

**The good community:
managerial lessons from Benedictine Rule**

by

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Abstract

In some managerial approaches there is the hidden risk of reducing people to their rational capabilities applied to decision-making; on the contrary, people cannot suppress their complex and deep nature, which involves emotions and spirituality in all their actions. This paper starts from this point of view and explores the importance of practical wisdom to build “good institutions”; that is, institutions that work toward the common good. We aim to explore the Rule of St. Benedict (RSB) as a crucial source of spiritual capital that can help the development of practical wisdom for management. A systematic content analysis of the text highlights three strongly related characteristics of the RSB: the coenobitical nature of Benedictine communities, the vision of abbots as “prudent managers”, and the role of manual labor in monastic daily life. According to the RSB, the common good becomes a practice of life and practical wisdom is disclosed in monks’ daily lives. This analysis aims to reveal several managerial implications of the RSB; in particular, with regard to institutional theory (the ontology of the organization as a community of people) and the purpose of organizations, which exceeds the narrow limits of individual (profitable) goals.

Introduction

The purpose of organizations is at the very heart of their management when they operate in free markets. Over recent decades, scholars have debated organizational purpose, and in particular, the role of profit in organizations (Handy 2002); for example, in the context of neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Greenwood and Meyer 2008). Profit is both a weak and a strong objective for a firm. It is strong, because it calls for individualism and the maximization of individual benefit; but it is also weak, because it cannot understand the complex, relational nature of people (Spaemann 1996). If we deny a reductive vision of the firm, connected only to profit-making, we have to admit that managing a firm is not a simple affair and needs a clear view of its ontology.

However, some approaches to management have been founded as techniques that allow the government of a business as a deterministic system, removing relational and ethical capabilities from managerial skills and denying the human dimension of management (Acevedo 2012; Fontrodona and Sison 2006; Melé 2009, 2003b; Spitzeck 2011; Dierksmeier 2016; Melé and Schlag 2015). This situation seems to be the consequence of a reductive vision of both people at work (managers, entrepreneurs, etc.) and firms as mere instruments of profit-seeking, ignoring their communitarian roots (Melé 2012; Solomon 1994). On the other hand, at the base of a business there is a community of people. The individual goals that motivate people in organizations do not deny an organizational ontology that exceeds those individual goals. There is no contradiction between the communitarian view of the firm and individuals' needs, and the link between the individual and the community is the common good (R. G. Kennedy 2012). Therefore, the common good can define the ontology of organizations: it is not possible to understand the real nature of organizations only from an individualistic point of view.

Reintroducing ethical categories into management as practical wisdom and virtues makes it possible to go beyond a disruptive individualistic vision of people that cannot fully activate all human, relational capabilities. In other words, the reductive vision of the firm and its purpose reflects the vision of a person as a "one-dimensional man" (Marcuse 1964), without an affective and spiritual life that can positively affect their managerial style. Furthermore, if managers are *one-dimensional men*, all their efforts to maximize individual profits inhibit the common good and, finally, the full achievement of organizational purpose.

In this paper, we adopt the RSB as a source of practical wisdom that can help managers to develop good practices and recognize the common good as the final purpose of their organizations.

The notion of “practical wisdom”

Aristotle presents the notion of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) as a dianoetic virtue that allows one to decide well; the “good” decisions taken on the basis of practical wisdom are not always the best ones, but the better ones with respect to what is “right” for the decision-maker (and also for the community and humanity in its entirety). This characteristic of practical wisdom does not deny the existence of a universal right, but it interprets this right in the particular context and at the specific time at which the decision-maker must determine the “good” choice. As we will see later, the ethical vision presented by Aristotle is coherent with the common good and needs a clear vision of common good: decision-makers cannot be “wise” if they do not refer to the community in which they live and operate.

In Aristotelian thought, practical wisdom requires all other virtues and makes moral action an objective of action itself. Practical wisdom operates in choosing instruments useful to reach goals that are decided upstream; so practical wisdom does not determine “why” the individual acts, but “how” they can act to reach their goals. Although nerveless, objectives are not indifferent: a wise person operates well to reach *eudaimonìa*; or happiness, the final objective of human life, according to Aristotle.

Even if it is related to intellect, practical wisdom is not a science, because its object is not independent from the decision itself: practical wisdom can be identified as decisions that become *praxis* (Puleen and Kupers 2013, 22 ss). Furthermore, practical wisdom is clearly separate from the other dianoetic virtue (*sophía*; that is, the capability of knowledge and understanding); while *sophía* can be developed by studying, *phronēsis* is the fruit of experience and consists of a wise posture facing decision-making. In Aristotelian words, practical wisdom—also translated as “prudence”—is the characteristic of a man able “... to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for himself, not in some one department, for instance what is good for his health or strength, but what is advantageous as a means to the good life in general” (Aristotle and Rackham 1982, chap. VI.5).

There is an essential relationship between practical wisdom and the common good, because the phronetic decision-making process aims to achieve objectives that cannot be reduced to an individual, fleeting interest, but are connected to the deep sense of human life. In Aristotelian thought, ethical action becomes possible thanks to the dianoetic virtue of practical wisdom; in other words, Aristotle connects the objective of human life (the right itself) to the capacity to assume decisions and act on them. The Aristotelian approach to humankind, and overall, modern ethical philosophy, takes into account the relational vocations of all people, who are destined to live in communities where happiness (right) is related to individual happiness (right) (Spaemann 1989; Scheler 1913). Consequently, even if Aristotelian writings do not cite the notion of common good as we know it in contemporary ethical debate (Maritain 1947; Murphy 2005), it seems clear that we can see practical wisdom as the virtue of making decisions devoted to the common good. When the decision-maker chooses the right solution to a problem, they solve the issue with regard to their individual good as well as that of the community in which they participate, because their participation in a community affects their moral character (Koehn 1995).

Practical wisdom concerns individual decisions, but also affects the social dimensions of the individual; therefore, there is a logical connection between the practical wisdom of the participants in an organization and the institution itself. We cannot reduce practical wisdom to the narrow boundaries of individual behavior, because it is the fruit of *good* experience, lived in *good* communities, which aims to attain a *good* purpose.

Practical wisdom has no elective sphere, but it can be evident and become *praxis* in all human fields of action. Modern applications of the concept of practical wisdom are inherent to politics, education, and management (Schwartz 2011; Kinsella and Pitman 2012; Puleen and Kupers 2013). The first managerial implication of practical wisdom regards business ethics and the two-fold dimension of managerial action: the definition of organizational purpose, and decisions about the best tools to reach organizational objectives. Practical wisdom operates in the decision-maker and becomes applied decisions; so we can see management responsibility as an ethical issue (Fowers

2003) that depends on managers' virtues (Intezari and Pauleen 2014). Practical wisdom is inclusive, operates at the level of organizational actions, and affects them, because managers cultivate their *phronēsis* better if they live a community devoted to good purposes and composed by good human relationships.

Practical wisdom, religious experience, and management

As a dianoetic virtue distinguished from knowledge, practical wisdom grows by experience and cannot be learned by studying or applying technical skills. Ethical reflection and communitarian life can feed practical wisdom because they allow one to build relationships with other people and to connect the individual dimension of life with the social and spiritual dimensions. If social capital affects practical wisdom and managerial behavior (Melé 2003a; Coleman 1990; Burt 2000, 1997), spiritual experience—as well as philosophical reflection—can generate a phronetic approach to decision-making (Lenssen et al. 2010).

Spiritual capital is closely related to religious tradition and entails an ethical vision that becomes both religious and social *praxis* (Baker and Skinner 2005, 4). Scholars have recognized that spiritual capital is difficult to define and, overall, to measure (Iannaccone and Klick 2003; Keller and Helfenbein 2008), because it does not concern intellectual capabilities or “mere” knowledge accumulated by studying. Individual and communitarian religious experience feeds spiritual capital that can be embodied in oral and written traditions, liturgical practices, rules of life, etc. In other words, if we can recognize social capital only in reference to mutual relations between people in a specific context and at a particular historical moment (Putnam 2000, 18–19), spiritual capital is a manifestation of social capital that grows and spreads by means of memory and custom (Roosevelt Malloch 2010), in connection with heartfelt human needs.

The dianoetic virtue of practical wisdom produces good practices if social or spiritual capital nourishes it by accumulating life experiences and cultural traditions; spiritual capital accumulation is positively correlated with the common good (Koenig and Lewis 2000; Wortham and Wortham

2007) in the different aspects that this notion assumes for human life, as well as in the professional and business spheres. Spiritual experience does not end in religious practice—even if it is strictly connected to religion—but enters social, political, and economic relations, because a spiritual approach to life guides individual thought and action. There is a two-fold dimension to spiritual capital: on one hand, it is a common asset fed by widespread tradition; on the other hand, there is the individual dimension of religious experience that allows a personal accumulation of spiritual capital.

Some scholars affirm that spiritual capital is related to specific religious experience (Berger and Hefner 2003), while others assert that there is a wider relationship between spiritual capital and religious experience itself (Gràcia 2012). Even if personal religious practice has a clear effect on spiritual capital accumulation, there are some deposits fully accessible to all people, because they are the fruit of the millennia of experience of all humanity—or specific communities—and an important aspect of cultural and social heritage. Their crystallization in literary texts allows a general access to spiritual capital, available also to people that do not adhere to a religious community; but as part of humankind, have universal spiritual instances (Zohar and Marshall 2004, 29). Therefore, the access to spiritual capital becomes freer and simpler via the medium of millenarian religious tradition embodied in literary texts.

Scholars have explored the relationship between practical wisdom, religious, and philosophical tradition and some aspects of management as leadership (Pruzan et al. 2007). The scientific interest in this topic is indicated by research programs, such as the “Practical Wisdom Project” managed by the European Academy of Business in Society and the “Spiritual Capital Initiative” of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. There are several contributions on the impact of monotheistic religious tradition on managerial practical wisdom: Hebraism (Hoebeke 2010; Cornuel, Habisch, and Kletz 2010; Habisch 2012), Christianity in its different churches (Cornuel, Habisch, and Kletz 2010; Alford 2010; Grassl 2010; Melé 2010; Weber-Berg 2010; Habisch and Loza Adauí 2010; Kessler 2013; Naughton, Habisch, and Lenssen 2010; Melé and Fontrodona 2017), and Islam (El

Garah et al. 2012; Beekun 2012, 1996; Dsouli, Khan, and Kakabadse 2012). Other studies focus on the contribution of Oriental philosophy and religions to management (Hunter 2012), such as Chinese tradition (de Bettignies et al. 2011; Opdebeeck and Habisch 2011), Buddhism (Vallabh and Singhal 2014; Daniels 2014; Marques 2012; van den Muyzenberg 2014), and Zen philosophy (Flower and Guillaume 2001; Yoneyama and Yoneyama 2007; Saha 1992). Even if all these contributions take into account different traditions with different consequences for managerial approaches to problem-solving and decision-making, scholars agree on the strict connection between religious experience and managerial practices, according to a unitary view of human nature and the ineluctability of moral judgment in business problems (Krueger 1986).

Among the different religious traditions, millenarian Christian reflection becomes relevant because of its importance in the development of Occidental thought and economics, as confirmed by Weber's and Novak's crucial contributions on the Christian roots of capitalism and the capitalistic spirit (Weber 1934; Novak 1993). The Catholic tradition feeds managerial practical wisdom from three different sources that share a common evangelic origin:

- a) Catholic social teaching, which has directly argued economic issues over the last 120 years, starting from the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, and which has recently concentrated on managerial practices (Laczniak and Klein 2010; Melé and Naughton 2011; Melé, Argandoña, and Sanchez-Runde 2011; Grassl and Habisch 2011; Melé 2012; Spieker 2011; H. E. Rousseau 2017; Cremers 2017; Loza Adauí and Mion 2016; Solari 2010; Melé and Fontrodona 2017; M. J. Naughton 1995; M. J. Naughton and Alford 2014);
- b) Religious orders and movements, which have generated economic experiences devoted to the common good, such as the *Monti di Pietà* (pawnshops) founded by the Franciscans in the early Renaissance (Bruni and Smerilli 2008; Little 1983), or enterprises related to the experience of the economy of communion (Guitian 2010; Baldarelli 2011; Frémeaux and Michelson 2017; Gold 2010; Gallagher and Buckeye 2014);

- c) The practical experience of firms founded and managed by wise entrepreneurs; for example, the German industrialist Franz Brandts (Habisch and Loza Adauí 2012), those organized in cooperative form, such as the Spanish Mondragón cooperative (Campbell 2011; Forcadell 2005), or many others governed by managers that have shown a particular managerial style derived from their religious faith and practice (Argandoña 2015).

In this context, the Benedictine Rule is a special deposit of spiritual capital, fruit of a millenarian Catholic monastic experience that is not separate from business administration. Even if the RSB was not born as a managerial code of conduct, monastic Benedictine experience had clear economic effects from its earliest days, and its content disciplines many economic aspects of monastic life. Therefore, the RSB can be seen in the overview of Christian experience that feeds spiritual capital and managerial practical wisdom.

The Benedictine Rule as a spring of practical wisdom

St. Benedict of Nursia lived in Italy at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, and is considered the real founder of coenobitical Occidental monasticism. St. Benedict's life history is recorded in the Second Book of Dialogs of St. Gregory the Great, a Benedictine monk who became the Roman Latin Pope in 590 AC. St. Gregory describes Benedict as a "man of God", whom life was remarkable more for his venerable virtues than for his reforming action on monasticism (Gregory I and Gardner 2010). It was only in the following centuries that historians and men of the Church recognized the crucial role played by Benedict and his monastic rule in developing the forms of religious life and of Occidental economic and social organization. The diffusion of Benedictine monasticism deeply impressed European ethical thinking during the Middle Ages, building the roots of modern society, even if St. Benedict himself had no particular political program, only the desire to discipline monastic life.

The RSB is not a completely new literary work by St. Benedict of Nursia. He based his rule on coeval sources and, in particular, on the so-called Rule of the Master (Pricoco 1995; de Vogüé

1977). Nevertheless, if the RSB was not a revolution, during the following centuries it showed its importance as a clear summary of different contributions (Pricoco 1995, XXVIII) and the peak of historical evolution, which overtook the former monastic Oriental experiences that were not suitable for the European cultural context (P. Rousseau 2005). While St. Benedict was alive, his rule could be considered as one of the different monastic rules. However, the wide diffusion of the RSB throughout Europe showed its importance in religious and political life during the Carolingian age and especially after the reform sanctioned by the Abbots' Council of Aachen in 817 AC, which adopted the RSB as the only monastic rule. In the following centuries, Benedictine monasteries were founded in all European regions and became increasingly powerful, as demonstrated by exemplary cases such as Farfa in Italy and Cluny in France (Hilpisch 1989; Constable 2010). Over the centuries, the Benedictine order separated into different religious families, such as the Cistercians, Trappists, and Camaldolese, but all these monasteries recognized the RSB as the central guide of monastic life.

The long and rich history of Benedictine monasticism is the first element that motivates us to consider the RSB as a deposit of spiritual capital and a spring of practical wisdom, valid also for management. St. Benedict wrote his rule in simple language because he had no philosophical ambition, and because he wanted to speak to all monks, even those without a cultured background (Penco 1958, XL); so the absence of the word “*phronēsis*” is not surprising. Nevertheless, the logical category of practical wisdom is implicit in his description of the character of abbots and other responsible members of monasteries (Tredget 2010, 717), and he uses synonyms for *phronesis* when referring to the same semantic field. Reading the RSB, we find several terms, including *sapientia*, *prudentia*, *discretio*, *providentia* and the verb *discernere* used to describe the wise posture that abbots and monks must maintain in their daily lives. In detail, *sapientia* and its derivatives occur 12 times, while these other words occur from three to five times in the text.

Consequently, the continuous reference to discernment and prudence testifies to the phronetic nature of the content of the RSB; however, there are also different characteristics of the historical evolution of the RSB that affirm its place as a spring of practical wisdom.

First, the RSB is not a philosophical text, but derives from St. Benedict's experience as a monk and an abbot in Montecassino; we can affirm that the RSB is the written summary of St. Benedict's practical wisdom, matured over his 30 years of monastic life. Its philological character (Pricoco 1995, XXXIV) and the content itself (Lentini 1952, XVII) show that the RSB cannot be the outcome of a legislative action; but rather, it is the fruit of the discernment of a person that has experimented with monastic life and the application of previous rules. This unique origin makes the RSB a phronetic text that aims to guide the practice of life. On the other hand, in the last chapter of the RSB, St. Benedict takes care to explain that the RSB is not a complete and detailed juridical code, but a basic rule that can help each monk to discern the right *modus vivendi*.

Second, the phronetic nature of the RSB emerges from its principal goal: directing the good life of individual monks and their communities. St. Benedict aims to address the abbots and the brethren to encourage them to assume wise decisions in their daily monastic life. In other words, the RSB hopes to shape good communities, in which all people practice spiritual and practical virtues, not least the dianoetic virtue of prudence, embodied in all their daily activities. If Aristotle logically unites phronesis to the ultimate goal of eudaimonìa, St. Benedict guides his brethren to the apex of Christian life by building good communities where all situations—prayer, work, studies, and mutual service—are inspired by prudence.

Last, the plurimillennial history of the RSB confirms its phronetic character: monasticism has flourished on this pillar over the centuries, making European cultural, social, and economic development possible. Even though the RSB was not the only monastic rule available during the Middle Ages, Benedictine monastic experiences have survived in both other rules of stricter observance, such as the Rule of St. Colomanus, and reformed Benedictine monasteries, such as Cluny. The reason for this longevity is probably the more phronetic nature of the RSB that makes it

possible to overcome all uncertainties by assuming decisions are inspired by essential prudence and indispensable discernment.

The RSB is not a charismatic text, but the “good fruit” of a way of life. Therefore, the RSB does not risk becoming a bureaucratic tool to manage rigid organizations, as is typical of charismatic power (Weber 1921). The wide diffusion of Benedictine monasteries in Europe after the death of St. Benedict shows the importance of the RSB in building significant practices of religious life (Hilpisch 1989); the RSB seems to fit Occidental society better than other monastic models, such as the Middle-Oriental eremitical experiences. During the Middle Ages, Benedictine communities saw their economic and social power increase and their influence on Church life become relevant, to the point of providing some popes, among whom was St. Gregorius Magnus, St. Benedict’ biographer. The Benedictine monasteries have survived some difficult historical periods and continue to exist today, even if religion has changed in its expression. The Benedictine contribution to the life of the Church is another proof of the pervasive spiritual power of the RSB as a deposit of spiritual capital and a spring of practical wisdom.

The Rule of St. Benedict and management: research design

Certain scholars have explored the managerial implications of the RSB; in particular, there are some important studies on the model of leadership that emerges in the RSB (Chan, McBey, and Scott-Ladd 2011; Bekker 2009) and the potential of the RSB as a tool in management education (Tredget 2010). Kennedy (1999) examined the potential compatibility between the RSB and contemporary managerial theories, while other scholars have studied the RSB as a text useful for modern corporate (Rost et al. 2010; Kaufer 1996) and public governance (Inauen et al. 2010).

Moreover, there are contributions by scholars and practitioners on the relevance of the Rule in human resource management (Dollard, Marett-Crosby, and Garland 2002; Galbraith and Galbraith 2004; Wolf and Rosanna 2007), and the connection between the RSB and organizational success (Folador 2016; Skrabec 2003). Other studies focus on the role of work in the RSB, as one of the

more important elements of Benedictine monastic life that can affect contemporary work ethics (Tredget 2002; Malesic 2015).

Nevertheless, the RSB is a partially unexplored, but rich deposit of practical wisdom that can help in building good organizations and interpreting their ontology. The phronetic character of the RSB is at the root of this paper, according to the approach of Tredget (2010). Formally, the RSB comprises a Prologue and 73 chapters, devoted to discipline in all aspects of a monastery's life.

According to Pricoco (1995), the rule can be divided into three sections and a conclusion as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Formal structure of the Rule of St. Benedict

Section	Paragraphs	Content
I	Prologue §§ 1–7	Individual ascesis of the monk (objective, meaning and content of the rule)
II	8–66	Institution of monastic life §§ 8–20 <i>Divine office and prayer</i> §§ 23–30 <i>Penitential code</i> §§ 31–57 <i>Activities of monastic life</i> §§ 21–22; §§ 63–66 <i>Responsible for monastery activities</i> §§ 58–62 <i>Admission to the monastery and enrolment</i>
III	67–72	Spiritual foundation of coenobitical practice
Conclusion	73	The “minimum rule”

The first section is devoted to explaining the individual ascesis of monks and to illustrating the objectives, meaning, and content of the rule; it provides an excellent introduction to religious life and the hierarchical organization of a monastery. The second section is more practical, and aims to regulate the organization and the responsibilities of the monastery's activities. In the third section, the RSB describes the foundations of coenobitical life. The final chapter presents the so-called “minimum rule”, which reminds the reader of the need for essential obedience to the Scripture. St. Benedict wants to underline the role of his rule: it indicates to monks (and to all readers) the “good” way to eternal life. We can read the rule from the ramparts of the monasteries, because the “minimum rule” is not addressed only to monks, but it has a universal vocation to “*whoever you are, therefore, who are hastening to the heavenly homeland*” (RSB, LXXIII.8).

St. Benedict wrote the rule for male communities, such as Montecassino, where he lived and operated; nevertheless, the RSB was soon adapted for female communities without any substantial changes (Jayatilaka 2003). In this paper, we refer to St. Benedict's original text, related to male communities, but all our considerations can be fully repeated reading the female version of the rule. In this paper, we want to highlight the potential of the RSB as a source for practical wisdom, useful for governing organizations according to their deep purpose, which cannot be reduced to individual objectives, such as profit-making.

We have adopted a qualitative approach to content analysis (Krippendorff 1983; Krippendorff and Salkind 2017) and used NVivo software to help identify significant textual nodes connected to different managerial themes. Although there are several existing philological and theological studies on the RSB, we have considered it relevant to construct a new coding system, which we have finalized, to understand the managerial implications of the RSB. We consider that philological researchers have not adequately highlighted the managerial potential of the RSB and we wished to reread the text to allow new insights to emerge (Kondracki, Wellman, and Amundson 2002). By adopting a conventional approach to content analysis, we were able to create a new coding system, which emerged during the text analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005); the coding is shown in Table 2.

This methodological design has allowed the recognition of a two-fold approach to reading the RSB and highlighting the managerial themes emerging within this text: the first concerns the individual level of the monks' daily life and the leadership approach—already analyzed by scholars—while the second can be considered the novel contribution of this paper, and is related to the theme of the common good. In presenting our results, we adopt English translation from the Latin by Doyle (2001).

Table 2: Coding of the Rule of St. Benedict

Categories	Sub-categories
The rule aims to a good life	<p><i>The RSB guides readers to eternal life</i></p> <p><i>The RSB disciplines coenobitical communities</i></p> <p><i>The RSB is addressed to all people who have an open posture</i></p>
The abbot is a wise leader	<p><i>The abbot must be subject to the RSB</i></p> <p><i>The abbot's teaching is wise</i></p> <p><i>The abbot judges all aspects of monastery life prudently</i></p> <p><i>The abbot manages monastery life, aiming to safe souls</i></p> <p><i>All responsible people helping the abbot are wise</i></p>
The monks conduct a good life	<p><i>Monks follow the RSB accurately</i></p> <p><i>Monks consider themselves part of the community</i></p> <p><i>Monks are modest and practice mutual fraternity</i></p>
The monastery is a good community	<p><i>Love to God and brothers is the life rule</i></p> <p><i>Work is a fundamental part of life</i></p> <p><i>The community is characterized by stability</i></p> <p><i>Relations with material goods aim for the wellbeing of the community</i></p> <p><i>All people responsible for the community are chosen because they are wise and prudent</i></p>

Practical wisdom and monks' life

As mentioned before, in the Prologue and the first chapters of the RSB, St. Benedict highlights some characteristics of his rule that identify this ancient text as a phronetic one. In other words, the RSB makes it clear that the person responsible for the monastery and all monks that have chosen to allocate their lives to God must be prudent and practice discernment. The ultimate objective of the RSB is the perfection of life and helping one's brethren—and all potential readers—to attain eternal life, or as we read in the Prologue, "*attain life everlasting*" (RSB Pr.42). Therefore, the RSB does not trap its readers in a strict code, but accompanies them along the way of eternity, "*in founding it we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome*" (RSB Pr.46).

St. Benedict acknowledges different forms of monasticism, but he chooses the coenobitical model, that considers the strongest one among others, "*to lay down a rule for the strongest kind of monks, the Cenobites*" (RSB I.13). He considers monastic life, or better, his rule, suitable for all people

searching for eternal life, providing that they assume an open spiritual and physical posture. At several points in the Prologue, St. Benedict remarks on this necessary posture of the heart—“*incline the ear of your heart*” (RSB Pr.1), “*our hearts expand*” (RSB Pr.49)—and of all physical senses: “*let us open our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with attentive ears*” (RSB Pr.9).

Loyal adherence to the RSB ensures that people can live an honest life, made up of good actions commensurate with God’s will: “*the Lord is waiting every day for us to respond by our deeds to His holy admonitions*” (RSB Pr.35).

The Prologue clarifies the objectives, recipients, and consequences of the RSB: St. Benedict addresses all people who want to gain eternal life by living a good earthly life. So, we can argue that all readers of RSB must become prudent in their actions and adopt a phronetic posture in assuming decisions inspired by God’s will. St. Benedict marks a connection between obedience and Providence: if the reader of the rule abandons himself to complete, but not blind, obedience, he can gain real happiness and eternal life. This obedient posture calls for trust in God; that is, for faith, as well as in the person responsible for the monastery and all the other monks (de Vogüé 1977).

A trustworthy nature affects all aspects of monastic life and all relations within the monastery (Vanier 2012, 49); therefore, when the RSB regulates monasteries in terms of both individual capabilities and communitarian relations, the organization of the monastery assumes a relational structure, and each monk assumes a prudent posture.

The wise leaders: the abbot and the other responsible brethren

St. Benedict dedicates several chapters to clarifying the role and the personal characteristics of abbots and of all other people in responsible positions in the monastery (e.g., priors and cellarers); it seems fundamental to build good communities in which the leaders are able to guide all the different offices, both strategic and modest, wisely.

First, the abbot is not a “free batsman” who manages the monastery based on his sensitivity or, so much worse, to reach his individual objectives; he is subject to the Rule as much as the other brethren: “*the Abbot himself should do all things in the fear of God and in observance of the rule*” (RSB III.11). Therefore, his leadership must be firmly rooted in God’s will and guide the monastery to its natural goal of helping all monks to reach eternal life, preserving the Rule as fundamental to monastic life: “*And especially let him keep this rule in all its details*” (RSB LXIV.20). Humility is a necessary characteristic of the abbot, even if he holds the power and has ultimate responsibility for the monastery.

The abbot must be the master of all the brethren, and especially for the younger ones, who must be able to grow following divine justice (RSB II.5). The abbot should teach with mixed severity and fondness, because he is both chief and father: “*In his teaching the Abbot should always follow the Apostle’s formula: ‘Reprove, entreat, rebuke’; threatening at one time and coaxing at another as the occasion may require, showing now the stern countenance of a master, now the loving affection of a father*” (RSB II.23–24).

In managing the monastery, the abbot must assume his decisions and judge controversial situations: the RSB recommends operating prudently and preserving monks’ souls. The role of the abbot is to guide a community to its salvific purpose and not to exercise unlimited power, so the abbot must adopt a wise posture as a shepherd, because his role finds a natural limit in his responsibility to God: “*the Abbot must not disturb the flock committed to him, nor by an arbitrary use of his power ordain anything unjustly; but let him always think of the account he will have to render to God for all decisions and his deeds*” (RSB LXIII.2–3).

St. Benedict establishes a clear hierarchy of power within the monastery: The abbot has the responsibility of the life of the community, but he is subject to God's will and to the Rule, which demarcates and directs his leadership (de Vogüé 1977). Consequently, he matures his judgment skills based on prudence and balancing different needs: the maintenance of order, fraternal amendment, being an example to all monks, etc. Justice and mercy work mutually in the abbot's practical wisdom, because all judgment aims to preserve and develop both the individual and communitarian way to eternal life. If the abbot goes too far in exercising his power and in punishing faults, he risks the internal equilibrium of the community: "*In administering correction he should act prudently and not go to excess, lest in seeking too eagerly to scrape off the rust he breaks the vessel*" (RSB LXIV.12).

It is clear that St. Benedict thinks of the abbot as a leader who exercises his power prudently and wisely conducts the community to the "perfection of life", the real goal of monastic organization. The RSB designs an ethical leadership for the monastery, where the abbot decides, after consulting the other monks (RSB III), and then assumes his personal responsibility for the good operation of the community (RSB II.7).

The RSB also disciplines the personal characteristics of all people holding responsible roles in the monastery: even if they assume a less powerful role, they must also manage their responsibility by adopting a careful style. For example, St. Benedict considers the delicate role of the cellarer, who must constantly pay attention to all aspects of monastic life: "*Let him keep charge of everything*" (RSB XXXI.3). The cellarer cares for all monks, especially the old or sick ones (RSB XXXI.9) and the monastic assets, which are considered as liturgical things (RSB XXXI.10).

The practical wisdom of each monk

Not only must the abbot be a prudent leader: all monks have a vocation to practical wisdom in their daily lives (Vanier 2012) and must constantly observe the Rule. The monks venerate the natural order of the monastery as established by the rule: they are obedient and modest in such a way that

they are able to contribute to building a good community. St. Benedict dedicates a long chapter to humility, designed as a scale of 12 steps that help monks on their way to perfection (RSB VII): climbing the ladder of humility, monks do not mortify themselves, but grow more and more in virtue. Therefore, a general vocation to practical wisdom emerges clearly in the RSB because monks are devoted to virtuous practice, in a continuous cycle of prayer, study, and work.

The monks feel themselves part of the community and aim for the common good, renouncing individual interest: “*no one following what he considers useful for himself, but rather what benefits another*” (RSB LXXII.7). This is not only an exercise of disinterest in material things, but also a true skill of judgment, because monks must cultivate practical wisdom to understand what fits with the common good. If monks practice mutual benevolence, they increase their empathy and, finally, their judgment skills, in addition to exercising evangelic fraternity (RSB LXXII.8–11).

Building the “good community”

Even if an individual level of practical wisdom clearly emerges, the discipline of the RSB also enables coherent organization of the monastery, bringing out the communitarian level of the Rule and the crucial role assigned to organizational purpose. St. Benedict devotes a large proportion of his rule to regulating all offices of the monastery, in order to build a “good community” capable of helping all monks in their ascesis.

As mentioned above, love—of God and of one’s brothers—is the basic rule for life in a monastery: the brethren are called to mutual service and the abbot is the community’s servant, because the way to perfection in life passes through the construction of a community based on relational exchange and fraternity. The coenobitical form of monasticism is at the very center of the RSB and we cannot understand Benedictine monasticism without considering the communitarian choice instead of other forms of religious life, such as anchoritism or eremitism. The choice of the coenobitical model is not completely new, because communitarian monasticism originates from early monastic experiences and from the desert fathers’ scripts (Gould 1993). However, when St. Benedict

illustrates diverse forms of monasticism and indicates his preference for coenobitism (RSB I), he not only traces the boundaries of his rule, but also selects the solution he considers the best for attaining eternal life.

In Benedictine thought, there is a strict connection between spiritual perfection and communitarian life, and all chapters of the RSB consistently aim to create the conditions to allow the monastery to become a good community. Reading the RSB, we can highlight four characteristics of this “good” community, which fosters the ascesis of monks as individuals and as members of the community itself.

First, stability characterizes the monastery (Stewart 1998; Feiss 1999) because only a durable relationship between individual monks and their community allows it to realize good actions: “*Now the workshop in which we shall diligently execute all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community*” (RSB IV.78). St. Benedict wants his monks to remain in the same monastery so that they can patiently exercise all virtues and grow in their spiritual life. On the other hand, stability is one of the promises required of novices (RSB LVIII.17), because they must consciously choose monastic life and understand that communitarian life is their own way to reach spiritual perfection.

Stability is so important in the RSB that even if hospitality is a duty, guests must make the choice of whether they want to become part of the community by accepting stability, or if they wish to maintain their temporary condition as guests (RSB LX.8, LXI.5).

Second, communitarian life includes different offices that have the same importance: prayer, study, and work (Bouyer 2008), in continuity with the Biblical vision of the relationship between labor and life (e.g. Ecclesiastes 4:9). If liturgical offices and prayer are fundamental to developing the spiritual dimension of life and study of Bible is necessary to feed intellectual capabilities, likewise monks cannot renounce work because it is an unavoidable dimension of their life. The monks are directly responsible for the material organization of the monastery that is not delegated to servants, because all dimensions of monks’ life are devoted to perfection and free time can distract souls

from their way to eternal life. In other words, St. Benedict reconciles soul, mind and body in a “perfect” union of efforts to reach life goal: “*Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brethren should be occupied at certain times in manual labor, and again at fixed hours in sacred reading*” (RSB XLVIII.1).

Manual labor does not degrade the social status of a monk, but elevates him to the level of the apostles and fathers; consequently, the brethren must accept their work joyfully, because in this way they contribute both to supporting the community and advancing their spiritual asceticism: “*And if the circumstances of the place or their poverty should require that they themselves do the work of gathering the harvest, let them not be discontented; for then are they truly monks when they live by the labor of their hands, as did our Fathers and the Apostles*” (RSB XLVIII.7–8).

The basis of a good community is labor, as an instrument to mutually serve all participants and to build a sustainable organization: if all brethren involve themselves in obtaining the monastery’s economic independence, the sense of belonging grows and enforces community. On the other hand, the monastery becomes a workshop where monks walk the path to eternal life only if it achieves independence in economic terms and if monks can stay in the monastery without travelling around collecting alms. St. Benedict states that all necessary productive activity —e.g., the mill, water spring, and vegetable garden—should be internal to monastery, in order to seek economic sustainability (RSB LXVI.6–7).

Even if St. Benedict does not directly quote the Holy Bible, the relationship between material assets and labor discussed above mirrors the Biblical vocation to labor as reported in the book of Genesis, when God invites people to “*cultivate and take care*” (Genesis 2:15) of the garden of Eden. In the textual context of both the Holy Bible and the RSB, people (monks) must work because they are the custodians of a gift and are responsible for the maintenance of this gift, which must be available to the community to whom they belong and to all humanity. Consequently, labor is not only an essential dimension of individual life, but also a fundamental aspect of communitarian life.

The particular relationship with material goods is the third characteristic of a good community: St. Benedict does not despise material substances, but bends them to the wellbeing of the community, excluding every individual interest or profit-making goal. There is a separation between brethren and material goods, but the RSB establishes a serene relation with the latter, because St. Benedict aims to create the best conditions for communitarian life and does not ask for intolerable sacrifices. According to Biblical tradition, the RSB prescribes a balanced attitude toward materialism, excluding both greed and prodigality, because all things point toward God's will and eternal life. It is clear, for example, that cellarer must be wise in his administration of the monastery's businesses and avoid unscrupulous behavior: "*He should be neither a miser nor a prodigal and squanderer of the monastery's substance, but should do all things with measure and in accordance with the Abbot's instructions*" (RSB XXXI.12).

The brethren's vocation to labor has a clear communitarian connotation and does allow individual advantage or career opportunity, because each monk works to contribute mutually and fraternally to the community. St. Benedict makes this point clear, by prescribing punishment for monks that have exalted themselves: "*But if any one of them becomes conceited over his skill in his craft, because he seems to be conferring a benefit on the monastery, let him be taken from his craft and no longer exercise it unless, after he has humbled himself, the Abbot again gives him permission*" (RSB LVII.2–3).

The fourth characteristic of the good community built based on the RSB concerns how monks nominate their responsible officers. St. Benedict's idea of career and meritocracy is neat: no one obtains power over the community by an automatic mechanism or by other merits, except his wisdom and prudence in judgment. For example, when he describes the role of the Deans, St. Benedict makes clear that they are not the oldest monks, but the wisest ones among the monastery, because they have to be able to counsel the abbot in assuming his responsibility (RSB XXI). Any role that involves certain responsibility or visibility is given to monks who can usefully contribute to communitarian life, excluding any possible automatism. St. Benedict prescribes in the

chapter devoted to weekly reader is paradigmatic: “*The brethren are not to read or chant in order, but only those who edify their hearers*” (RSB XXXVIII.12).

Finally, the Benedictine monastery is a good community as a result of both the content of the Rule and the primacy of the Rule itself over any other power. The RSB guides the community to the right path by cultivating practical wisdom within each participant in community, be it abbot, cellarer, or a simple monk.

Managerial implications: is it only an individual choice?

In this paper, we present the Benedictine Rule as a spring of practical wisdom and, in particular, as a deposit of spiritual capital that can facilitate the development of a better approach to decision-making within organizations. If scholars have already analyzed the potential of the RSB to shape wise leadership at the individual level, reading the RSB allows us to highlight further aspects inherent to the purpose of organizations and the nexus between the vocation for the common good and style of leadership.

The first, and most important, contribution of the RSB to management and to business ethics concerns the vision of organizations as instruments for the common good. In St. Benedict’s thought, a monastery is a complex organization based on the Rule, which is in turn not a combination of rigid restrictions, but rather, a way to build good relations with God, with the authorities, and with one’s brethren. In other words, the practical wisdom derived from the RSB is not an individual affair, but something relevant to the basis of the institution itself. A *good* life enables *good* relations with others, and makes one capable of seeking the common good (Mancini 2004, 99) as a fundamentally relational concept (Maritain 1947).

A contribution to the ethical debate on managerial functions concerns the switch from the individual dimension of moral action in management to the communitarian dimension of business ethics. The RSB allows an understanding of how there is a “spirit” of community that involves individual choices, but that cannot be limited to them. Participation in an organized community makes

individual choices able to reach goals otherwise unreachable, because of the relational and trustworthy nature of the community. It is not important which objectives (spiritual or economic) are at the basis of the organization: if a community of people share values and goals, it becomes stronger and more able to operate.

The RSB makes it clear that it is not possible to think of ethical behavior in organizations from an individual perspective alone due to the communitarian nature of all firms. Therefore, if each participant brings their individual needs and skills to an organization, there is an organizational meta-level in which individualities dissolve into the community. The goals of the community become primary, and individual goals can be reached only if communitarian aims are reached.

Obedience is the way that monks ratify their adherence to their community by sharing its values, objectives and internal rules: this is true not only for simple brethren, but for all those in responsible positions, and most of all, the abbots. Likewise, a firm can only work as a community if managers and workers foster a sense of belonging and acknowledge the common good as a more important goal than their individual ones. This sense of community is a deterrent against conflicts, because it bends individualities to fraternity and mutual service, making the common good the center of all organizational actions.

Clearly, a monastery is a hierarchical organization where monks must obey their leaders.

Nevertheless, this hierarchy is “wise” and is based on trust and practical wisdom, which no-one must obey unless he shares the goals and values of the community and because he has discerned authority as an instrument to govern the community for the common good. Therefore, there is a nexus between leadership and the recognized purpose of the organization: the monk participates in monastery life and works hard because he has understood that coenobitical monasticism can help him to reach perfection in life. Similarly, in firms, the leadership becomes stronger if the organization aims for the common good, seen as the summary of the rights of individuals and of the community, and people share these values and goals.

The RSB has another important contribution that is potentially valuable in organizational life: the role assigned to labor and its relationship with the spiritual dimension of life. When St. Benedict prescribes manual work for monks, he recognizes the importance of combining diverse aspects of humankind—spirituality (cultivated by prayer), the intellect (fed by study), and materiality—in both personal and communitarian development. Likewise, if firms are communities of people, managers and workers must be free to cultivate themselves to maximize their contribution to common objectives. Clearly, if in monasteries there is a need to emphasize manual labor to prevent idleness and conceit, businesses must also develop relational and spiritual capital to license themselves to operate.

Finally, the RSB makes clear that there is a relationship between organizational goals, practical wisdom, and sustainability that can be seen as a reflection of managerial stability. Monks must be prudent to gain eternal life, and must persevere in their obedience to the RSB, while managers can orient their decision-making processes toward sustainability and overcome the narrow boundaries of individual, short-term interests, such as profit-seeking. Profitability is not excluded from the organizational purpose; monasteries—as for all firms—must be financial sustainable, but profit is only an instrument and not the principal aim of organization, as indeed it is not the aim of the virtuous person (Aristotle and Rackham 1982, chap. I.5). Therefore, organizational purpose can help or, quite the opposite, hinder the development of managerial practical wisdom, depending on its durable or transitory nature. It is clear that the common good, as an organizational goal, stimulates virtuous practice and prudent actions as the route to building good communities and sustainable businesses. Aristotelian thought attributes the character of stability to virtues (Aristotle and Rackham 1982, chap. I.10), because only a wise, virtuous posture can empower individual and communitarian practices and make them capable of reaching their long-term goals. Therefore, the prescribed stability is not a chain that fastens individuals to the community, but the viaticum to reach a plentiful capacity to decide well and to build good relations within, and around, the organization.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to analyze the potential of the RSB as a tool to develop practical wisdom within businesses. Clearly, St. Benedict did not write his rule for managers, but the content of the RSB has universal validity and is a deposit of spiritual capital that aids managers and workers in their personal and communitarian discernment. His deep knowledge of humankind is the key to understanding his thoughts on monastery life and also to applying his rule in building good communities licensed to operate in today's society. Cultivating spiritual capital is an opportunity to develop managerial practice and education, and the RSB is a precious instrument, available to all, not only those who belong to a religious community.

Through a systematic content analysis, we have placed in evidence two principle nuclei of managerial practical wisdom: an individual dimension related to leadership and daily life, and a communitarian dimension.

The RSB contributes a conceptual and ontological approach to organizations, but it can be operationalized and integrated in organizational practice in different ways; e.g., by using it as an instrument of business education (Tredget 2010), by exercising spiritual coaching (Brescianini and Pannitti 2016) or by complementing the RSB within the ethical code of the firm, as in "Brunello Cucinelli SpA", where a Benedictine prior participate on the firm's ethics committee.

The present article is written principally at the theoretical level, but further research on this theme could focus on a collection of managerial good practices that draws attention to the relationship between practical wisdom and organizational purpose.

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