

## Thimmesh, Hilary, OSB. "Benedictines and Higher Education American Style."

Benedictines and Higher Education  
American Style

by Hilary Thimmesh OSB

My topic is Benedictine higher education, but I want to begin by examining Ignatius of Loyola and his provisions for Jesuit education. The advantage of this approach is that it provides a point of comparison for Benedictine education. It also sets the mission of our Benedictine colleges and schools of theology in the larger context of Catholic education. In the end it will help us to describe some of the changes and some of the challenges that American Benedictines face in post-secondary education today.

To begin then with Loyola. For the sake of brevity, I must omit the fascinating story of his spiritual conversion at the age of thirty and simply say that in pursuit of his religious calling he undertook studies at the University of Paris in 1528. He was a student there for seven years at a high point in that great university's history. He took his Master of Arts degree at the age of forty-two and completed his university education with two years of theology under the Dominicans, already long renowned for their learning and intellectual brilliance.

In short, although he came late to formal education, Ignatius of Loyola was a university man. It was a group of his fellow students at Paris who joined him to form the **Society of Jesus**, and when he set about drawing up the Constitutions for the Society some ten years after leaving Paris he had no doubt that his followers would need to be learned men and that education should be one of their missions.

Part IV of the Constitutions describes how this is to be done. In the words of a contemporary Jesuit historian,

Ignatius devised a series of successive, integrated studies from Latin grammar up through theology.... He was large and liberal enough to cling to what was best in medieval education, especially philosophy and theology. He discarded what was obsolete, a training in philosophy or theology grown excessively and needlessly subtle.... Finally, he had vision enough to absorb the best elements in the educational theory of his day.

He was an admirer of Thomas Aquinas who, we might recall, had his pre-university education at **Monte Cassino** and he gave pride of place to the study of theology as the chief source of the well-reasoned Catholic outlook, and the most efficacious motive of vigorous Christian living. He wanted education to be both intellectual and moral so he urged his professors to take a personal interest in their students and he established a program of religious observance for Jesuit and lay students alike. It is worthy of note, however, that he set a limit on the time to be devoted to religious practices, cautioned against an asceticism that might conflict with rigorous study, and prohibited either teachers or students from accepting pastoral commitments, which, in his words, much distract from study and interfere with the attainment of the aim envisaged in these colleges for the service of God.

Ignatius died in 1556. In the last ten years of his life he had approved opening or taking over the direction of thirty-nine colleges and universities. In 1586 his followers drew up the famed Ratio Studiorum that embodied the Jesuit philosophy of education in a plan of studies to be followed at hundreds of Jesuit colleges and universities in the next three centuries and widely imitated by Catholic schools under other auspices, Benedictines among them, until well into the 20th century. By a judicious blend of medieval humanism, scholastic philosophy and theology, and the new learning of the Renaissance, all strongly oriented toward the service of God and the Church, Ignatius in effect defined Catholic education in the post-Reformation world.

A thousand years before Ignatius, Benedict of Nursia went to Rome as a young man to study the liberal arts but after a time broke off his studies out of concern for his spiritual welfare. He retired to religious solitude, preferring, in the words of his biographer, **Gregory the Great**, to be scianter nescius et sapienter indoctus, knowingly ignorant and wisely unlearned. A 20th century Benedictine scholar, Dom Jean Leclercq, who has written the authoritative work on medieval monastic learning, says that "All Benedictine tradition was to be made in the image of St. Benedict's life." He comments: "According to St. Benedict, monastic life is entirely disinterested; its reason for existing is to further the salvation of the monk, his search for God, and not for any practical or social end" (The Love of Learning and the Desire for God.)

Far from preparing monks to be teachers, then, or monasteries to conduct schools, not to mention colleges or universities, the founder of the Benedictines would seem at first glance to rule out education as a Benedictine mission. I say at first glance because quite apart from the subsequent history of the Order, a reading of the **Rule** itself leads us to conclude that Benedict was neither unlearned nor opposed to learning for his followers in those studies that could enrich their vocation.

It is true that schools are not mentioned in the Rule, nor is any other kind of mission to the larger church or secular society. In this sense it is quite accurate to describe Benedict's version of monastic life as disinterested. However the Rule includes a reference to assignments that concern the world (Chap. 64) and give directions about prayer for monks who work at a distance from the monastery (Chap. 50). While these provisions may refer only to unavoidable business outside the cloister, a note in Gregory's Dialogues tells us that some of the brothers at Monte Cassino were sent by Benedict to give spiritual instruction to a neighboring community of religious women (Chap. 19), and it does not seem farfetched to conclude that from the first the disinterestedness of the Rule in any particular mission allowed individual communities the freedom to undertake various apostolic works in harmony with their monastic calling.

That monasteries would provide schooling at least for their own candidates who entered as children or illiterate adults is implied by the important place of reading in monastic observance. Perhaps this is why a stylus and writing tablets are among the personal articles regarded as necessities (Chap. 55). The monastery is to have a collection of books large enough to issue every brother his own reading matter for Lent (Chap. 48). Meditative reading, **lectio divina**, is accorded a generous three to four hours a day throughout the year (Chap. 48) with more for those who prefer reading to a siesta. From the start, then, Benedictine life required a certain level of disciplined intellectual activity. It assumed familiarity with a sizable body of sacred literature and by implication knowledge of the classical authors whose study provided a foundation in grammar. Remember that grammar had a larger meaning for the ancients than it has for us. In Leclercq's words grammar was the first stage and the foundation of general culture, and the two terms grammaticus and litteratus designate "one who knows how to read," that is, not only how to decipher the letters, but to understand the texts.

Given this orientation to the world of letters, 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. Nor is it surprising that schools became attached to well-established monastic communities, particularly as a result of the **Carolingian renaissance** in the 9th century. Without drawing up guidelines for education under monastic auspices, Benedict had provided for a style of religious life that lent itself to teaching children by drawing on the monks' own foundation in the liberal arts, forming them morally and religiously at the same time, and fostering the literary and theological interests of individual monks. We know the names of the most illustrious **Bede, Anselm, Bernard** and medieval historians single out many others in the Benedictine centuries, roughly the 7th to the 12th, when it can be said that monastic teachers were the schoolmasters of Europe. It is from those centuries that we derive the tradition of Benedictine education.

Having said this, we need to note that the medieval monastic schools did not develop into universities or produce a class of speculative scholars. Why this is so is worth looking into, for it tells us something about tensions inherent in monastic life which have a bearing on Benedictine higher education in our day. A passage in the monk **Eadmer's** life of St. Anselm cited by R. W. Southern is instructive. Anselm was wrestling with how to prove the existence of God and Eadmer says that his thoughts took away his appetite for food and drink, and what distressed him more disturbed the attention which he should have paid to the morning Office. He began to think that his intellectual struggle was a temptation from the devil but he couldn't still his mind until at last one night during vigils the grace of God shone in his heart, and the thing he sought became clear, and filled his whole being with the greatest joy and exaltation.

Commenting on this passage, Southern notes: Personal dilemmas of this kind cannot have been uncommon, especially when new and challenging ideas were in the air, but they subjected the Benedictine Rule to a strain for which it was not adapted. He adds that by contrast an atmosphere of intellectual effort and strife was to be the very condition of life of the **Dominicans** whose constitution laid down that the friars were to be intent on study...; to stay up at night if they wished to study; and to make their church services brief so that this aim should not be impeded. This feverish spirit was quite foreign to the Benedictine monasteries where study was incidental to the duties of a long day.

This assessment comes from a scholar who rates the Benedictine contribution to European civilization very high. It accords with Jean Leclercq's observation that monastic culture in the 11th and 12th centuries was increasingly personal and creative but more literary than speculative, concerned more with experience than with abstract thought, more with esthetics than with dialectics. He sees this culture as distinct in its time from both nascent scholasticism and a new current of secular humanism. This monastic humanism, as he calls it, read the authors of classical antiquity in an explicitly Christian framework, moralizing them as necessary. It valued the whole quality of life, the

prose of daily work and mutual service as well as the poetry of graceful writing and psalmody and contemplation. It integrated the life of the mind with the steady and demanding round of work and prayer that the Rule of Benedict calls a school of the Lord's service.

In the following centuries monks were frequently students at the universities, sometimes at such Benedictine houses of study as Durham College at Oxford where one monk, Uthred of Bolden, became noted as a professor in the late 14th century. There continued to be learned Benedictines, particularly in historical subjects as with the **Congregation of St. Maur**. However, they did not constitute faculties. There was no Benedictine theological school in Europe until the **Collegio Sant'Anselmo** was founded in Rome in 1687. With such exceptions it is accurate to say that before the 19th century education under Benedictine auspices was limited to schools for boys whose teachers did not need to be scholars or learned authorities although some no doubt were but good pedagogues grounded in the liberal arts and patient with struggling learners. This tradition continues to the present day in Great Britain, on the continent, and in a number of Benedictine houses on this side of the Atlantic.

The Benedictine colleges and seminaries that began to appear in the United States in the 19th century thus had an ancient tradition of monastic learning and pedagogy to draw on but not a university tradition. At first they hardly needed it. The first Benedictines came to America in the 1840's. True to ancient practice they avoided the cities and settled in rural locations where they could be essentially self-sustaining while ministering to their fellow Catholics and undertaking missions to Native Americans and others in spiritual need. To conduct schools for the local children and their own candidates seemed as natural as to plant crops, bake bread, and keep a dairy herd. That the monks would prepare their own candidates for ordination seems to have been taken for granted in the pioneer communities. At the start the lines between high school and college, college and seminary were somewhat blurred, as was the case, incidentally, with some of the Jesuit schools founded in that era in response to the needs of a rapidly growing Catholic population. (Between 1818 and 1855 the Jesuits founded nine colleges and universities that continue in existence. Twelve more were founded before 1900, an astonishing accomplishment.)

Monasteries founded after the Civil War took a more structured approach to their schools from the start. Belmont Abbey College, founded in 1878, is a good example. It was not of course a four-year college to begin with, but in those halcyon days before accreditation and state university systems a college was what its founders claimed it to be. The college curriculum was still predominantly literary and historical, even at the leading secular universities. The German model of graduate research and scholarship was an adornment welcomed in college professors but not yet expected of them, monastic or lay. And of course lay professors were rare at Benedictine schools. Enrollments were small and the life of the students took place within the monastic precincts. Religious and moral formation thus went hand in hand with academic instruction in a style of holistic education generally continuous, both in its orientation to the humanities and its setting within the monastic community, with the teaching that had been congenial to the monastic vocation since the time of **Charlemagne**.

We can say, then, that although Benedictines had not historically conducted education at the university level, the colleges and seminaries that they founded in America in the 19th century drew on along tradition of Benedictine schooling and preserved its broad features. These were that it was centered in the humanities, that it was integrated with the work and prayer of the monastic community, and that much of its effect resulted from the personal influence of the members of the monastic community who shared the life of the students as their teachers, mentors, and as necessary disciplinarians.

This characteristic synthesis of academic schooling and shared experience has often been praised as an educational model, sometimes for reasons that perhaps did not occur to those who were involved in it. I remember being surprised that Alfred North Whitehead saw St. Benedict as the patron of technical education. This sounded all wrong until I realized that he was comparing Benedict's monastery with Plato's academy to symbolize the two different attitudes toward the aims of education: Plato's exclusively intellectual and unconcerned with the actual practice of the arts and crafts, the work of slaves; Benedict's intellectual but also practical, prizing the artisan's skills and the dignity of labor. Using technical in its primary sense, Whitehead's appraisal is valid enough and particularly apt as a way to distinguish not so much the curriculum as the context of historic Benedictine education in communities where the labor of minds and hands was equally respected.

Last, we now come to interesting questions about how Benedictine education is faring today after a century of great change in American higher education. Is it still recognizable in its broad features? Does it enjoy some advantages in addressing the needs of contemporary society? What challenges do the sponsoring monastic communities face? I can only offer my own thoughts on such questions and hope that they will prompt a productive response.

To begin with, the curriculum no longer consists primarily of literary and historical subjects. Even our relatively small colleges offer many hundreds of courses. Traces of the old monastic humanism can be found among them but the sciences and career-oriented disciplines business, computer science, education, social work, pre-professional programs of many sorts dominate the scene. Theology and philosophy have hung on as general requirements by the skin of their teeth, sometimes under other headings, in a sort of last homage to the Jesuit Ratio Studiorum. We are all the heirs of Harvard President Charles Elliot's elective system, inaugurated in 1883, which was meant to allow students to choose courses according to their career plans rather than to hand on a common culture.

From one perspective the resulting curriculum is pervasively secular. Can it nonetheless be given a Benedictine imprint? I think so if paradoxically we can go back far enough to be thoroughly contemporary: if we bear in mind that medieval monastic schooling embodied an idea of Christian education which built on secular learning and antedated both scholasticism and the 16th century divisions of Christianity; that, as Whitehead observed, the monastic tradition positively embraces the world of work; that the much vaunted Benedictine esthetic was not cultivated for its own sake but resulted from the interplay of forces organic to monasticism: order, simplicity, stewardship, inner joy, delight in creation. All of these suggest the possibility of a new curricular synthesis under Benedictine aegis, one that draws on influences strongly at work in contemporary monasticism revitalized understanding of Sacred Scripture and liturgy, ecumenism, peace and justice concerns, care for the environment, community values and takes as its organizing principle a Christian humanism based in theology and ordered toward human cooperation in shaping the world for good. In short, I suggest that we need not be nostalgic for medieval monastic culture but can learn from it to incorporate secular learning into a Christian vision of society worthy of Benedictine tradition.

Another broad characteristic of Benedictine education was traditionally the integration of the school into the life of the monastic community. My hunch is that the monastic communal influence is still considerable in Benedictine education but that it works differently than it used to and needs to be understood in different terms. The farms are gone, in many cases. The workshops where they remain are largely staffed by lay employees. Schedules no longer revolve around the daily horarium of the monastic community. The non-academic aspects of monastery life are not much seen or understood by students or lay members of the academic community. The rhythm of the monastic life its stability, its respect for young and old, its simplicity and ordinariness may all seem rather remote and irrelevant to the business life of the campus.

In other words, integration of monastic and academic life today must take place on a different plane than in the past. Then physical proximity and personal relationships could be relied on to instill habits of piety, a work ethic, and other ethical and moral values by a kind of osmosis. Today the meaning and the values of the Benedictine way of life need to be interpreted to students and to new lay members of our faculties and staffs. To the degree that we Benedictines are successful in doing this and reinforcing the interpretation by our own lived example we can continue to bring to education a communal dimension characteristically if never exclusively Benedictine.

Achievement of this effect is admittedly rendered more difficult by the reduced role of Benedictines in our colleges and to some extent in our schools of theology. This poses a challenge to the sponsoring communities to understand anew why they are involved in higher education and how their commitment to schools they founded in simpler times must change to meet new conditions. Considerations of governance, of allocation of resources, of the education and training of their members are all implied.

Here it may be helpful to recur to first principles, to recall Leclercq's observations about the disinterestedness of the Rule, Southern's acute judgment about the strain of accommodating monastic observance to the tensions of intellectual struggle, Ignatius' adaptation of religious life to the demands of university teaching and scholarship. The challenge, I should think, is not to settle for an attenuated monastic observance or a nominal scholarship, but to keep both our monastic and our academic standards high enough to represent the best tradition of Benedictine learning. We must, too, make allies of our lay colleagues, drawing them into genuine collegiality in a shared understanding of the principles that animate the Rule of Benedict and the history of the Order so that they become, in a sense, Benedictine affiliates.

This should not be regarded as a second-best solution. The quality of disinterestedness in the Rule which Leclercq noted in regard to external missions also makes it the least sectarian of religious documents. In its moral and social principles it is open to appropriation by anyone who prizes an ordered and ethical way of life. In this respect, it is admirably suited to serve as the founding document for education in a pluralistic society. Given the diversity of our enrollment today Catholic and non-Catholic, multiracial and multicultural, adolescent and adult and the diversity of the curriculum with its exacting professional requirements in many areas, one has only to ask the question whether it would be desirable to have an all-Benedictine faculty and staff to know the answer. Even in our schools of theology with their mixed enrollments of clerical and lay students, men and women, and all the more so in our colleges it is

important to reflect a variety of experience and intellectual positions. One example by no means the only one the desirability of having good numbers of both men and women on the faculty, makes the point.

The note on which I end is that the monastic communities which sponsor higher education need to understand how they can best continue to shape the institutions they founded. The Jesuit provincials in America addressed this question in regard to Jesuit education nearly twenty years ago. In a broad national consultation they surveyed their resources, made organizational adaptations, noted the values of the Society particularly as these concern justice and peace, and charged each of the Jesuit institutions to draw up its own rationale. More recently the International Commission of the Apostolate of **Jesuit Education** has published *Go Forth and Teach: The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*. In a prefatory letter, Father Kolvenbach, the Superior General, notes that this document is not intended to be new *Ratio Studiorum* but like it can give us a common vision and a common sense of purpose. Most recently, the twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities have formed the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education to engage in a continuing conversation about their mission as Jesuit and Catholic institutions and to publish *Conversations*, a semi-annual review on the same topic.

We Benedictines engaged in higher education would, I believe, gain from a review of our own history as educators and the resources implicit in our tradition. Esteem for learning, a communal way of life which integrates intellectual work with practical skills, the commitment of individual Benedictines as teachers and scholars while they continue to be observant religious: these are the elements of Benedictine education which cannot be overrated and without which questions about administrative control and governance ring hollow. I hope that my greatly simplified historical survey suggests that Benedictines successfully undertook higher education American style in the 19th century, and that my observations about adapting to a new age point the way toward an even more vital Benedictine contribution to higher education in this country in the future.