

Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition

Prologue

The origin of monastic schools can be traced to the sixth century beginnings of Benedictine life. In prescribing for all monastics the praying of psalms and meditative reading of Scripture and other sacred texts, St. Benedict guaranteed that monasteries would be places of reading, study and learning. From the start young people came to study with the monastics, many to prepare for monastic life and others, in the end, for lives in the broader church and society. In this way, long before universities or colleges in our sense of the term had arisen, monasteries grew to become centers of learning for the wider public.

Through many centuries, monasteries have cultivated the arts and science, stewarded knowledge of the past in scriptoria and libraries, and promoted understanding of the earth and the wise use of its resources. This work has engaged the labors of a great many monastics and, taken together, it has been a source of social, economic and cultural grounding for entire civilizations. The Benedictine colleges and universities of our time participate in this great saga, seeking to cultivate understanding among their faculty, staff, students, board members, parents and friends of time-honored pursuits that make full and worthwhile human lives possible.

The Benedictine Wisdom Tradition

Benedictine education is akin to ancient wisdom traditions¹ in that it stresses the education of the whole person rather than the intellect alone. Benedictine education demands rigorous thinking and sets its sights on the transformation of the human mind and heart.

There are three influences that animate Benedictine education: *Christ* encountered anew each day in Scripture and the human person, the *Rule of Benedict* lived in community, and the rich *tradition* of those who have pursued Christian and monastic holiness in the past. St. Benedict exclaims, “What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?” (RB 73.3²). The Rule, itself steeped in scriptural references, aims to show monastics the way to abundant life (RB Prol. 15-21). These two sources, Scripture and the Rule – far from being static – are interpreted through a living *tradition* that stretches beyond the lifetimes of its monastic practitioners and can be remarkably more generative than they themselves realize.

Pursuing Benedictine monastic life involves engaging core values that are set forth in the Rule: **love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community**. Individual monastics steep themselves in these values, striving as best they can to embody them as wholeheartedly as possible. St. Benedict promises that by doing so, his disciples will come to the point where they run the way of God’s commands with the inexpressible sweetness of love (RB Prol. 49), a perfect love that casts out fear (RB 7.67). This is the transformation of life that is at the heart of Benedictine monastic life.

The Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine Education

To be sure, a school is a different social and cultural entity than a monastery. However, an institution of higher education founded and sponsored by a Benedictine monastery is deeply

influenced by the fundamental concerns of the monastics. Therefore the core values that animate their life – **love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community** – find a home in Benedictine colleges and universities. In fact, these values can be seen as hallmarks of the core purpose and vitality of these educational institutions. Together the hallmarks of the Benedictine wisdom tradition can shape an overall pattern of life for a campus community. There is no one way to embody them. Instead, as the members of a Benedictine educational institution reckon with these hallmarks in the context of their own deepest purposes in life, more expansive life emerges for all, the fruit of a surprising transformation of individual human hearts and minds.

1. Love of Christ and neighbor

Benedictine life, like that of all Christians, is first and foremost a response to God's astonishing *love* for humankind; a love expressed in the free gift of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Love, the motive for monastic life and its goal, tops St. Benedict's list of tools for good works (RB 5:10, 7:67-69, 4.1-2). Yet the Rule recognizes many ways in which monastics can fail to ground their lives in love. It sets up personal and communal practices that deal directly with human selfishness wherever it occurs and seeks to heal the resulting harm to one's self and others. Ultimately it is the power of God's love that is decisive. Indeed, the crowning good work for the monastic is "never to lose hope in God's mercy" (RB 4:74).

Benedictine colleges and universities should be unabashed about being grounded in love and animated by it. The "love of learning and desire for God," so celebrated as part of Benedictine culture,³ make demands on all and should be expansive enough to engage persons from all backgrounds who desire to teach and lead, to serve and to study. Practices should be cultivated to address habits of mind and behavior that can diminish or cause harm to one's self or others. Each member of the campus community should be able to count on others' assistance in pursuing a rigorous and disciplined search for truth. And each should undertake education expecting to develop habits of mind and heart that are calibrated for the good of all.

2. Prayer: A life marked by liturgy, lectio and mindfulness

Benedictine monasteries cultivate a fundamental attentiveness to the ways in which God is present in the human mind and heart and, indeed, in all creation. The primary way for doing this is through the monastery's daily rhythm of liturgical prayer. St. Benedict directs that nothing is to be preferred to it (RB 43.3). This daily experience of community prayer is supported and deepened by individual spiritual reading, a practice that Benedictines call by its Latin name, *lectio divina*, in order to differentiate it from reading undertaken to gain information or knowledge. *Lectio divina* is the slow meditative reading of Scriptures and other sacred texts with the intention of discerning how God is at work right now in the world and calling within the individual's own heart. For a monastic, the daily movement between common liturgical prayer and *lectio* opens up new space within where qualities and virtues such as compassion, integrity and courage can develop and grow strong.

Benedictine educational institutions seek to create and preserve a noticeable rhythm of public prayer and private attention to the sources of religious inspiration. We strive to ensure that the design and life of the campus promotes a spirit of transcendence and mindfulness, encouraging all to cultivate a life of prayer appropriate to their own faith. The intent of all of this is to cultivate by analogy a fundamental openness to the work of intellectual and personal

transformation. It is important that the thinking of all members – students, faculty and staff – be shaped by movement between shared engagement with ideas and close personal reading of “texts” (whether written, aural or visual). It is our intent to foster connections between the subjects that persons study and the fundamental deep purpose of their lives.

3. *Stability: commitment to the daily life of this place, its heritage and tradition*

Stability shapes a Benedictine monastery. All of its members commit themselves to seeking God. They resolve to pursue this, their heart’s deepest desire, *together*, day in and day out, in good times and in bad, throughout the entire span of their lives.

Benedictine educational institutions put great energy into cultivating lasting relationships between students, faculty and staff. We seek to embed a vigorous exchange of ideas within the pattern of life on campus, recognizing the shared human standing of all. We strive to foster a pervasive commitment to share our intellectual passions, our bewilderments and breakthroughs with one another. We do this because we believe that persevering together in the pursuit of wisdom – as opposed to engaging one another only enough to achieve private understanding – builds strong and lasting relationships and makes remarkably powerful growth possible for all.

4. *Conversatio: the way of formation and transformation*

The aim of life for Benedictines is the same as it is for all Christians – to be transformed in every part of one’s life so that God’s very image, in which each has been created, becomes palpable and transparent. The Benedictine word for this way of life is *conversatio*, the process of letting go in day-to-day life of self-centered preoccupations and false securities so that the divine life at the core of one’s being becomes manifest in a trustworthy pattern of living. *Conversatio* is a commitment to engage in practices that over a lifetime bring about conversion into the likeness of Christ and, in particular, Christ’s giving of self for others. This transformation proceeds according to small steps; and it is tested in unexpected ways over a lifetime. To come to fruition *conversatio* requires stability, discipline, faithfulness and resilience.

Benedictine colleges and universities attempt to call all members of the campus community to move out of their comfort zone for the sake of learning and integrity. We are not afraid to focus on habits of mind that will require many years to develop. In curricular and co-curricular programs we seek to challenge realities we often take for granted, to foster intellectual and personal breakthroughs, and to cultivate habits of mind that will transform students, faculty and staff alike, nurturing deep learning and generosity over a lifetime.

5. *Obedience: a commitment to listening and consequent action*

Benedictine life is unthinkable without *obedience*, a value that cuts against the grain of much in contemporary life. It is often forgotten that the root of the word *obedience* is found in *audire*, “to listen.” When St. Benedict begins the Rule with the exhortation “Listen,” he emphasizes the stance of obedience required of all who seek wisdom. He asks for obedience not only to the spiritual head of the monastery, but to the other members of the community. Each has something of value to say about true fullness of life. For the monastic, obedience is putting into practice what is learned by listening to the other “with the ear of the heart” (RB Prol. 1). Centuries of Benedictine experience show that such listening requires a willingness to submit to imperatives outside of the self, something that is never easy to do, but that is deeply rewarding.

Teaching and learning are impossible without obedience, without listening to others with the awareness that no one possesses all truth, or knows everything worth knowing. In intellectual inquiry, obedience means respecting the integrity of disciplinary methods of study and maintaining fidelity to the evidence, wherever it leads. Obedience helps to form an intellectual community, drawing on a number of disciplines, respecting the methodologies proper to each. All members of a Benedictine educational institution should work to understand and respect the viewpoints of others, to adhere to standards of excellence in thinking and communicating. Learning to listen well and respond deeply to what one learns is a prerequisite for growing in wisdom and it requires courage and perseverance.

6. *Discipline: a way toward learning and freedom*

Discipline is a way of focusing energy and attention on what matters most. Benedictine life is built around a fundamental discipline of prayer, work and relationships that is set forth in the Rule and that seeks to free a monastic to take delight in God's presence within the self, the community and the world. New members are taught how to cultivate the discipline of monastic life and to realize that it takes a lifetime of practice to develop fully the skills needed to live life freely and wholeheartedly on the deepest of levels.

No true learning takes place without discipline, without the hard work of stretching beyond one's comfort level to master complex practices and ideas within a variety of fields. In pursuing academic excellence a Benedictine institution of higher education strives to shape the classroom, laboratory, and studio – as well as social interactions and athletics, service and leadership programs – so as to model and call forth personal discipline on the part of students. The goal is to move from a discipline imposed from the outside to a mature self-discipline in which a person possesses a robust love of learning and, in setting his or her own goals, is able to imagine and pursue the steps necessary to achieve those goals.

7. *Humility: knowledge of self in relation to God, others and creation*

Humility is St. Benedict's word for wisdom. He begins his extended description of the twelve degrees of humility by describing awe at the abiding presence of God and ends depicting a love that casts out fear (RB 7). Monastics seek an accurate knowledge of self, a pervasive awareness of God's presence in their lives and their dependence on others and creation itself. They recognize their limitations without losing hope and accept their gifts without becoming arrogant because the measure of their lives is not found in themselves alone. There is always room for additional personal growth, for giving one's self for the good of others.

This simple, balanced perspective should inform the self-understanding and pursuits of students, faculty and staff in Benedictine educational institutions. By ourselves alone, none of us can learn what we most need to know or bring to completion what most needs to be done. We strive to engage the insights and expertise of a wide variety of persons in our educational mission so that each of us can discover what we are good at doing and what we need others' help to achieve. We seek to cultivate the multi-faceted exploration of truth in academic disciplines, aware that in a rigorous and wide-ranging pursuit of academic excellence, all participants are freed to discern and cultivate the gifts they possess and thereby contribute to the well-being of all.

8. *Stewardship: responsible use of creation, culture and the arts*

At its core the Rule seeks to foster a fundamental reverence toward the creation that God has made. St. Benedict exhorts his followers to regard *all* the tools and goods of the monastery as the sacred vessels of the altar (RB 31.10). Benedictine monastics do not simply use up what has been given to them, nor do they aim to live in poverty. Instead, they prize good *stewardship*, the respectful use of material things for the good of all, with a special eye to frugality, integrity of form and function, and the capacity of beauty to communicate the presence and power of God.

In Benedictine educational institutions we seek to foster awareness that we are part of a larger ecology and that the environment – human as well as non-human – has been given by God for the sake of all. We encourage the sustainable use of resources and their just distribution. We seek to sharpen awareness of noteworthy contributions – past and present – to the well-being of society and the earth itself, trying to keep strong the memory and practice of human creativity and generosity. At every turn we strive to promote the study and practice of the arts, aware of their capacity to bring all to a deeper recognition of the nature and purpose of life itself.

9. *Hospitality: openness to the other*

St. Benedict sees Christ present within the monastery in Scripture and liturgy, and in the person of the abbot / prioress, the sick, and each of the members of the monastic community. However, St. Benedict accords special attention to Christ's unexpected arrival from outside in the person of the guest, whom he describes alternately as poor and as a stranger. Christ presents himself in the outsider's vulnerability and calls the monastic to put aside individual plans and pre-occupations in order to let the unexpected person in, to help her get established, to respond to his most pressing needs. And when the outsider comes to experience being "at home" in this new place, for however brief the stay, the monastic discovers new awareness of the common journey in which all are engaged. For a blessing accompanies both the offering and the receiving of *hospitality*.⁴

Within Benedictine educational institutions, we strive to extend hospitality to each member of the educational community, especially to those new to the community and/or coming from other traditions. More broadly, we seek to cultivate curricular and co-curricular ways to recognize the needs and call forth the talents and gifts of persons of differing capacities and dispositions, of diverse races, cultures and backgrounds. The educational community that can result breaks down any residual sense of insiders versus outsiders and manifests an openness to being transformed by engaging deeply with the other – be it an idea, a person or an experience.

10. *Community: call to serve the common good*

Benedictine monastic *community* is rooted in a particular place in which mutual service, especially in the mundane areas of everyday life, is demanded of all with no expectation of individual reward. It is a challenge to contribute to a living, flesh and blood community on such terms. The qualities of character that are required are nurtured by the individual community's sense of its mission, the witness of monastic forebears and the broader communion of saints across the ages. The imagination to persevere and thrive in such a life is enriched through the example of communities across the world – monastic and non-monastic, Christian and non-Christian, religious and non-religious – that make sustained practical efforts to foster human well-being. Though directly grounded in a particular place, the commitments and aspirations of Benedictine life can only bear fruit if they stretch to horizons that are truly universal.

Benedictine colleges and universities seek to enlist this practical focus on community building and its profound openness to human history and global experience. It is our intent to cultivate a focus on the nature of responsible living – a focus that is enriched by local example, grounded in the wisdom of the past and refreshed by the perspectives of other cultures. We attempt to provide students with a tangible experience of community, deepened by curricular and co-curricular programs, to help them make the connection between the individual and the communal, the local and the global, the present and the past. In so doing, we seek to ensure that students cultivate the disposition to serve others in ever deeper and more expansive ways.

Conclusion

Near the end of his Rule, St. Benedict has this to say about the spirit that ought to animate the life of monastics:

Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: *They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other* (Rom 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life. (RB 72)

There is an analogous “good zeal” for a Benedictine educational institution. It results from seeking to cultivate the hallmarks of Benedictine education – **love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community** – with good and carefully directed energy. To be sure, each Benedictine college and university will cultivate these hallmarks differently. But to the extent that a campus community keeps renewing its understanding of and fidelity to these hallmarks, it will manifest a Benedictine educational culture in keeping with the spirituality and culture, the core values and the hopes of the sponsoring monastery. Such a culture will be strong and resilient enough to offer a superb and distinctive education, one worthy of the varied gifts and talents, the passionate commitment and full support of the entire campus community and the broader human family.

¹ See Lawrence Boadt, CSP, “An Introduction to the Wisdom Literature of Israel,” *Collegeville Bible Commentary* (ed. Dianne Bergant, CSA and Robert J. Karris, OFM; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989) 634-43; Dianne Bergant, “The Wisdom Books,” *Catholic Study Bible* (ed. Donald Senior; New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) Readers’ Guide, 231-32.

² References to the Rule are from *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (ed. Timothy Fry, OSB, et al.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

³ John Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd ed., 1982.

⁴ See Aquinata Böckmann, OSB, *Perspectives on the Rule of Saint Benedict: Expanding Our Hearts in Christ* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 163-194.