benedictine understanding of work, applying it to the context of working from home.

In my rereading of the Rule (Section 2), I found that the Benedictine spirituality of work comprises four major aspects, encompassing the work ethic, the physical and temporal embodiments of work, and the community of workers. One proposal that I offered was that the Benedictine work ethic is firmly grounded in the vow of obedience, rather than primarily in the utilitarian notion that work is done for the sake of addressing what needs to be done. This transition from the utilitarian reading of work (as proposed by Kardong) to the obedience-oriented interpretation reconnects work to the vow of obedience, making it more integrated and robust than viewing work primarily through a utilitarian lens. The spatiotemporal and communal aspects of work are interrelated that a recognition of

the diversity of work functions and roles serves as the starting point to organize work with both order and sensibility in a monastery.

In Section 3, I discussed how the insights from Benedictine spirituality of work can be applied to those who are WFH. First, secular workers who do not have an abbot-like superior still answer to superiors, such as bosses and clients. Benedictine obedience also entails mutual obedience and listening to one another's needs. This mutual obedience is particularly crucial for family members to support each other, akin to monks upkeeping the monastery through different roles such as porters and cellarers. Second, monastic life is multidimensional as reflected in the monastery spaces. The key takeaway for WFH is that works that are not directly generating income are not distractions, but rather different kinds of work that are equally valuable. Third, the Benedictines organize their temporal life with order, flexibility, and considerations of necessity. Given the unpredictability of home environments, embracing these three points ensure that WFH is neither rigid nor uncontrollable, but realistic. Lastly, Benedictines believe that everyone must communally work with humility, accountability, and sensitivity to the needs of others. During the pandemic, this sense of togetherness can be constantly cultivated through virtual meetings. For the religious, the performance of the divine office at home represents a communal effort to fulfil the work of God together. These insights are also beneficial to people WFH beyond the pandemic era.

There are indeed limitations in this article as I have explained in Section 4 because the monastic life and the secular life are not completely comparable. However, I have pointed out that the Benedictine understanding of work is more comprehensive than the secular notion of work, offering a more holistic outlook on work. For individuals who must work on-site, a richer understanding of Benedictine spirituality of work would help them view 'life' and 'work' not as segregated, but as united. Also, this article does not address issues relating to extreme situations within toxic households where work cannot be done effectively. Despite these constraints, my aim has been to demonstrate the relevance of Benedictine spirituality of work amidst this evolving work paradigm.

## Abbreviations

WFH – Working from home.

RB – Kardong 1996 [*Regula Benedicti*].

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