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The Benedictine Option as a Component in Shaping the Character of Benedictine Schools

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The current cultural analysis and corresponding historical analogy are well in place. We are living in a world that manifests rapidly growing signs of secularization and behavioral patterns that express opposition or indifference to religious practices. Rather than engage in the futile effort to convert or convince those in the seats of power and influence, people of faith are encouraged to move to the margins of society. Detached from the forces that pulverize public expression of religious belief, new groupings of the spiritually observant will fortify themselves by living in intentional communities where they can freely practice their faith. The entire enterprise is compared to the historical phenomenon of St. Benedict going to Subiaco and Monte Cassino in the sixth century, fleeing the moral laxity and political chaos of a crumbling Roman Empire. Thus we are supplied with what is now a commonplace term in circles of concerned Christians: the "Benedict Option."**[1]**

I would like to take this phrase as the basis of a renewed notion of what the mission of Benedictine schools can be for the culture of North America and beyond. By reflecting on monastic tradition and the historical framework of Benedictine schools in the U.S., I hope to construct a possible pathway for educators as they consider how to confront the continuing challenge of a secular culture and its attendant pitfalls today.

The Legacy of History

A first order of clarification on the manner of Benedictine presence is to reject the stereotype of a spiritual enclave, one that is set at a purposeful remove from interaction with the events and people of a wider world. Anyone who has a regard for Book II of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* or the whole arc of historical development of cenobitical monasticism from the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages to the Reformation and Enlightenment can certify that the cloister walls of monasteries have been permeable in ways too many to count. Although the wider society outside the cloister may have been held with some suspicion, safeguards were in place to protect those being formed by a monastic culture from the corrosive effects of structures and swaths of life antagonistic to monastic practice. Truth be told, a *fuga mundi* spirituality never squared with the ongoing reality of monastics who engaged with kings and prelates, the rich and the poor, the saints and sinners. The questionable elements of worldly influence were not so much ignored as filtered through the unique strain of monastic theology that Jean Leclercq famously coined "The Love of Learning and the Desire for God."**[2]**

When one examines more closely the nature of a Benedictine school in this country in its historical evolution, there are some characteristics that deliver helpful lessons to us. In its earliest form, most schools established within the proximity of a monastic community were the equivalent of total institutions. A majority of the students were full time residents who abided by restrictions of schedule and activities quite similar to those of the monastery. In many cases, a student could enroll as a minim at the age of twelve or less, advance through high school and college levels of education, and in some communities of men, go on through major seminary. Some would comment that such a protective environment was an artificial construct, having the same questionable influence as that of society's gated communities.

Whatever one's judgment on the restricted horizons of such an educational enterprise, one can assert that the Benedictine monastic houses of the 19th and early 20th century in the U.S. showed an intimate interaction with and absorption of the life of the local community. Immigrant status, ethnic and religious identity, and a working class background constituted the make-up and formation of most of our monastic predecessors. Moreover, the apostolate or ministry of education, along with the Benedictine pastoral presence in so many parishes, assured a day to day contact with generations of parents and children who carried from the experience a distinctive spiritual DNA, however limited it may seem to the eyes of a more diverse society of the third millennium.

A Crucial Interlude: Vatican Council II

At the risk of leap-frogging much of the history of Benedictine life in this country, I prefer to concentrate on the critical time frame of Vatican II and its aftermath. This period presents a juncture when the question of how much and what type of contact with the world outside of the monastery appeared with a new intensity. The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes,* summarized this changed outlook when it declared: "The Church profits from the experience of past ages, from the progress of the sciences and from riches hidden in various cultures, through which greater light is thrown on human nature and new avenues to truth are opened up."**[3]** One has to wonder whether the Council Fathers would have classified the Internet and social media as "new avenues to truth," but it is very evident that the phrase so evocative of the spirit of Vatican II, the discerning of "the signs of the times,"**[4]** implied a filter of optimism that gave little thought to the moral dystopias that would soon be a cause of concern.

This same mandate to have a more honest and wide-ranging engagement with the world is borne out in the Council's Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis,* and by the renewal documents of the major monastic congregations of men and women that appeared in the years after the Council.**[5]** The thrust of monastic houses in these years was to engage in dialogue with the strata of the surrounding society that had previously been unnoticed.

At this same time, the mission and make-up of monastic schools were undergoing a sea change. Single-sex schools were giving way to the new norm of coeducational institutions. The composition of student bodies was shifting. Increasing numbers of non-Catholics were now enrolled and ethnic diversity was also very much in evidence. As Benedictine schools were taking in an entirely new demographic, the monastics were initiating dialogue with non-Catholic and non-Christian groups and programs of service were being instituted to promote an improved understanding of individuals and institutions that formerly were outside the pale of consideration for a Catholic school.

One of the blessings of Benedictine communities committed to educational apostolates in the post-conciliar period was the appearance of mission statements and curricula that promoted a new and better defined Benedictine identity. Frameworks were also put in place to go about discerning what type of solidarity monastics were willing to carve out as they encountered and interacted with the wider world. **[6]**

While there was a dwindling number of monastics in administrative positions and in the classrooms, there was a sharpened sense of what it meant to be Benedictine. By the decade of the 1980s one detected a more guarded and critical stance toward the world surrounding the monastic cloister. Benedictines were not, of course, alone in steering through this unchartered land. Many other schools run by religious communities were retrieving their peculiar charisms. They saw a need to transmit these charisms to educators who were not members of their religious community. They also reconfigured their relationship with the "real world" and calculated how to transmit values that could stand as a witness to the tsunami of secularization.

A Period of Redefinition and Retrieval

As Benedictines crossed from one millennium to another the landscape of culture and education changed considerably. On one hand there was a renewed focus on formulating an appropriate network of religious formation and Benedictine values for both faculty and students that could be carried into the broader sphere of society. On the other hand there was an ongoing concern over surveys that reflected a determined decrease in younger generations with respect to belief in a specific creed and observance of religious practices.**[7]**

New phrases began to surface within schools. "Hiring for mission,"

"transmitting the charism" and "safeguarding the tradition" all pointed to the growing concern about how to cope with the changed reality of non-churched men and women while at the same time attempting to form them in a monastic tradition that was seemingly at cross purposes with a radically different cultural climate. In an attempt to define this new climate the attraction of what we know as the Benedict Option began to emerge.

A number of diagnostic checks on the generation of "nones" served to spell out differences from previous generations. They were removed from any fixed affiliation of denomination or religious tradition. Their basis of moral decision-making and philosophical grounding was a relativism of personal choice. Their world view was not so much an opposition to a stance of religious teaching or observance as it was an indifference to its relevance. The telling elements of such an attitude were a pursuit of happiness unhampered by the constraints of moral absolutes, a detachment from the collective wisdom and communal institutions of traditional religion. Unlike previous examples of rebelling generations willing to contest values and practices they considered inadequate to the needs of the time, the

"nones" did not feel a need to find a common language of debate. The contours of common discourse were no longer in place. Trying to find a common language in which to discuss differences was deemed irrelevant.

It was out of this unprecedented and unsettling awareness that many inheritors of orthodox Christian and monastic tradition began to see the need for the Benedict Option. Precisely what that meant at first was not entirely evident. It certainly included a sense of an intentional community that would require a set of practices and an overall rule that would set it apart from the secularized setting surrounding it. Its energy would be devoted less to rejecting the spiritually toxic elements of an alien secular culture as it would be reviving elements of a spiritually stable society that had its model in the monastic world of the Middle Ages.**[8]**

Possible Shapes of a Future Benedict Option

Even though there may be competing versions of a future Benedict Option, there is agreement on why there is such an attraction for it. We need a compelling alternative to the religion free and technologically driven climate of so much of secular modernity today. No doubt each educational institution must find its "new and different Benedict." But there will be some underlying qualities that such a presence must embrace and it is well to spell them out.

The heart of that presence must reflect an energetic and confident community of faith. The reason for such a community is not a flight from reality or a circle the wagons retreat from discouraging signs of an antagonistic world. At the heart of a community must be a space where others are welcome to enter, enter for what Pope Francis would describe as the grace of an encounter. That encounter inevitably will enlist the resources of a culture of faith and religious practice from monastic tradition. These resources will serve as a filter of the assortment of technological and religious biases people carry into such a space from our contemporary culture.

There are convincing exemplars of such communities today. The New Monasticism of recent years provides a model that is both religiously diverse (Protestant and even non-Christian) and embedded in the life of local communities, often in urban environments.**[9]** The manner in which the Manquehue Movement of laity in South American communities channeled their love for Scripture with the ancient monastic practice of

lectio divina into Benedictine schools throughout the world remains an arresting example of a practice of prayer that became accessible to a wide array of adults and adolescents.

The community that seeks to model a Benedict Option cannot be one that disengages from the larger culture. One of the reasons for the longevity of the Benedictine charism in the Church has been its ability to stay connected to society, even as it recognizes the need to maintain a critical posture toward that society's moral failings. St. Benedict could allow the patricians of Rome, illiterate Goths, and barbarian kings to come to Monte Cassino. A viable Benedict Option cannot become a cloistered bubble that isolates from the press of the quotidian. Just as home schooling is not the final answer for parents who are troubled by the ambience of American educational institutions, an educational institution that wants to provide a structure and spiritual skill set to counter a culture devoid of religious meaning needs to deal adroitly and honestly with the challenges posed by such a culture.

A positive factor long in favor of Benedictine communities has been stability. The Benedict Option that seeks to capitalize on this value should insure that for the near future it will need to attract people to its home space rather than operate in an itinerant missionary mode. If much of the energy of American Benedictines in their founding years was centrifugal, going out from the center, it now sees the benefit of centripetal energy, drawing people to a center of stable and structured life. That means more than just offering the clichéd "safe space." At once it invites connection with the coarseness of contemporary culture and holds out the promise of values in short supply in a world where the stock of Christianity has dwindled so markedly. For the many who lack religious roots and a spiritual center in their lives, there is stability. For those who live only for the moment, there is a liturgical rhythm of seasons and sustained periods of reflection. For those who have been weaned on instant gratification, there is a world where asceticism and stewardship teach the lessons of self-restraint and sacrifice.

The engine that runs many Benedictine schools in our country today is competition. We are in competition for test scores, technological expertise, athletic programs of excellence, top-flight professors and philanthropic sources. We also have parents who pay the way for students stating candidly to us that their interests are getting into the best schools and securing the most successful jobs, not having their faith lives be saved or shaped by a Benedictine institution.

The alternative community articulated by Rod Dreher has been criticized as a survival strategy, a spiritual tactic akin to the American society's Cold War push for air-raid shelters that would provide a refuge from the scourge of a nuclear holocaust. While I do not share that dour assessment of Dreher's Benedict Option, I do recognize that both the monastery and the school can be easily stereotyped as refuges from the clamor and chaos of the workday world. A more realistic template of a Benedict Option is to see the community as an island of welcome and of order, where the directives of the Rule of Benedict are observed: Christ is received in the guest and central to all activity. The Christ-centered atmosphere of the Rule of Benedict must be deeply implanted in a community that expects to shed elitism and foster inclusiveness.

While Pope Benedict XVI's negative commentary on the spiritual barrenness of contemporary culture is a reminder of the challenge facing any Christian institution today, I think it essential to couple that with the striking images that Pope Francis has offered to describe an effective presence in our world. The field hospital where triage is taking place is an apt portrayal of what takes place in a number of our "safe places." Not unlike the task of the abbot in the Rule (RB 27), as the wise physician who heals the hurting, we are called to construct outposts where the spiritually aimless can find the care they require. Another aspect of the pastoral style of Pope Francis is conveyed by his desire to have Christian communities establish themselves on the periphery of society. Monasteries in particular have never been entirely comfortable with a high profile, situated next to places of political power or ecclesial authority. They have preferred physically remote areas where their witness is less likely to be held sway by the pull of popular culture. It is in such places where true dialogue can take place and spiritual values can be nurtured and transmitted. Staying on the periphery will also guarantee for those who attempt to witness to the Gospel a freedom that is not impaired by political clout or access to corridors of power.

A question that lingers over the discussion on the Benedict Option is whether the situation around us is as dire as depicted in the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Dreher. As a monk who has had occasion to teach young people over the course of four decades and as someone who has rather dismayingly tried to stay current with the signposts of our culture during that same period, I must admit to sharing much of the same sense of dread over the present state and projected course of our spiritual wellness. Yet while the indices of waning religious practice and rapidly diminishing respect for religious institutions may continue, I do not envision the immediate future as a time to adopt a bunker mentality, doing our best to have our institutions become the equivalent of monastic scriptoria during the Dark Ages of Europe. We live in a country where we still exercise a remarkable latitude for religious and, yes, spiritual expression. We have at our disposal an array of resources, personal and material, from our Catholic and Benedictine tradition that are the envy of many of our co-religionists.

I remain impressed at how students at both the high school and university level sense the formative potential of one of these resources: the liturgy. While it does not appear in course catalogues or accreditation standards, the way in which a Benedictine community's life of communal prayer takes on a pedagogical prominence is one of our underappreciated resources. The confluence of liturgical prayer and sacramentality do more than we think to generate a true culture of contradiction to the privatized religion and disaffected strains of post-Christian society. Such resources have been in place for hundreds of years and evoke a striking contrast to the antiseptic counterfeits that pass for substance in the world of the present day.

The precise Benedict Option we may incorporate into a Mission Statement or strategic plan requires an awareness of the resources available to all Benedictine communities and a judicious selection of which ones are most appropriate for our particular institution.

Conclusion

The Benedict Option is not a flight of fancy and certainly not a spiritual utopia. It is a realistic and hopeful attempt to cope with the current quandary of spiritual illiteracy, moral torpor and historical aphasia that have afflicted our country and global common home at present. If there is no new and different Benedict discernible to our eyes, there is an ongoing tradition of Benedictine education that can be tapped to build communities where love for learning and desire for God are not opposing goals.

We should not be flummoxed by the accelerating pace of scientific inquiry and technological innovation. Nor should we devote our better energies to decrying the cheap imitations of religious education and practice that are all too prevalent in our popular culture.

One of the saving graces of having a knowledge of history is to know that we have seen worse than this. Distressed as our precarious stretches of history may have been for the faith, the fact that the many centuries after Benedict

have witnessed the perduring power of monastic practices and Benedictine tradition speaks eloquently to why our hope should stay strong.

We have been entrusted with trying to preserve the integrity of our rich tradition even as we seek new ways to engage a world that needs the stimulus of our past and present. Whether we do that by a construct we call the Benedict Option or by a like-minded enterprise, it must be an effort that can meet the challenge of a dominant secular ideology that will keep us in peril for some time to come.

[1] The original concept is found in Alasdair McIntyre's 1981 *After Virtue,* now popularized in Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* (Sentinel, New York, 2017).

[2] Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (Fordham University Press, New York) 3rd edition, 1982.

[3] Austin Flannery, O.P. (ed.) *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Costello, New York, 1979) n. 44.

[4] Flannery, GS, n. 4.

[5] The most significant documents were *Renew and Create* (1969) by the American Cassinese Congregation and *The Covenant of Peace* (1969) by the Swiss-American Congregation.

[6] Luigi Gioia, "The Sapiential Dimension of Monastic Theology in the Light of the Second Vatican Council," *The American Benedictine Review* 68:1 (March, 2017) 51.

[7] Cf. the work of Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[8] Perhaps the best articulation of such a society is found in the by now classic work of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[9] See Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008).