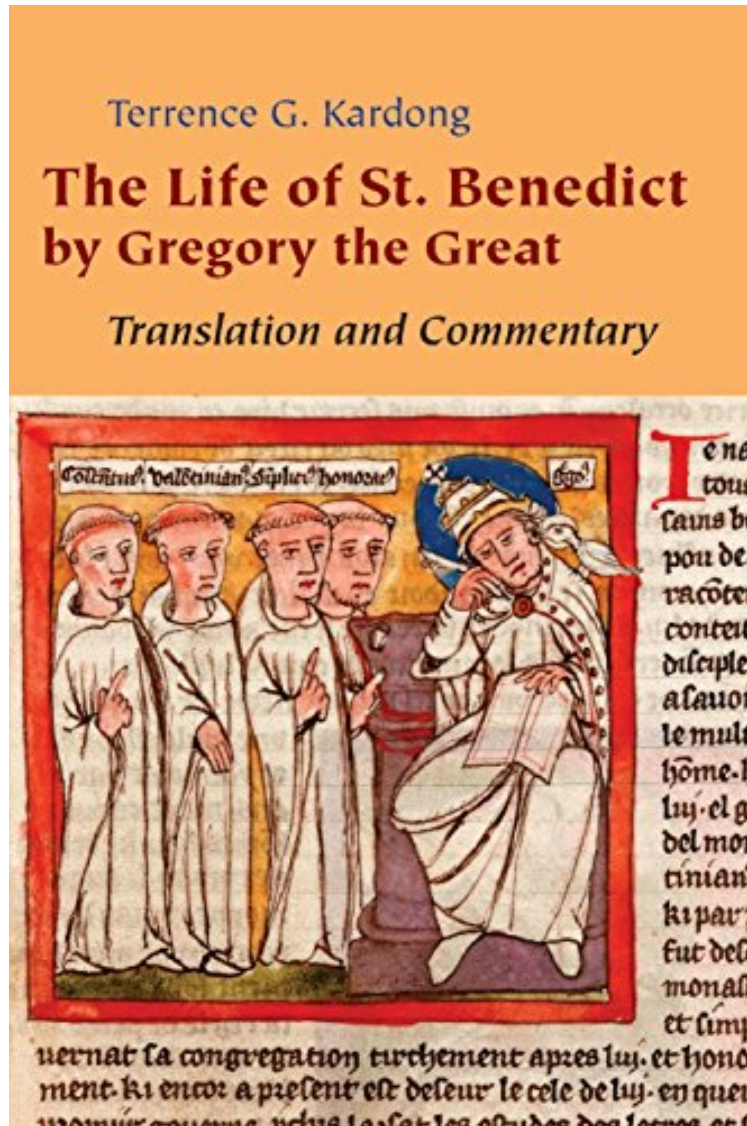


# The Life of St. Benedict By Gregory the Great: Translation and Commentary

*Terrence G. Kardong OSB*  
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**Terrance G. Kardong OSB : The Life of St. Benedict By Gregory the Great: Translation and Commentary**  
before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Life of St.  
Benedict By Gregory the Great: Translation and Commentary:

19 of 23 people found the following review helpful. Ignore, deny...marginalize! By Kate At first glance the choice of

eminent American Benedictine commentator Fr Terrence Kardong as author for a new translation and commentary on the Life of St Benedict is an odd one. He did after all, decline altogether to draw on the Life as means of illuminating the Rule in his own commentary on the Rule of St Benedict. And in 2004 he authored an article in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* endorsing the Francis Clark's conspiracy theory to the effect that the Life was in fact a fake. Clark's work, to the extent that it ever had any credibility (which is doubtful), has now been comprehensively debunked, as Kardong acknowledges in this book. So is this work then, offered by way of atonement? Sadly, no. Having tried first ignoring, and then dismissing altogether, the value of the Life, Fr Kardong now embarks on a third means of marginalizing the importance of what has traditionally been regarded as one of the foundational documents of the Benedictine Order. The reasons for his dislike of the text are not hidden: as the introduction makes clear, he hates its miracles. And, also dislikes, one gathers from the commentary, the rather 'rigid' approach to the interpretation of the Rule that those miracles support. Even while acknowledging in places that the historicity of the Life is hard to reject given St Gregory's careful citation of his sources and provision of corroborating detail, Kardong treats the work as literature, not history. Take for example his discussion of St Benedict's decision to abandon his studies in Rome. Although Kardong mentions some of the recent studies on St Anthony's learning, he fails altogether to draw out the distinctions made at the time between the completion of the classical curriculum and choice of other less formal but more Christianized forms of learning. Neither does he make any mention of the decay in systems of study that Benedict's contemporaries Boethius and Cassiodorus both attempted to counter in different ways. Nor does he provide any context on the well documented moral decay of contemporary Rome that St Gregory tells us prompted the decision to leave the city. Surely the greatest problem with this commentary though, is that Kardong fails altogether to see the providential dimension of St Benedict's life. Instead of a symbolic move from the hidden cave and depths of the valley of Subiaco to the light shining out from Montecassino that St Gregory suggests for example (and the current Pope has also pointed to), the move is portrayed purely in terms of the moral and spiritual growth of the saint. There is nothing unusual about Fr Kardong's approach to the Life. The miracles that dominate the Life of St Benedict by St Gregory the Great have been regarded with suspicion ever since rationalism and modernism became fashionable in the nineteenth century. And this work is entirely consistent with the marginalization of the person of St Benedict, in the context of a reductionist view of history that sees it as something altogether separate from God's plan for his Church, that has been a consistent feature of American Benedictine thought in particular over the last forty years. Still, it is disappointing to see this hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity continuing to be perpetuated at a time when Pope Benedict XVI is urging the recovery of the Church's patrimony. Benedictine oblates and others committed to the hermeneutic of continuity in the Church would do well to look to the older biographies of St Benedict and translations of this work rather than to this one. But if you too hate miracles, this is the version of the text for you...2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Great translation of ancient text and commentary explaining the style and content By Joseph M. Reninger Over a millennium ago, the biographies of saints were written in a far different style than today. Today, an author probably focuses on the challenges and failings of a saint rather than any miraculous or seemingly superhuman feats they accomplished. By contrast, the ancient tradition of hagiography (writings about the holy ones) reveled in miraculous events and conversions, almost like the saints were superheroes powered by grace rather than gadgets or gamma radiation. Pope St. Gregory the Great wrote just such a biography of St. Benedict, founder of the monastic tradition in the western church. The text follows Benedict's life from childhood and his first experiences at school in Rome. Living in the late 400s, life was decadent. Benedict was appalled at the behavior of his Roman classmates and fled to the countryside where he became a monk. People heard about him and came to him. A nearby community lost its leader and they invited Benedict to be the new leader. He wanted them to live a holy life, giving up their luxuries. They were unhappy with this and poisoned Benedict's wine. As they brought the pitcher, he blessed it according to the local tradition. The pitcher shattered; Benedict instantly knew they were trying to poison him. He upbraided them and told them to find another father more suited to them. That's just one example among many along the way. The commentary by Terrence Kardong does a good job of explaining the ancient style and relating the stories both to other examples of hagiography and other writings by and about Benedict. Kardong is well aware and sympathetic with the modern discomfort over miracles, especially when they happen on almost every page. He also is very aware of the literary style of the work. Not only is the prose beautiful to read but the ordering of the stories sets up interesting contrasts or similarities between events in Benedict's life. For those afraid of finding a miracle-laden text too unbelievable, this translation and commentary makes it much easier reading. The stories told are very interesting and vivid, making this book worth reading just as literature. I enjoyed it thoroughly. Sample Quote--the famous story when Benedict was tempted by lust: A victim of lust, he almost decided to desert the hermitage. Suddenly, favored by grace from above, he came to his senses. Seeing a thicket of briars and nettles growing close at hand, he stripped naked and threw himself in the sharp thorns and stinging nettles. He rolled in them for a long time and as a result was scratched from head to toe. The physical wounds on his skin removed the wound of his mind, for it converted lust into sorrow. By means of an external punishing fire, he snuffed out what unlawfully burned inside. So he conquered sin by switching fires. [p. 13]3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Very useful By C. J. Skamarakas Brief, lucid translation of Gregory the Great's biography of Benedict, to which the author adds many explanations that help cut

through Gregory's hagiography.

In his classic *Second Book of Dialogues*, Pope Gregory the Great lionizes Saint Benedict as hero and casts him predominantly in the role of miracle worker. Yet in his *Rule*, Benedict comes across more as a practical community organizer and premier spiritual father. In this volume, Terrence Kardong offers a fresh take on Gregory the Great's classic. He alternates between translated sections of the *Diablo's* and his own commentary. Crisp and direct, and infused with his wry and ever-present sense of humor, Kardong's writings sure to build up the spiritual life of readers and, equally important, to make them love St. Benedict..

This translation and commentary will be a valuable resource for educators seeking to introduce undergraduates to the development of monasticism and hagiography.