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St. Benedict Medal

The Medal or Cross of St. Benedict has become very popular in recent years. People wear it as jewelry around their necks and wrists, and I have even seen it on t-shirts and sweat shirts. Have you ever wondered what was on the St. Benedict Medal and what it all means? Let's take a closer look at the St. Benedict Medal and Cross. If you are wearing one or have one in your possession, you might want to take a closer look at it as you read this article and grow in your appreciation of both its history and its powerful meaning.

Let's begin by first of all saying that medals, crosses, rosaries, statues, paintings, and other religious articles have long been used as a means of fostering and expressing our religious devotion to God and the saints. The use of any religious article is therefore intended as a means of reminding us of God and of stirring up in us a ready willingness and desire to serve God and our neighbor. With this understanding we shall reject any use of religious articles as if they were mere charms or had some magic power to bring us good luck. Such is not the Christian attitude.

For the early Christians, the cross was a favorite symbol and badge of their faith in Christ. From the writings of St. Gregory the Great (540-604), we know that St. Benedict had a deep faith in the Cross and worked many miracles with the sign of the cross. This faith in, and special devotion to, the Cross was passed on to succeeding generations of Benedictines.

Devotion to the Cross of Christ also gave rise to the striking of medals that bore the image of St. Benedict holding a cross aloft in his right hand and his Rule for Monks in the other hand. Thus, the Cross has always been associated with the Medal of St. Benedict, which is often referred to as the Medal-Cross of St. Benedict. In the course of time, other additions were made, such as the Latin petition on the margin of the medal, asking that by St. Benedict's presence we may be strengthened in the hour of death, as will be explained later.

We do not know just when the first medal of St. Benedict was struck. At some point in history a series of capital letters was placed around the large figure of the cross on the reverse side of the

medal. For a long time the meaning of these letters was unknown, but in 1647 a manuscript dating back to 1415 was found at the Abbey of Metten in Bavaria, giving an explanation of these letters. They were the initial letters of a Latin prayer of exorcism against Satan, as will be explained further on.

The above features were finally incorporated in a newly designed medal struck in 1880 under the supervision of the monks of Montecassino, Italy, to mark the 1400th anniversary of the birth of St. Benedict. Since that time, the Jubilee Medal of 1880 has proven to be more popular throughout the Christian world than any other medal ever struck to honor St. Benedict. There is still a constant and heavy demand for this medal.

Since the Jubilee Medal of 1880 has all the important features ever associated with the Medal of St. Benedict, the following description of this medal can serve to make clear the nature and intent of any medal of St. Benedict, no matter what shape or design it may have.

On the face of the medal is the image of St. Benedict. In his right hand he holds aloft the cross as the symbol of our salvation, also reminding us of the vast work of evangelizing and civilizing England and Europe carried out mainly by the Benedictine monks and nuns, especially from the sixth to the ninth/tenth centuries. In Benedict's left hand is his Rule for Monks, which could well be summed up in the words of the Prologue exhorting us to "walk in God's ways, with the Gospel as our guide."

On a pedestal to the right of St. Benedict is the poisoned cup, shattered when he made the sign of the cross over it.

On the pedestal to the left is a raven about to carry away a loaf of poisoned bread that a jealous enemy had sent to St. Benedict.

Above the cup and the raven are the Latin words: CRUX S. PATRIS BENEDICTI (The Cross of Our Holy Father Benedict).

On the Martin of the medal, encircling the figure of St. Benedict, are the Latin words: EIUS IN OBITU NOSTRO PRAESENTIA MUNIAMUR! (May we be strengthened by his presence in the hour of our death!). Benedictines have always regarded St. Benedict as a special patron of a happy death. He himself died in the chapel at Montecassino while standing with his arms raised up to heaven, and supported by the brethren, shortly after having received Holy Communion.

Below the figure of St. Benedict is a Latin inscription giving the Kevin and date of the Jubilee Medal: Abbey of Montecassino, 1880.

On the back of the medal, the cross is dominant. On the arms of the cross are the initial letters of a rhythmic Latin prayer: CRUX SACRA SIT MIHI LUX! NUNQUAM DRACO SIT MIHI DUX! (May the holy Cross be my light! The dragon never be my guide!).

In the angles of the cross, the letters C S P B stand for CRUX SANCTI PATRIS BENEDICTI (The cross of our holy father Benedict).

Above the cross is the word PAX (Peace), which has been a Benedictine motto for centuries.

Around the margin of the back of the medal, the letters V R S N S M V – S M Q L I V B are the initial letters, as mentioned before, of a Latin prayer of exorcism against Satan: VADE RETRO SATANA! NUNQUAM SUADE MIHI VANA! SUNT MALA QUAE LIBAS. IPSE VENENA BIBAS! (Begone, Satan! Tempt me not with your vanities! What you offer me is evil. Drink the poisoned cup yourself!).

There is no special way prescribed for carrying or wearing the Medal of St. Benedict. It can be worn on a chain around the neck, attached to one's rosary, kept in one's pocket or purse, or placed in one's car or home. The medal is often put into the foundations of houses or buildings, on the walls of barns and sheds, or in one's place of business.

The purpose of using the Medal in any of the above ways is to call down God's blessing and protection upon us, wherever we are, and upon our homes and possessions, especially through the intercession of St. Benedict. By the conscious and devout use of the medal, it becomes, as it were, a constant silent prayer and reminder to us of our dignity as followers of Christ.

The medal is a prayer of exorcism against Satan, a prayer for strength in time of temptation, a prayer for a peaceful death in the Lord, a prayer for peace among ourselves and among the nations of the world, a prayer that the Cross of Christ be our light and guide, a prayer of firm rejection of all that is evil, a prayer of petition that we may with Christian courage "walk in God's ways, with the Gospel as our guide," as St. Benedict urges us.

A profitable spiritual experience can be ours if we but take the time to study the array of inscriptions and representations found on the two sides of the Medal of St. Benedict. The lessons found there can be pondered over and over to bring true peace of mind and heart into our lives as we struggle to overcome the weaknesses of our human nature and realize that our human condition is not perfect, it that with the help of God and the intercession of the saints our condition can become better.

The Medal of St. Benedict can thus serve as a constant reminder of the need for us to take up our cross daily and "follow the true King, Christ our Lord," and thus learn "to share with patience in the sufferings of Christ so that we may one day share in his heavenly kingdom," as St. Benedict urges us in the Prologue of his Rule.