

Taylor, The Rev. Brian C. "The Benedictine Way as a Counter-Cultural Path."

by **The Rev. Brian C. Taylor**
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Thank you for inviting me to speak with you about Benedictine spirituality as lived out in the world. As Father David said in my introduction, I am an Episcopal priest and married, have two sons that are 11 and 13 years old, own a house, run a fairly busy parish and therefore live very much in the world.

I had followed a number of different approaches to Christian spirituality before I came to Benedictinism. Several years ago, I discovered Benedictine spirituality as a very helpful path that would assist me in living in the world. And so I don't try to speak as an academic expert on Benedictinism but rather as a practitioner of this spiritual path. Perhaps I can therefore shed some light on this particular way as an outsider, as someone who sees Benedictine life from a different perspective.

The mission of this Benedictine college, as I understand it, is one that does focus on values. We hear a lot about values these days. Dan Quail, of course, during the last presidential campaign made a big deal about family values. What did he really mean? Was he really calling us to greater responsibility or simply condemning those who are different from the Norman Rockwell/Leave it to Beaver stereotype? Later on, one of the people who echoed his talk on values was William Bennett, who published a recently best-selling book on virtue. It's very much in the bookstores these days and it's a very popular thing to be talking about -- values and virtue. Unfortunately, some of this discussion around values does nothing but deepen and try to buttress the existing conventional stereotypes and wisdom of our day, which may have more to do with "Americanism" than real values or virtue. In this sense some of the unhealthy values of our day, such as consumerism and chauvinism, are only strengthened by political proclamations of the need for "traditional" virtue and values.

Today what I want to talk about is the particular values of Benedictine spirituality. They provide an alternative wisdom to the conventional wisdom of our day, and I really believe that any religious path worth its salt always does this. That's one of the purposes of a religious path: to provide alternative wisdom. That's why religion exists.

Benedict was counter-cultural himself. He was educated in the conventional wisdom of his time but ended up being disgusted by the decadence of life in the cynicism of the diminishing Roman Empire. So he moved away from it into his own life of contemplation and drew others around him. There have been times when Benedictines have lived quite prosperously and conventionally, but the Benedictine vision is one of an alternative, counter-cultural wisdom. This, I believe, is what is behind the considerable attraction to Benedictine spirituality right now.

I'll be sharing with you five different qualities of the Benedictine path that do, in fact, quite directly challenge the world we live in. These qualities or values therefore offer a more healthy and grounded existence than does our contemporary world and its conventional way of thinking and doing things. These qualities are: Ordinarity, Commitment, Self-denial, Simplicity, and Silence.

Ordinarity

One of the bits of conventional wisdom of our current culture at this time was summed up in the '60's by Andy Warhol who said that in the future "Everybody would be famous for 15 minutes." This was a prophetic statement and it's something he helped bring into being in his own enigmatically pop/art way. Lo and behold, nowadays we have people who are seeking their 15 minutes of fame through crime or on any one of many television talk shows and other outlets of "Info-entertainment." What we have now is a culture that promotes excitement and the new. The means to becoming fulfilled in our society, we are told, is not to be ordinary by any means. It is to be special. Ours is a Wow! culture, whose heroes are the Hollywood stars, notorious criminals and "Personalities" whose only claim to fame is that they are famous. Oliver Stone's recent film "Natural Born Killers" was a devastating indictment of our cultural obsession with the new and exciting.

But our Wow Culture is not limited to Entertainment Tonight. We also see within the Church (and other religious paths) a spirituality of specialties and an emphasis on special experiences that are supposed to happen to us. There's some of this in charismatic and Pentecostal approaches but we also see it flourishing in the New Age movement. I don't know what it's like here in Chicago but in New Mexico it's just unreal. They're always looking for

something really unusual, whether that's levitation, auras, paranormal powers, contact with aliens or anything else that can get us stimulated. This is very damaging, because it takes us out of ourselves, it creates a kind of dualism between our ordinary lives and our longing for special, spiritual experiences.

Let's face it, for most of us, life consists of getting up out of the same bed, having the same kind of breakfast, facing the same ordinary people around us and going about fairly ordinary tasks day after day. Maybe once in a while we have some sort of "mountain top" experience but that isn't where we live. When we chase after that as a lifestyle what happens is we start to create a gulf between life as it really is and life as we think it ought to be or how some spirituality salesman is telling us it ought to be.

The Rule of Saint Benedict and the Benedictine tradition through the centuries has modeled a way of doing life, doing spirituality, that actually values the ordinary. There is actually an emphasis placed upon ordinary life as something to be honored and respected. This is completely counter-cultural. Basil Cardinal Hume OSB said, "The Rule of Saint Benedict makes it possible for ordinary folk to live lives of quite extraordinary value." When you look at other religious orders through history often you see spiritual heroes, real "stairs" (such as St. Francis or John of the Cross) that stand out because they are quite unusual in their practice and individuality. But there is something about the Benedictine life that makes the Benedictine monk anonymous. How many famous Benedictine monks can anyone name?

Benedict felt that holiness was to be found in the everyday, broad path. Benedictine life is expressed through such mundane activities as systematic prayer with scripture, study, work, community, and says "here is the place where we meet God:" not by going off into some cave and looking for twinkling lights. Benedict offers a kind of plain honesty. There is a simple trust in God having made- the world the way it is, in seeing our ordinariness as natural and holy. In our age of "specialities" this is an unusual virtue. Abbot Rembert Weakland said, 'Perhaps it might sound as a strange contribution to make to the Church -- to be witnesses to normalcy -- but maybe in such a day as this, the witness to balance is the most needed thing.'

This, of course, is one of the reasons why Benedictines are often attracted to dialogue with Buddhists because the Buddhists are, of course, centered in mindfulness of the ordinary. One of the sayings of Buddhism that is one of my favorites is, 'May we exist like a lotus, at home in the muddy water.' To me what's important about this perspective for Christians is that it recognizes the Incarnation, the place where we find God enfleshed is in the world, in the world as it is, not is some sort of idealized wonderfulness.

One of the things that this leads to is a kind of compassion for our life in the way that it really is. There is a kind of spiritual or emotional violence we do to ourselves when we expect ourselves to be something that we're not. When we sit and say, 'You know, if I could just get myself feeling the way I was "hen I was on vacation at that lakeside place." Or 'if I could just meditate more and get to feel more peaceful all the time .' Or 'If I could just, if I could just, if I could just' whatever it is. There's a kind of emotional violence that happens when we try to jerk ourselves out of where we are into somewhere else.

Another dimension of ordinariness is the focus on moderation. In the Rule of St. Benedict in the Prologue it says, "Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing, burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and safeguard love." And so, there's discipline but it's within the context of our humanity. Ultimately, this comes down to our sense of humanity -- being human beings and not necessarily expecting ourselves to angels of light. The result of this moderation is that we can be lead to a kind of incarnational faith.

Commitment

What this ordinariness requires is the second quality I'd like to discuss, which is commitment, or in the Benedictine language, Stability. It is only possible, after all, to enter fully into the holiness of the ordinary if one has commitment. One of the vows of a Benedictine is Stability. What is intended here, is stability to one community for the rest of one's life. It is very parallel to the marriage vow. It is stability in the sense of belonging to a group of people for the rest of one's life. To say "this is where I live. I'm ,not going to look for a greener pasture somewhere else; this is where I live." This is what helps monks move into the virtue of ordinariness.

You see, if the door is always open to some other possibility -- and we live in a -- culture where that is the norm -- then we're never really here. We're never really able to enter into the ordinariness of everyday life as it is. Our culture's conventional wisdom about this is really summed up by a rather horrifying interview that I saw one time on

Television with Barbara Walters and Sylvester Stallone. He was being asked about his second or third divorce -- I can't remember which one it was -- and she said, 'Well, what happened? What happened in the relationship?' And he said something that was so essentially American: "Da spark wuz gone. Whadday gonna do when da spark is gone?" Indeed, as a contemporary American, what are you going to do, for the spark will surely go in time. You leave, which is what Stallone did. I'm not saying that divorce is always a horrible thing; sometimes it's the lesser of two evils. But we live in a culture that teaches "if you don't like it, leave. Go do something else. Don't put up with boredom. If you're not happy with this person, blow them off or blow them away." Here the focus is on meeting one's needs and taking care of Number One, with no sense of commitment to an@,thing outside the self or the moment.

The parallel to the Benedictine vow of Stability is, for those of us outside the monastery, the unconditional covenant of marriage and other lifelong relationships. Unconditional, covenanted relationships simply say that if I'm going to be here in this situation -- let's say this college, this relationship, this friendship, whatever it is -- I'm going to really be here. I'm not going to have the back door halfway open thinking that I can leave at any time, thinking that if da spark is gone I can just check out.

One way this is lived out in the monastery is the emphasis upon hospitality for strangers. The stranger is to be received as Christ, to be honored as Christ. This assumes that one has a commitment, almost in a familial way, to a complete stranger. And so, in a university such as this and in parish settings we have to ask ourselves about our relationship with those who are new; what is our relationship with those who are not part of the inner circle; and, what is our commitment to one another?

It brings to mind that wonderful photograph that I have on my wall in my office of the earth from space. There are no boundaries. You look at this picture of the earth and there are no fences and no lines drawn on it. It is one world. As this is referred to in one of the Eucharistic liturgies in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, 'this fragile earth, our island home.' I think it has been a very moving thing to look at this photograph for millions of people ever since it came out, just precisely because we see it as one world and we realize that we are one family of God's children.

The value of Benedictine stability and commitment is that of saying, 'We belong to each other.' We belong in community: sometimes they're intentional communities like monasteries, or marriages, or friendships but sometimes we have to look at ourselves as being a part of something much wider -- the family of humankind. Sometimes in the parish, when I look at the people that are around me I realize that these are not the people that I would necessarily choose to be with. They're just given to me.

It's as if someone went into a bus station and put a rope around 250 families and said "here, come and live together. You're going to be a family and you're going to go through traumas; you're going to go through death; you're going to go through some of the greatest joys in your life; you're going to struggle together on committees and will at times hate each other and have to learn how to love each other. You're going to want to dismiss each other and blow people off because you don't care about them. But I want you to stay together. I want you to stay together and work through what you need to work through because you know what? It doesn't matter who's around you. You could rope off another 250 families at some other bus station and you have the same exact problems, perhaps a different flavor, but the same exact problems because wherever you go you take yourself."

Benedict recognized this. On one level it doesn't matter where you live it doesn't matter which college you attend, because we always find humanity wherever we go. The commitment of stability which is absolutely core to the Benedictine life says that while we're here, let's be here. Let's not be somewhere else in our lives; unless things are genuinely unworkable, let's not be looking for some other alternative, let's be committed to one another.

Self-denial

As one lives in the stability of relationship, a lifestyle of self-denial is inevitable. We can't survive in a relationship over time without dying to self. The primary way in which self-denial is lived out for the Benedictine is through one of the vow of *Conversatio* (or Conversion of Life). A monk is called to continually change and continually grow in the grace of God and to die to themselves. It is the way of the Cross, the way of dying so that we may be reborn in God's grace.

Part of the obvious need for growth through self-denial is that if we don't do it, then stability becomes deadening. We've all seen marriage relationships that went on far too long without any change or growth that become places of death. Benedict said no; you just can't have stability, -- you just can't have commitment to one another by saying, "By God, I'm going to stick it out and be here no matter what." We've seen that happen to parish clergy, we've seen it

happen in marriages; we've seen it happen in every relationship of commitment and stability. Benedict says if you're going to have health in a committed relationship you have to have conversion of life. You have to change and grow.

Well, this goes against the grain in our culture as well because conventional wisdom today tells us something very different about this. Healthy self-denial (which I believe is the path of change and growth) is not popular. The opposite is what is taught and shown. You turn on the television for any five minutes and you're going to come across several commercials which teach you that self-denial is not the way to life. The way to life is to fulfill every single desire you've ever had or ever imagine you might have. You've all seen the bumper sticker "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty." The other day I saw a response to this, another bumper sticker. It said "Practice disciplined self-interest and ruthless acts of logic."

The monastic way, the Benedictine way, offers up a different reality by saying that self-gratification doesn't bring life, it brings death. What brings life is healthy self-denial. Now let's be clear about what we're talking about here. We're not talking about becoming a doormat. We're talking about a kind of self-denial that recognizes the spiritual danger inherent in the belief that satiation of desire will satisfy us. This belief is idolatry. Materialism is a good example. It leads to death precisely because it is an idol and idols promise something they are never intending to deliver. They can't deliver the happiness they provide. In fact, what they produce is a kind of emptiness that then is never satisfied. And so we think the solution is to have more when, in fact, that only makes the hole bigger; it sets up an addiction which keeps us going back for more and more and more. We are an addicted culture in that sense.

In the Rule of Saint Benedict there is an emphasis upon humility, obedience, self-denial, very unpopular concepts. But that is an understanding that if we are to grow, there have to be limits; there has to be discipline. The way in which a person becomes good in anything is through self-discipline; there is a measure of dying to self when we do that. The discipline that I am most familiar with is music. I was a musician before I went to the seminary and there is something of dying to self, I tell you, when you sit in a room by yourself for four hours a day and practice scales. There's a part of you that does not want to be there. There are also far more enticing things to be done than sitting for several hours a day in meditation as a monk. But there's something about discipline, about trimming the wings a little bit, holding ourselves in, that produces the best kind of fruit and the most fruitful kind of life. Dom Dominic Milroy spoke about obedience which is a kind of self-denial by saying, "It is not an imposed subservience to an external authority but a condition of inward growth. The monk who is not authentically obedient to the abbot and his brethren will not be a happy monk. The carpenter who is not obedient to the laws governing joints will make an unreliable table. 'Disobedience represents in this sense the pursuit of an illusory freedom which obstructs the acquisition of real freedom.'"

We all know the kind of grinding oppression that comes from the wrong kind of obedience, and that is subservience. I'm not speaking here about that kind of obedience. The obedience of healthy self-denial simply puts oneself underneath the necessary discipline of responding to what life demands. And our culture teaches us that we don't have to do that. You can do whatever you want, and it won't cost you anything. Win the lottery! Fall in love! Become a star!

But let's look again at the familiar example of marriage: the hard work of being in a marriage over the years is submitting to the discipline of that marriage. One of the rules of a marriage, part of the discipline, is honesty. If you lie to each other, it's not going to work. If, on the other hand, you practice the discipline of honesty, there is doing to be some death to self, because it is uncomfortable, and it costs us something, but it leads to life.

St. Benedict said that this kind of obedience and death to self results in the fruitfulness of monastic conversion of life. It is the Way of the Cross, the way of entering into the difficult but life-giving path.

Simplicity

Benedictine simplicity, otherwise known as poverty, holds forth a different kind of poverty and simplicity than other religious orders where. For instance, in Franciscan poverty there is an identification with the poor and a shunning of worldly material objects. Benedictine poverty has a different understanding.

As Cuthbert Butler said, "Calvary is the type of Franciscan poverty but Nazareth is the type of Benedictine poverty. It was not the poverty of beggary but the poverty that obtains in the household of a carpenter or other skilled artisan. It is simplicity and frugality rather than want -- the poverty of a workman's home who is earning good wages." As Fr. Ambrose Wathen said, "As we look at monastic history, the monks who fled from the world usually found some of the most beautiful spots imaginable for the escape and if perchance the spot was not beautiful when they arrived, it

quickly became a kind of garden paradise. How can we explain this fact? It is because monks who were interested in space and time could become good caretakers without destroying natural beauty. When one is detached from good one can caress it without mangling it. The Benedictine approach to poverty, the relationship to things, the relationship to the material world is a paradoxical one, for it involves detachment from things and at the same time reverence for things.

In our culture we are extremely materialistic but at the same time, ironically enough, we have no respect for those material things that we acquire. We throw things away even as we desperately search to acquire the next new thing. I think there is something within us that knows that this isn't right, that this idolatry is not working. As we try to amass more things and have more gadgets there's something in us that's saying this isn't going to work; so we disdain them and throw them away and make them something almost an object of scorn and then accumulate more.

The Benedictine approach actually values things. It is not an other-world kind of spirituality or an anti-worldly spirituality-, it values things and that's why in monasteries there are beautiful things. That's why there's art. This is not a kind of spirituality where people walk around in burlap rags as you might in a primitive Franciscan kind of spirituality. It's one that values good fabric, good meals, artistic expression, music. It says that God made this world and this world is good. That is a kind of healthy, world- affirming materialism which you don't often see in our society, a kind of love for the material world and at the same time a detachment from it, to love things without crushing them in your hand, to caress them without mangling them.

The result here is a kind of true, healthy materialism (or put in theological language, incarnationalism) that recognizes that the dividing line between spirit and matter is not so clear, that God is infusing matter. In that sense we become co-creators with God by making and enjoying and having things that are beautiful. At the same time we can be detached from them by perhaps giving away some of our most prized objects in our house to someone because they admire them. That's a kind of Benedictine spirituality around nice things: to have it in your house in the first place and then to give it away when someone admires it.

Silence

We are a culture of short attention spans, of channel-surfing, options and stimulation. We like to hop from one political sound byte to another, from job to job, from feeling to feeling, from culture to culture and never touch the ground. The result is that we are a nation of short attention spans, of low test scores, of nonreaders. 'You took around on the airplane; I just did on my way out here from Albuquerque, and I noticed that everyone seemed distracted, vaguely anxious about finding something outside themselves. Everyone was moving around: shifting in their seat, seeking a refill on their drink, looking out the window, flipping through such info-entertainment rags as the in-flight magazine, People magazine, USA Today. USA Today is one of these incredible developments in our culture. If you haven't looked at it recently, go and buy a copy and notice how the information is laid out, what it expects of the reader. What it assumes is a television mentality: lots of color, "lite" news, little sound bites, bumper sticker slogans ... this is what we have become. The Benedictine value of silence stands in perhaps the greatest contrast to our culture. It is a value which says we can spend time with and give attention to things. The Benedictine lifestyle is a contemplative lifestyle.

There are Benedictine monks who are extremely active, to be sure, but there is always an expectation that % certain amount of time will be spent in silent contemplation and prayer, several hours for the Offices and often more time for private prayer as we'll. What this points to outside the monastery is the value of contemplating or reflecting in silence. There is such a pressure these days, with the information explosion, to be inundated, to be absolutely inundated with information, with an enormous variety of cultures and ideas. This is always held up as such a tremendous good, which in some ways, it is, because it shrinks the world and makes us realize that we're a one world community. But we only have so much time. We're still 24 hour creatures, just like we were in the Middle Ages. Our brains are only so large and we can only take in so much.

Our obsessive busyness, which is getting more and more frantic every year, compacts our experience. So what happens when it is too much? Our experience gets chopped up into little pieces, and we end up fragmented, superficial.

The alternative to that is to do a lifeless quantity and a little more quality. We can stop and listen to life, to God, to ourselves, to one another. When we are busy making things happen and jumping from idea to idea and from activity to activity in a kind of flurried haste, we don't have time to listen, to simply be. When we stop and listen all sorts of things begin to open up; life moves from fragmentation to integration.

I had a professor in seminary who said something offhandedly that has stayed with me over the years far more than anything he ever said in his lectures: "the most important thing you can do as a parish priest on Sunday morning is to walk slowly." Once in a while that line comes back to me on Sunday mornings as I'm rushing to class and making sure this is taken care of and hustling around. Walk slowly. Take time to pay attention to life, which is in danger of passing us by all the time. Take a little more contemplative approach means that we're not going to get the kind of quantity that we're being pressured to experience in our life in this day and age. We perceive this as a loss, and there is always some grief around this. When we allow silence and stillness to be, without filling it up, we must go through a culturally-induced grief that tells us the lie that inactivity is death.

The only way to do this is to allow the emptiness to be there and to trust it, for emptiness is what happens when we enter silence. An example: you know the tendency when you jump in the car, to turn on the radio or now, to pick up the telephone. I hear some even have fax machines in cars. What is suggested by the Benedictine model is the experience of just driving down the road and feeling the emptiness that inevitably comes in that time of silence and inactivity. On days off, can we lie on the bed and daydream out the window, and let ourselves drift into that scary but life-giving place of silence and inactivity?

To trust silence and stillness in our fast-paced culture is in itself a counter-cultural act. In so doing we drop out of one kind of idolatry that will, if allowed its way, eventually kill us. In so doing we drop into life itself, which persistently and wondrously goes on all around us unnoticed.

Conclusion

I was questioned some time ago after one of these talks a number of years ago by someone who said, "You know, all of this talk about duty and discipline and self-denial, dying to self and silence, stability and commitment sounds awfully grim. What about joy? What about spontaneity? What about fun? How come that isn't a part of the Rule of Saint Benedict?" The thing that I responded at the time and the way I feel is that fun and spontaneity and joy are fruits; they aren't practices. The Benedictine life is a spiritual practice, a way of being in harmonious relationship with other people -- to the earth, to God, and to life as it is. By embracing the ordinary and by unconditional commitment to other people where we are planted and not looking for that open door, self-denial and the service of the common good, detachment from things and at the same time reverence for things and a contemplative lifestyle that includes Silence, we then begin to experience the fruit of this practice: the spontaneous joy of being fully alive.

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Born in 1951, Brian Taylor was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. His family is Episcopalian, and he cites the liturgy of the church having a profound and early effect upon his spiritual life. Since 1983 he has been Rector of **St. Michael and All Angels**, Albuquerque, NM. In 1978 Brian married Susanna Hackett, and together they have two sons, Oliver and Samuel.