

Min, Anselm K. "Updating Benedictine Education for Today."

Association of
Benedictine Colleges and Universities

Updating Benedictine Education for Today
Anselm K. Min

Father Hilary's articulate presentation has not only provided a very clear and informative description of the traditional elements of Benedictine education along with a persuasive sketch of the differences between Benedictine and Jesuit education, but it has also pointed out as clearly some of the dilemmas and challenges facing Benedictine education today. His proposals for meeting those challenges are highly relevant and appropriate, and in my response I do not think I can do better than to develop each of those proposals a little further in order to show what challenges for future effort they may contain.

Father Hilary is suggesting that there are three ways of retrieving and adapting ideals from the Benedictine tradition pertinent to education. The first is to integrate, in the spirit of a new Christian humanism, the traditional Benedictine appreciation of the world of work and the stewardship of creation into the contemporary context of liturgical renewal, ecumenism, ecological consciousness, peace and justice concerns, and community values in order to produce a new contemporary curricular synthesis.

The second is to maintain the shaping influence of the Benedictines on their colleges and universities in spite of their reduced numbers by interpreting to students, lay faculties, and staffs the meaning and values of the monastic communities and by drawing the lay colleagues into a genuine and shared understanding of the spirit and principles of the Benedictine tradition.

The third proposal is to use the **Rule of St. Benedict** as a founding document for education in a pluralistic society.

Now, some of my comments and observations. First, in the matter of producing a new curricular synthesis by updating the traditional appreciation of work and the matter of being stewards of God's creation, it seems quite essential to begin by asking what is the contemporary world of work that is meant to be appreciated, humanized, and sanctified. Today work no longer means engaging in farming, using simple tools, and, in general, living in harmony with the rhythms of nature. **Work** has itself become a product of a whole global dialectic of conflicting interests and interdependent regions and spheres of life. It has also become so specialized and professionalized as to require at least a college degree. Furthermore, work in fact does not exist for hundreds of millions of people on this globe to their starvation and death. It is to this kind of world that we need to bring the sacramental vision, the sense of stewardship of God's creation, and a sense of the human community to bear.

Certainly, the old conception of work has to be abandoned in favor of a more complex conception sensitive to both the dynamics of society and technology as well as the immense human suffering of those without work. Today, when monks generally do not run farms, when farms themselves have become agribusinesses, appreciation of work involves far more than having an esteem for that work traditionally considered humble and menial such as farming, carpentry, and cattle raising. It involves a sensitivity to and a knowledge of the actual world of contemporary work with its routine, boredom, alienation, and, often enough, exploitation in the factories, mines, stores, sweatshops, offices, and laboratories. It involves critical sensitivity to the global dynamics of the production of work, a commitment to social justice in the distribution and conditions of work, and ecological respect for the integrity of creation in the process of work.

The days are over when we could teach appreciation of work by quiet and personal example without critical social consciousness. We can do so today only critically, and it is here that a new curricular synthesis seems very much in order. Such a synthesis would involve not only professional education but especially courses in global political economy, sociology of labor relations, ethics of social justice, environmental science, and theology of creation, to mention only the most obvious. Furthermore, education in critical consciousness should also be accompanied by education in critical praxis, i.e., involvement in the concrete struggles for economic justice and the integral preservation of creation.

Secondly, how are we to interpret the meaning and value of the Benedictine monastic life today to the students, faculties, and staffs of our institutions, and through this promote a genuine collegiality of monks and lay faculty for a

better integration of monastic and academic life? It does require, as Father Hilary pointed out, "a shared understanding of the ethical and social principles that animate the Rule of Benedict and the history of the Order." It also requires more, as Father Hilary would agree. In the old days when Catholicism and Catholic colleges formed a cultural ghetto of their own, such a shared understanding could easily be presumed. Practically, all the students were Catholic, and students and the few lay Catholics on the faculty share a preconciliar view of the world and the church with the monks, with a ready deference for the monks who not only taught them or paid their salaries but also occupied a higher theological status because of their clerical order and/or religious profession than the laity. Within such a ghetto with a shared worldview and a ready deference for those who are superior in that worldview, a shared understanding of the mission of the college or university between monks and lay faculty and students was almost natural. A lay faculty member, even before being hired, would already possess either such an understanding or at least a favorable disposition towards such, while students would attend precisely because it was a Catholic college run by a certain religious order.

Today the situation has radically changed. The faculties of our Benedictine colleges and universities, as is the case with the colleges and universities run by other Catholic religious orders such as the Jesuits or the Congregation of Holy Cross, have become overwhelmingly lay, with Catholics often in the minority both in the student body and on the faculty. The post conciliar church adds to the picture by teaching the equality of dignity between laity, clergy, and religious as well as the intrinsic value and autonomy of secular pursuits. A real collegiality of Benedictine men and women and lay faculties, then, could only mean a partnership of equals, which in turn means not only the lay faculties learning about the Benedictine tradition or the monks teaching them about it in a much more aggressive and self-conscious way since we can no longer count on the traditional osmosis, but equally the Benedictine monastics trying to understand and enter into the thoughts and concerns of the lay faculty and students, Catholic and non-Catholic. This means breaking out of any institutionalized self-isolation on the part of the monastics and reaching out to lay faculty and students so as to form a common understanding of the mission of the college.

Thirdly, the pluralism which is already embodied in the diversity of the students, faculties, and staffs, and the varied curriculums themselves, also pose a challenge of its own. Pluralism means a sympathetic openness to diversity in attitudes and outlooks. However, if pluralism is going to remain a positive source of intellectual stimulation and progress, and not lapse into uncritical and self-destructive relativism, we need a dialectic of sympathy and criticism, sympathy with those who differ from us and the willingness to broaden ourselves in the light of what we learn from them, criticism of the other in the light of the best we have and fidelity to the best in our own tradition. Critical discernment is as necessary as sympathetic openness. Not all diversities in today's world are positive or liberating; some diversities are outright oppressive and destructive. Respect for pluralism means being open without being uncritical, and being committed without being dogmatic. Openness without criticism is sheer relativism, as commitment without openness is sheer dogmatism, and it is imperative to maintain a coherent dialectic of openness and commitment.

Such a dialectic requires not only the courage to face, not flee from, the many challenges of contemporary pluralism but, more importantly, immense intellectual resourcefulness and creativity. For it means, first of all, to rethink, purify, and broaden one's own tradition and in the process not only to preserve the truly enduring elements but also, in an important sense, to create it. It means, secondly, to appropriate critically, from the perspective of the broadened and renewed tradition, the benefits of the pluralism that challenge the tradition. Thirdly, it means to integrate the old and the new, the received tradition and the challenges of today, into the coherent whole of self-renewing, self-integrating, living tradition out of which we are also meant to teach and shape the world. In this pluralist process the Rule of St. Benedict may serve well as the founding document for education because it is "disinterested" in anything practical and social and is interested only in the search for God and in this sense is "the least sectarian of religious documents." Such a document, however, is no substitute for the difficult task of the critical renewal of tradition, the critical appropriation of pluralism, and the constructive integration of the two. Such a task has barely begun.

In light of what has been said, it seems clear that the implementation of all three proposals requires first-rate intellectual work, work that is at once rigorous, profound, and broad. In this regard I submit that the first order of business for Benedictines is to resolve the tension and dilemma so aptly indicated in Dom Jean Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, and so well illustrated in Father Hilary's own presentation. As long as there is a fundamental tension, a tension in principle, between the desire for God and the love of learning, between a monastic's contemplation of God and an intellectual involvement in the world, I am not sure how Benedictines can adequately meet the intellectual challenge of the contemporary world that requires full, daring, resourceful engagement. No half-hearted, reluctant commitment to the intellectual life will do. How and how well Benedictines are going to resolve this tension between monastic and intellectual life is, of course, only for Benedictine women and men to ask, ponder, and decide.

What I would like to suggest is something that Father Hilary had himself indicated toward the end of his presentation, namely, periodic intensive self-examination on the contemporary direction and identity of Benedictine education involving, of course, all the members of the individual monasteries of Benedictine men or women engaged in college education along with knowledgeable outside experts and sympathetic lay faculty members. As Father Hilary mentioned, and as I have had the opportunity to observe in the early stages of its development, the Jesuits have been involved in this sort of intense, sympathetic institutional self-examination since the late 1960s, through countless community discussions, provincial conferences, the General Congregation in 1974, and continuing debates since. This kind of meeting, I tell you, is no fun; it is often bitter and frustrating. Yet it is safe to say that a periodic, intensive self-examination is at once a necessity and a sign of vitality, no less in institutional than in individual life. To all Benedictine women and men engaged in the ministry of higher education I would suggest that Father Hilary's paper would be a good starting point for precisely such a communal self-examination, and I wish them all the best of luck.