Foundations of Benedictine Education

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When I refer to the foundations of Benedictine education I'm not thinking about curriculum or religious services, but about the broad underlying structure of ideas and attitudes that supply both the foundation and the motive for Benedictine involvement in education: the underlying way of thinking, the underlying way of looking at life, the way of living, historically and now, that is characteristically Benedictine. I have in mind Benedictine community, Benedictine love of learning, and Benedictine spirituality.

To get to the Benedictine notion of community we have to step back in time to the 520s and 30s and 40s in southern Italy, to a mountain top called Monte Cassino, where a man whom we might nowadays describe as a college drop-out gathered around himself a group of young men interested in seeking God together.

Some of them may have been well educated but they didn't intend to start a college. What they wanted was a school of the Lord's service and their teacher was to be the man who had discontinued his studies in Rome because its worldly environment was not what he sought. His name was Benedict.

Benedict's reputation rests on the Rule he wrote for his monastery. It is a work of genius. The monastic movement shaped by the Rule of Benedict is generally credited with a major role in preserving the learning of the past and creating a social fabric that provided security and a stable environment for new growth in Christian Europe. Yet Benedict didn't invent anything people had not thought of before. There was already a long tradition of Christian monastic life-sometimes solitary, sometimes in community. Benedict drew on this long tradition when he set down the rules for his followers at Monte Cassino.

What resulted was a work stamped with his deep respect for the person and his unerring sense of proportion. With typical modesty he calls it "a little rule for beginners," but the Rule of Benedict was to be adopted by hundreds and eventually thousands of religious communities great and small, male and female, over the following centuries and to serve as a model for many other civic and social bodies. In the words of a modern commentator, Benedict had come up with a guide for developing sustainable communities that is as relevant now as it was 1,500 years ago. Let's look at that a bit. How does Benedict build a community? I'm dwelling on this because in some respects it is as relevant to academic communities as it is to monasteries.

To start with Benedict puts all of the members on the same footing. Age, wealth, professional accomplishments, social prominence does not count. Rank in the community is simply by when you arrived. A certain respect for the elders of the community is appropriate, but this is simply one aspect of the mutual respect that all the brothers should have for one another. And bear in mind that this is a cross-generational community, from youths to men of advanced years, who go on living together year after year.

The line of authority is clear. The community is governed by an abbot whom the members choose from their midst. Benedict details the qualifications of the abbot, above all the discretion and sensitivity required in dealing with individuals as individuals. He must be aware that he will have to give an accounting to God for the welfare of each member of the community. The sick and the elderly may need a special diet that includes meat. Those with heavy responsibilities should be given the help they need in order to carry out their duties with a tranquil spirit. In community decision making the young should be heard. And so on.

There is also a strong horizontal relationship. The members need to care for one another, even be obedient to one another with mutual respect and love. "The brothers should serve one another" Benedict says, "for such service increases reward and fosters love." (Chapter 35.) A sense of serving the common good is pervasive. As far as possible the community is to be self-sustaining. This means that somebody has to plow the fields, herd the sheep, prune the vineyards, be good at a whole range of other practical skills. Everybody is expected to take a turn at the domestic chores. An English writer describes arriving very late at a monastery where he had an appointment to see the abbot. He got lost in the countryside and arrived long after dark. Someone in black pants and a T-shirt opened the door when he rang the bell, said, "Ah, yes, we were expecting you," got him to a room, brought him a bite to eat, told him when breakfast was in the morning. The guest asked one thing: "Do you suppose I shall still be able to see the abbot?" "Oh, I'm the abbot," his host said, "but you must be tired now. I'll see you in the morning."

This incident catches the spirit of the Rule to a tee. It reminds me of a story told about Abbot Basil Hume, the future archbishop of Westminster, who came to christen the child of some friends of his at their home and helped his hostess get the house ready by vacuuming the living room rug. The framework of community comes alive under the warmth of Benedict's persuasion that nothing is to be preferred to Christ's love in their midst. Equal standing; caring and wise authority; mutual respect and service: there you have the building blocks of Benedictine community. Historically what did Benedictines do in community? For one thing, many monastic communities became centers of learning. This is the second point I want to make about Benedictines and the bearing of their fundamental values on higher education.

A focus on learning was there in embryo from the first in Benedict's emphasis on reading. You had to be a reader to follow the way of life he prescribes. Besides work and prayer the monks were expected to spend two, three, maybe even four hours a day reading. The chapter of the Rule that deals with the daily manual labor devotes as much attention to the hours reserved for reading as it does to the hours reserved for work.

The central place of reading in the monk's life explains why copying manuscripts and making books became such a characteristic occupation for monks. Every cloister had its library as surely as it had its chapel. First of all the monks read Sacred Scripture and the great church writers like Augustine and Basil and Ambrose, but they also preserved and made new copies of profane authors like Cicero, Pliny, Tacitus-the whole body of classical literature that medieval scholars called Grammar with a capital "G," what Jean Leclercq calls "the first stage and the foundation of general culture" (*The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 17).

Despite this emphasis on books the monks did not found universities, although as the universities developed Benedictines were often university students and sometimes professors. However, both monks and nuns provided schooling for their own members. A famous product of this schooling was the eighth-century English monk, Bede, born in 673, who came to the monastery of Jarrow as a youth and lived his entire life there. He is renowned for his major work, *A History of the English Church and People*, a full length history which remains the major source for its period. He lived from 673 to 735. In his lifetime the monasteries of northern England were the focal point of learning in Western Europe.

"From the start," as I noted in an article I wrote some years ago, "Benedictine life required a certain level of disciplined intellectual activity. . . . It is not surprising that in the centuries following Benedict, monasteries became centers of literary culture, preserving the ancient texts in new copies and composing a body of liturgical texts, homilies, commentaries, and chronicles of their times" (*The American Benedictine Review* [June 1995] , 123). English Benedictines undertook to send a portion of their membership-one for every twenty monks-to Oxford or Cambridge, a practice that continued until Benedictine life in England was violently terminated by Henry VIII in the 1540s. (See *Benedictines in Oxford*, ed. Henry Wansbrough, OSB, and Anthony Marett-Crosby, OSB, [London, 1997], 39.) One of the first printing presses in Europe was founded at the great Spanish abbey of Montserrat as early as 1499. Toward the end of the sixteenth century Benedictines founded communities in the New World with monasteries and schools in Brazil that continue today. In the nineteenth century Benedictines came to North America and began to offer education at high school, college, and seminary level. Suffice it to say that it's a long history of learning as an integral part of Benedictine life that we continue in contemporary schools and colleges under Benedictine auspices.

Finally let me note, however briefly, the particular character of Benedictine spirituality. Krista Tippet, author of *Speaking of Faith*, puts her finger on the key to what is distinctive about Benedictine spirituality when she remarks that Benedictines "take great pride in the fact that their order began in the sixth century, predating the major divisions in the church" (Tippett, 117).

One of the results of that early origin is that monastic spirituality is firmly rooted in Sacred Scripture and the early Christian writers. Concentration on these sources leads Benedictines to a comprehensive and ecumenical view of the Christian life. It is ecumenical in the original sense of the word, "belonging to or representing the whole Christian world." It is also ecumenical in the more limited way we generally use the term today to mean bridging the gap between Catholic and Protestant or between Eastern Orthodox and Rome. Benedictine spirituality took shape long before the split between Eastern and Western branches of the church in the 11th century and the further divisions that resulted from the Reformation in the 16th century. It is a spirituality that transcends ecclesiastical divides because it is rooted in religious sources that antedate the sometimes bitter theological and political differences of more recent centuries.

In addition, Benedictine spirituality continues to be shaped by daily immersion in the hours of prayer and Eucharist that make up the monastic liturgy. A life steeped in the Psalms and the Gospels affords a large common ground with other people of faith within the Christian tradition and in interreligious dialogue. Seen in this light the motto "Pax" or "Peace" often seen at the entrance to a monastery takes on dynamic meaning. It doesn't mean passive toleration-you go your way, I'll go mine-but active commitment. As Paul puts it: "Live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13.11). On the contemporary American campus with its new interest in spirituality this commitment to building peace by the way we live is a Benedictine strength that should not be disregarded but treasured and cultivated.

Let me summarize what I've said. I've dwelt on three major facets of the Benedictine heritage that continue to have a deep effect on education under Benedictine auspices. They are the distinctive structure of community that Benedict worked out so wisely in his Rule for monasteries, the central role of disciplined intellectual activity in the Benedictine tradition, and the deep theological and spiritual grounding of the Benedictine tradition in Sacred Scripture and the writers whom Benedict calls "the holy Catholic fathers" in the stirring conclusion to his Rule.

David Bentley Hart suggests that in our time "the life of those ancient men and women who devoted themselves to the science of charity, in willing exile from the world of social prestige and power, may perhaps again become the model that Christians will find themselves compelled to emulate" (*Atheist Delusions* [New Haven, 2009], 241). "Compelled" may be too strong a word, but called upon to recognize and value sounds right for an institution that prides itself on its Benedictine heritage.

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