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ABCU Benedictine Leadership Formation Institute 2018

Saint Anselm College

1 June 2018

by

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What a pleasure it is for me to be with you all this evening for the conclusion on the 2018 Benedictine Leadership Formation Institute, the Benedictine Pedagogy Conference, and the meeting of Association of Benedictine College and Universities. I am delighted that this event is being hosted here at Saint Anselm College, an institution from which I graduated almost a half-century ago and that I was privileged to lead for over two decades.

For some who have been around for many years, you may have heard some of the remarks I will make this evening. It is a topic on which I have spoken at a number of ABCU meetings.

The title of my remarks is: From leaves of Gold: Saint Anselm offers A Benedictine Approach to Education.

The allusion in the first part of the title is, I realize, perhaps a bit obscure because it comes from the 12th century life of Saint Anselm (whom I trust is *not* so obscure) the life written by his relatively unknown biographer Eadmer. In my remarks I will generally not be making explicit references to the Rule of Saint Benedict. But remember that Saint Anselm was a monk and an abbot, well-schooled in the wisdom of the Rule. And so, in choosing to recount a story about him, I do so using him as an exemplary Benedictine educator.

What I have to offer is not a scholarly analysis of a biographical text. I leave that to others who are far more competent than I. It is more a reflection, perhaps in our tradition *lectio divina*, a reflection by a long-time believer in and practitioner of Benedictine education.

In one portion of the biography, Eadmer recounts a conversation between Anselm and an anonymous "certain abbot" – whom he described unflatteringly as "a *sufficiently* religious man." The conversation was about the not so surprising difficulties he was having with the boys who were being educated in his school. (Now, as an aside, I realize that most of our institutions are coeducational – and trust me – though I cannot change the historical elements of the story – I can assure you that the point applies to all.)

So, the frustrated "certain abbot" went to Anselm to complain about the students. He asked: "What is to be done with them? They are incorrigible ruffians. We beat them day and night and they only get worse and worse."

The astonished Anselm replied: "If you never stop beating them, what are they like when they grow up?" "Well, they're stupid brutes" the abbot responded. To which Anselm made the somewhat sarcastic retort: "You have certainly spent your energies well – from young men you have brought up beasts."

Then, in his more characteristic wisdom and good sense Anselm began to explain to the abbot: Since these boys feel no love or pity, no good will or tenderness in your attitude towards them...they are brought up in no true charity towards anyone else. Consider this.

You wish to form in them good habits by beatings and chastisement alone. But have you ever seen a goldsmith form his leaves of gold into a beautiful figure by severe blows alone? I think not. How then does he work? In order to mold his leaves of gold into a suitable form, he first presses them and strikes them gently, and then even more gently raises them with careful pressure and gives them shape. So it is if you want those in your care to be adorned by good habits, you must adapt yourself according to their strengths and weaknesses so you may win them all for God – so far, at least, as your own efforts can.

When the abbot heard these words of Anselm, he admitted his lack of discretion and promised amendment for the future. Would that it were that easy to change the hardened hearts of some other difficult educators – even in our own times!

It is from this story that I have chosen my title, because I believe it illustrates three fundamental aspects of what Saint Anselm offer us as a Benedictine approach to education.

The first of these aspects has to do with the leaves of gold themselves, the second with the craftsmen, and finally the intended outcome of the relationship between the first two.

First the leaves of gold: If there is anything that should characterize a Benedictine approach to education it is the profound regard for the dignity and worth of *every* human person. That regard is founded not on secular respect or simply good manners, but on the fundamental belief that every human being is a unique creation of a loving God – that same God who sent his own Son –Jesus the Lord-- to become one of us and to redeem us by the shedding of his blood.

To even begin to consider a Benedictine approach to education, we must start with a lively sense of what it means to be fully human. That approach must be respectful of every aspect of human life – the physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of who we are. Certainly, the Rule of Saint Benedict itself is filled with this awareness.

By this I do not mean a cursory acknowledgement of a Christian anthropology, but rather a practical and practiced way of living one's life. Leaves of Gold simply are not hunks of clay; leaves of gold *begin* as a very precious commodity. Though they may be formed into something even more beautiful, nonetheless they start from a position of considerable worth.

This approach is, I believe, characteristically Benedictine. Though the Rule of Benedict was written for monks – for those who, under the inspiration of God's grace, chose to live their lives in a particular way, still there are principles which are "translatable" to other ways of life, and to the institutions and works with which Benedictines and their lay associates engage themselves. For Benedict – and consequently for Anselm – respect for persons is a central perspective. By this he not only acknowledges the obvious fact of the differences that exist between one person and another, but takes seriously the fundamental conviction that each person is capable of coming to know and love God fully – in and through the varied ways in which God reveals himself, not the least of which is the relationship of one person to another.

What I am suggesting is that if one searches for a Benedictine approach to education, one must first discover Benedict's profound appreciation of what it means to be a human person. One must first acknowledge – in the practical living of life – that *by nature* we are bound to one another and to God in an inescapable and redemptive relationship. One must acknowledge one's own ultimate worth and that of the other; worth determined not as a collection of possessions or talents assembled, but as a being created with an eternal destiny.

Most easily we can apply the image of leaves of gold to students, but the image really applies to all who are involved in education – teachers, administrators, and students. All are participants in the process of forming from a common humanity the object of beauty that the Creator intended. This endeavor cannot succeed without all parties appreciating the value of the ones engaged in it.

What that "certain abbot" in the Anselm story failed to see was that he was dealing not with brutes but with humans, that coercion alone could not develop virtue because it sorely missed the basic insight into human nature: that here was something of more than a little worth -- a creature meant to be in union with God.

The craftsman, too, is of some import in the work of Benedictine education. And here we might initially focus on those who are the "masters" – members of the faculty and staff. Anselm's description of the goldsmith, while it may be an idealized picture, is not far from the mark. There is an expertise expected from one who can work with such precious material, but it is an expertise that is not merely technical. It is a sense of what is needed to form the object of beauty, of when strength is productive and when tenderness, and of how to distinguish the usefulness of different approaches to the same material. It is what in the Benedictine tradition has been known as discretion.

Throughout the Rule, Benedict alludes to this as the quality that should be possessed preeminently by the Abbot, who is not to treat all in exactly the same way, who does not have a single way of bringing his monks to God. Rather,

he is meant to be someone who can keep the strong interested in progress while at the same time can keep the weak from becoming discouraged.

It is the craftsman particularly who must know what he or she is dealing with and who must have the skill to know how the goal can be accomplished.

I submit that this has some significant implications for Benedictine education. If, as I have suggested, the fundamental insight is an accurate assessment of human nature, then those charged with the care of students must themselves be *experts* of discernment. Commitment to academic and professional excellence is an assumed prerequisite.

But beyond that, for Benedictine education truly to be so, the practitioners must also be *competent human beings*. They must active themselves in their own relationship to God, carefully attentive to God's presence in the world and in those around them, and they must be capable of leading others to see beyond apparent good to reality of God's own goodness.

If there is to be no disjuncture between theory and practice, the craftsmen of Benedictine education must make this synthesis in their own lives and they must have the *will* and the *skill* to communicate it effectively to others.

In the image Anselm used in his attempt to move the "certain abbot" to a new mode of conducting himself, the craftsman and the leaves of gold were not in an aimless relationship. The craftsman would not waste the precious resource at hand in with futile tinkering. Nor would he or she even have the resource at his or her disposal without first having possessed the skill to work on it.

Rather, it is clear that the purpose of exercising the craft was to form the plain leaves into something beautiful. There was an end in view, a design, a vision of what *could be*. He knew, too, that only by exercising his skill would the new creation come into being.

I suggest that this is third fundamental aspect of a Benedictine approach to education: that there is a clear goal towards which both student and teacher must move together. The ultimate goal of Benedictine education is to assist men and women in their search for God. It accomplishes this goal in neither a scattered nor aimless collection of knowledge, but in confronting the reality of humanity in all of its aspects.

Benedictine education can never be satisfied with a partial appreciation of the created world or a partial appreciation of truth, any more than it can be satisfied with incomplete understanding of the human person. Truth, in whatever form and wherever found, is the object of the educational endeavor. But an education that does not lead all who are involved in it to a deeper desire for full truth, an education that does not lead to the desire for the Truth, which is God, cannot be called Benedictine.

So, what are the implications of all of this for our Benedictine Colleges and Universities?

Here I believe, we have a shared responsibility to awaken in our students the responsibilities they have in this process. They have the responsibility to be attentive to what is around them – to the way in which they learn and to the reason why they learn, as well as being attentive to what they learn. They have both the capacity and the responsibility to come to a deep awareness of the meaning of their life. They have both the capacity and responsibility to make their own the ways to God that are open to them.

If Benedictine education is to be truly valuable, we must never allow our students to believe that the mastering of course material is the sole end of education. That knowledge must be integrated it into the larger vision of who we are in the eyes of our Creator. The connections may not always be immediately obvious to our students. We, the craftsmen, must assist them with that process. Because remember that well educated men and women who fail to integrate knowledge with human understanding, or who fail to integrate reason with faith, are capable of tremendous inhumanity and evil. As one Holocaust survivor has reminded us, it was skilled engineers who built the gas chambers and educated physicians who poisoned children. But even in that horror, there were those who did not lose sight of what true humanity meant.

I believe that we all have the opportunity to become men and women of wisdom whose lives will effect change for the good in our Church and society. I believe we all have the opportunity to transform leaves of gold into something

stunningly beautiful. I urge you to seize that opportunity with all the courage it takes and all the labor it involves. If you do, at the end of your life you will know that from leaves of gold you – and so many others because of you -- will have been transformed into the citizens of God's eternal kingdom.

Thank you and God love you all.