

Klassen, Abbot John, OSB. "Educating in the Benedictine Context: Why It Matters."

Abbot John Klassen, OSB, given with Sr. Thomas Welder, OSB - June 3, 2017

Good morning, it is an honor and a pleasure to be with you, to reflect on "Educating in the Benedictine Context – Why it Matters." Let me say unequivocally at the outset that I believe that our work in Benedictine colleges and universities is more important than ever.

I would quarrel a bit with the title of this presentation. I think we need to make clear the Catholic context of our work as educators and our own extensive debt to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

If you go to the website of the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities, you will find the essay entitled "Education Within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition. Completed in 2007, Presidents Brother Dietrich Reinhart, Larry Goodwin from Saint Scholastica, and Dr. Bill Cahoy worked on that essay over a period of two years, with input from all the presidents, prioresses, abbots, and many others steeped in this kind of reflection. If you go to that essay, you will note that it opens with a prologue on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. It is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition that provides the overall framework for the Ten Hallmarks that follow. Even though the prologue was written last, it is not an afterthought – it creates the framework for the Hallmarks.

From the earliest years of Christian mission, the disciples of Jesus faced the challenge of how to live the Gospel with integrity in the world in which they found themselves. They devoted great energy to thinking about how life in the Risen Lord could take root in the communities of the Greco-Roman world.

One of the earliest examples of this engagement with a different culture is Saint Paul's address to the Athenians at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-32). Many generations of believers reflected deeply on how the message of the Gospel could interact with a variety of cultures and created a nuanced and resilient intellectual tradition. That tradition is marked by the capacity to adapt and transform methods of inquiry, ways of knowing, and educational processes that originated outside a Christian context – in Alexandria, in Rome, and other intellectual centers.

Over the centuries, this intellectual tradition has become a powerful force for understanding and communicating the Christian message. It is also a touchstone for assessing new ideas. It explores the full development of virtues that make for a good life and that foster the common good. For example, Origen develops a rich sense of reading that one uses to deal with the complexities and seeming contradictions in the Scriptures. If the Church's leaders had remembered the work of Origen they would never have gotten into the misguided condemnation of Copernicus and Galileo. Boy, have we written the check for that mistake! This incident is a reminder that both individuals and institutions can forget what they know.

Athanasius, Basil, the two Gregorys, and others help the Church come to a rich understanding of the humanity and divinity of Jesus. In the desert, Evagrius writes an account of the spiritual challenges the hermits faced in the desert and how they responded with the help of a spiritual companion.^[i] And the list goes on... The point is, Christianity has always had a brain.

The Catholic intellectual tradition is a treasury of scriptural exegesis and catechesis, theology and spirituality, drama, literature, poetry and music, vast systems of philosophy and moral thought, as well as art, architecture, history and science. This enormously rich tradition is built upon a few cornerstones put in place by the earliest Christian thinkers.

These cornerstones include a commitment to think seriously about the culture in which one lives, to attend with respect to the ideas and world views of others. These cornerstones include the commitment to listen to what God is speaking through them, and to use ideas old and new to understand the Gospel, and communicate it in changing times and places.

On this foundation, the Catholic intellectual tradition^[ii] has created a distinctive approach to education. That approach stresses the continuity of faith and reason and has a deep respect for the cumulative wisdom of the past. At

its best, the tradition places a high value on inclusivity. It emphasizes the communal character of redemption and the integration of each person's studies into life lived with others. All of this is infused by a sacramental [iii] awareness of the ways in which the divine is manifested in the created world, in history and ritual, in imagination, and the human heart. It has developed a tradition of teaching on important social issues such as the economy, the right relationship between capital, management, and labor, our care for the earth, and the danger of turning to war and destruction as the go-to solution for conflicts of very kind.

The Catholic intellectual tradition does not stand alone in these commitments but shares these intellectual concerns with other traditions of inquiry, both religious and secular. But it attends to them in a way that is distinctive. Those who are shaped by the Catholic intellectual tradition have a deep hunger to understand the meaning of human living in relationship to God. They are unafraid of ambiguity or uncertainty, aware of vulnerability and failure, self-aware and self-critical. They aim to be generous in engaging ideas both old and new, convinced that growth in wisdom and understanding is an indispensable way of participating in God's work in the world and of drawing closer to God.

The ideals of the Catholic intellectual tradition are pitched high and neither the Church, its monastic communities, nor its schools have always been able to live up to them. Yet, in life and in science, we often learn the most from experiments that really go south.

The Catholic intellectual tradition, in insisting on the continuity of faith and reason, offers a powerful witness to two polarizing poles in the American academy: the aggressive secularizing position that says that "universities are about reason, pure and simple," and those who want universities to be extensions of a church's belief system. In our Catholic, Benedictine colleges and universities, we stand in the long line of those who believe in the integration of thinking and believing, of faith seeking understanding.

We are Catholic, Benedictine. The particular Benedictine milieu in which we stand shapes and nuances the way in which our Catholic identity is experienced and expressed. And the particular Catholic milieu in which we stand shapes and nuances the way in which our Benedictine identity is experienced and expressed.

I wish to take three key practices and reflect briefly on why it matters for these places to exist.

***Lectio divina* as a call to contemplative engagement with the world**

The director of Liturgical Press, Mr. Peter Dwyer, recently had a conversation with a theologian teacher, asking why he would no longer be using an LP book as a textbook. Was there a problem with the book? No, the book is outstanding. The faculty member went on to explain that he asked students why they didn't bother to buy the book. "O, it has way too much information. I don't need to read all that for this course."

I have been out of the classroom for seventeen years but already at the millennium, before the Internet *Anschluss*, I do remember having to use virtual forcing conditions to get students to read a four-color, knock-out gorgeous organic chemistry textbook with amazing diagrams, useful summaries, solutions manuals, that I would have died for as a beginning student. We may not give up on getting our students to read: literature, poetry, political science, chemistry, biology, across the span of human learning and imagination. We need to teach them how to immerse themselves in a text, truly understanding what it says, what it means.

As learning environments, in a loud, fast moving, high-tech world we need to encourage the development of contemplative habits – of reading and studying. We want our students should know experientially what *lectio divina* is, because we have challenged them to sit with a text, to feel the words, to taste them, to see how they connect to each other: the Brothers Karamazov, War and Peace, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary whether Genesis, the Gospels of Luke and Mark, Acts of the Apostles, Shakespeare's Hamlet or King Lear, the poets Mary Oliver or Wendell Berry; whether it is the text of the maple sugar bush, the wetlands or prairie, the text of a rough section of an inner city; the text of data from spectroscopy or a mass spectrum; the text of a film such as *Twelve Years as a Slave* or *No Country for Old Men* or *Hacksaw Ridge*.

In a world so often distracted, multi-purposed to death, we want to provide students to be especially aware of attending, of mindfulness.

The dictionary tells us that to ruminate is "to think deeply about something." Great ideas are *ruminated*, both fed to us and brought up to us for continuous reflection. In the 12th century Guigo the Carthusian writes: "for what is the use of

spending one's time in continuous reading of books unless we can draw out nourishment from them by chewing and digesting this food so that its strength can pass into our inmost heart?" What a question this remains for us in the 21st century, who often waste time-consuming documents both material and virtual not allowing them to nourish us deeply. The trouble is, we are both overfed and undernourished. We gulp down ideas without reflection just as we down fast food. **[iv]**

How do we do this? Well, none of us can read everything and that will be even more true in the future. We want to teach our students how to ferret out key arguments, crucial references, and locate the representative one. This is a higher-level thinking, a judgment skill, one in high demand in our world. This requires time for real rumination, pondering, reflection, thinking deeply – and thinking with one's pencil. It is done by reading and re-reading material, by outlining an argument, by making sure I am understanding. This is really the beginning of owning one's intelligence.

Insisting that students take time to ponder material only makes sense if we as faculty have disciplined ourselves in how much reading we assign. If we are consistently trying to cram too much material into a course, we create the conditions for non-reflection and shallow learning.

Just to iterate what I am saying here about the importance of the Benedictine wisdom tradition and the practice of lectio: it views our education as drawing students into a contemplative encounter with the world of learning that is profoundly integrated. When we are contemplative engaged, contemplatively centered, we feel like we have a foundation under our feet. We can see confusion, ambiguity, uncertainty and still be secure enough to find a pathway forward.

Receptivity – hospitality – room for the strange and the stranger

We think about hospitality as core to Benedictine spirituality and identity. In writing chapter 53 in the Rule, on the reception of guests, Benedict has written a brilliant chapter that escapes the suspicious, ungenerous stance of the Rule of the Master. Most often hospitality as a value gets translated into being "nice and friendly." I have nothing against these two human qualities – far better than being nasty and cold.

However, in the Biblical tradition, hospitality often has a prophetic edge to it. In terms of our educational commitment, the practice of hospitality may mean making room for people who are different: who have a different skin color, culture, dialect, and smell than we do. They listen to different music and have a different view and experience of praying. They do not share our assumptions about the place of government, the goal of being a human person on this earth, or politics or gender roles. They are amazed at our lack of awareness of the implications of our government's use of force in the world, of the way our nation carries itself abroad. Creating an intentional hospitable environment means making a welcome space, a willingness to listen deeply and value those whose experience is very different from my own.

Hospitality may mean being open enough to novel ideas, ideas that are foreign to me, to take time to really understand them. Whereas we understand society in terms of individuals, other peoples understand society in terms of community: "I am because you are." Many of our students are internally challenged for the first time when they study abroad for a semester. On an intellectual level, they know that there may be people who think differently, and that they are not just odd or idiosyncratic for doing so. But to be in China or Guatemala or Africa for a full semester, and to realize how we are viewed elsewhere, well, it can be shattering. The transition back to this country can be disorienting.

To quote Joan Chittister: "There are few things in life more threatening to the person whose religion is parochialism than the alien and few things more revelatory to the contemplative than the stranger.... It is the stranger who disarms all our preconceptions about life and penetrates all our stereotypes about the world. It is the stranger who makes the supernatural natural. It is the stranger who tests all our good intentions." **[v]**

Most of our schools have a faculty and a student body that is religiously diverse. If we want to be truly Catholic, we need to be hospitable. It is the practice of hospitality that biases us toward receiving those of other Christian traditions warmly into our midst and making room. Praying the psalms side by side and listening to the Scriptures together provides an immediate experience of what we share.

With Muslims we share a practice of praying across the day and embracing completely a search for the one, true God.

With those who have a tradition of contemplative silence, we share a tradition of centering prayer. Even though the practices have a very different meaning the experience, the challenges are open to dialogue and conversation. Colleagues who ask us hard questions about our practices and beliefs are not automatically disloyal. We need to be confident enough about our tradition that we can stay in the conversation with hard questions.

A biblical and liturgical spirituality

Our Benedictine spirituality is biblical and liturgical. By that I mean that we are immersed in the Bible, praying and singing the psalms, listening to chunks of scripture in a seasonal manner, and we do that continuously. We are hearing things in context: text in context. Over the course of years, we hear texts from all the books of the Bible and in *lectio* we encounter them up close and personal.

As a result, we are able to move freely across the different books of the Bible and understand the tug and pull of various biblical perspectives, the range of theological and experiential insights that are embedded in the Scriptures. We are also able to see where our forebears hit the wall.

And the liturgy shapes the meaning of these texts by providing yet another frame, the frame of Eucharist across feasts and seasons.

It is really hard for a biblical fundamentalist to be in a monastery. It is precisely this practice of swimming in a sea of scripture that provides the basis for a willingness to engage with a contemporary cosmology and evolutionary theory and to do so in a way that does not undermine religious belief or do violence to the desire for deeper understanding.

In other words, it is precisely the Catholic, Benedictine context that provides a platform for engaging broadly and deeply with the burning questions of our time: questions about the meaning of human living and community; our desire for peace in the face of new violence that seems overwhelming and unsolvable; questions about the place of our little planet in the cosmos; questions about God, and the truth that is in person and work of Jesus Christ. It is always a challenge to live truthfully and with a certain amount of confidence in a time of enormous ambiguity. I am convinced that a Catholic, Benedictine environment affords a unique and special place for learning in such a time.

Conclusion

I think that all of us want the education at our schools to be transformative, that is, to be the basis of genuine metanoia for students. Not just intellectually, but ethically, and spiritually. The Rule of Benedict is a wisdom statement – it is about the whole of life. Benedict wants a lot less talk and a lot more action! What we learn, what we know, matters for our living and believing. It is vitally important that we are Christian in our thoughts and in our actions. Benedictine communities offer a daily example of a faith that is lived and put into practice. Not perfectly, but with all the fits and starts that are part of the human condition. There is no generalized religious experience. We may all bow together at the doxology but that does not mean that we are at the same place or live with the same questions. It means we support each other on the road.

[i] See Jeremy Driscoll, “Monastic Culture and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition* (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2000), 55-73 for an insightful discussion of the Catholic intellectual tradition is shaped by praying the Liturgy of the Hours in community, the practice of *lectio divina*, and other elements of monastic spiritual culture.

[ii] Monika K. Hellwig, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University” in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition* (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2000), 1-18.

[iii] Michael J. Himes, “Finding God in All Things: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects,” in *As Leaven in the World*, ed by Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001), 91-103.

[iv] Maria Lichtmann, *The Teacher’s Way: Teaching and the Contemplative Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 62.

[v] Joan Chittister, *Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroads, 1988). 129-130.