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Address to the Illinois Benedictine College Community
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by Esther de Waal

What does the Benedictine charism offer to today's world? Put another way, how does The Rule of St. Benedict and the vision of St. Benedict speak to us today, particularly to lay people like myself?

About 15 years ago when my husband went to be the dean of **Canterbury Cathedral**, we went to live in the cottage that goes with being an Anglican priest in England. In this instance, that "cottage" was a vast medieval house which had belonged to the Benedictine priors during the Middle Ages when Canterbury had been a great Benedictine monastic community. Living in that extraordinary place, I, as a historian, believed that I should not allow myself to be crushed by the power of the past. So I picked up the **Rule of St. Benedict** to know something of the minds, hearts and vision of the men who had built the building that surrounded me, indeed the very house in which I lived with my husband and four teenage sons.

As I dutifully began reading **St. Benedict's Rule**, this man began to speak to me. He addressed many of the issues all of us have to face. Since then Benedict has been a continuing power and person in my life. I would like to celebrate the reality of Benedict's power in my life with you today. Just this morning I realized that this is April 26, the day many of the conversations I've been having with St. Benedict will appear in print in England. It will be published later in America. The title, **A Life Giving Way**, says something of the energy, vigor and the vibrancy St. Benedict has brought to me.

So how does **St. Benedict** speak to us today? How does he address the issues that we face? How, particularly, does he speak to a college community such as Illinois Benedictine, where there is a commitment to the values and vision of the Benedictine way? Can it be that this tiny Rule, written some 1500 years ago for men in rural Italy, is still vibrant, life-giving and relevant? I believe it is. I believe that in Benedict we find a man with vision and practical wisdom whom we can hear because he speaks out of his personal experiences. It is precisely because he has such a grasp of the human psyche and how it works that he can touch us with practical wisdom and insight.

When I first picked up the Rule one sentence leapt out at me. It was that statement in **chapter 31** which discusses the role of the monastic cellarer, what we might call the business manager. Benedict tells us to handle the things of the kitchen, the pantry, the garden, with as much love, reverence and respect as the sacred vessels of the altar.

Now, in those days I was extremely busy with four boys, ages 12 to 17, and a husband in public life. I was trying to do a little historical work, when I could fit it in while running a vast house. If I tell you there were 47 stone steps in the spiral staircase leading to the top of the house and that the house had not been modernized in any great way, you will realize that life there could be quite hard.

I trust you can understand that I received this vivid text about the cellarer as a wonderful word. I was on a visit to Africa when I came across it. I was "moozingoo," which means feeling an enormous amount of pressure whirling about. I also was still a victim of a religious upbringing which told me that what God really wanted from me was that I should say a lot of prayers. I had the idea that the more uncomfortable they were and the more I suffered the more God was pleased. At one point, I determined to pray longer and in greater discomfort than my younger sister. Going to church, reading religious literature, giving up sugar during Lent, giving my savings to the mission field-- that's what God was looking for. There was no idea in my upbringing that God would be pleased if I helped my mother in the kitchen handling ordinary things like the dishes. I had no idea that matter mattered to God and that included my own body. There was no idea that the earth, the ground on which I walked, was an essential part of God's world. There was no sense that creation was important, that God was part of the ordinary and the day-to-day. Without noticing it, I was part of the great dualistic system of the Western world that splits the world between the holy and the profane, the sacred and the ordinary.

While I was growing up, I was very conscious of splits and parties within the church. I knew precisely where I stood. I was an evangelical **Anglican Christian**. Baptists and Presbyterians were pretty dreadful; **Anglo-Catholics** were highly suspect; **Roman Catholics** were beyond the pale. These labels and banners made things simple for me.

In my education, I was shaped by the split that shaped western Europe from the 12th century onward. With the coming of the universities, the rediscovery of the Greek philosophers and the growth of rational analysis, an approach to education developed which was totally cerebral and left-brained to the neglect of the emotions and the imagination. I dealt in words, not in the visual, not in images. There was no sense of the right-hand side of the brain. I was also shaped by the split of 1098, the schism which severed the West from the great **Eastern theological traditions**.

Although I didn't realize its implications at the time, I also had begun to follow that simple movement of illumination that begins to mend these splits and divides, that heals the tragic divisions in my self, my thinking and my whole approach to the church and the world. The Rule of St. Benedict, like the **Celtic tradition** which has enriched what Benedict gives me, takes me behind and beyond the divisions that shaped me. It takes me to the fifth and sixth centuries during which the Benedictine way of life and the Celtic tradition were forged. The Rule takes me back to something early, primal and universal. I choose these words carefully. I don't want to say "primitive." That would sound prejudicial and critical. So I say primal, universal, fundamental, existing not only in the church but in each of us.

Recovering this as the core from which we operate, the ground from which we reach out to others, is urgent. It is prophetic for our time and for what the next **millennium** is going to give us. I think this language resonates with many people who are on the edge of the church, who are questioning and seeking. They find many things in the institutional church difficult, but they still find a deep longing within themselves. I think this language comes close to the new consciousness **Bede Griffiths OSB** has stood for during the many years of his monastic life. I think it is very close to the terms in which the "New Science" also speaks. Certainly, traditional peoples, Celtic peoples, African peoples and Native American peoples have always seen beyond historic Western dualities to unity and integration. Unfortunately, others find the whole matter rather abstract and theoretical.

It is compelling to me that Benedict always speaks in totally practical terms. He gives his teaching in the most practical and down-to-earth way possible. This is one of the reasons I can hear him and find him unthreatening. I have a built-in resistance, which I share with many others, to being presented with ethical demands and moral statements such as the declarations and pronouncements that emanate from the institutional church. However, my reaction is entirely different when profound theological teachings and spiritual insights are given in the context of real-life situations or through portraits of ordinary people. I am ready to listen, to hear and to follow. When Benedict talks to me about handling with care, about reverence and respect for material things, he does it in a way that is immediate and specific, and therefore difficult to evade. The Abbot hands out the work tools to the brothers, and he keeps a list, recognizing that these items are on loan and that everything matters. At the end of time, whether it is when the harvest is finished, or at the end of one's life, or the day of judgment, they are to be collected back again and "recollegenda." The Latin word carries a sense that when work is done and the harvesting is complete, the tools are to be gathered in again. They are only on loan, and they've got to be returned. Since the Abbot is the exemplar of Christ for the brothers, I see that Christ has lent me all the good things in my life. This includes the earth, everything.

I'm fond of this thing I'm wearing because it reminds of New Mexico and Native American traditions. This ring, of which I'm particularly fond, is a piece of a jet which I picked up on the beach at Whitby. It moves me to think of **Hilda of Whitby**. A friend set it for me so I can wear it and be reminded of that great Saxon Benedictine abbey. But I have to look at these things and say "not mine, only on loan." Benedict tells us to enjoy these things-- and return them. We don't possess. He is telling us about attitude, about the attitude of detachment-- or better non-attachment. This is about the interior disposition of the heart. Benedict is quite clear that outward conformity doesn't count. There must be unity-- this theme is a keynote-- between the exterior and the interior.

Again, Benedict gives us a specific example from a particular time and place-- behavior in choir. When singing the psalms the heart, voice and mind must be in harmony. At times I've lived guided by others expectations. Put on the mask; pretend that something is there and in place when it was not. Benedict blows this sky high when he says that our handling of things can come out right only if the starting point is the right attitude. In my case, this has applied particularly to my sons as they grow up. I have had to realize they are on loan. I mustn't control; I mustn't possess; I mustn't try to organize their lives, telling myself that it's for their own good and that I know better than they do. No, I have to let them go free. I have to handle them with care, respect and with all courtesy of love.

That is a wonderful phrase. Benedict has this great gift with phrases. Some are so extraordinary that you have to hold them in your hands, feel the weight of them and live with them. All the courtesy of love is a wonderful phrase for explaining how you handle people. When things go wrong there has to be gentle handling. Somebody needs healing, handle him as you would a pot where you have to scrape off the rust, very gently so you don't crack it. St. Benedict teaches us in images. Vessels and tools take on the fullness of images as I live with the text and as it lives with me. This is one of the great things about this text. You must read it time and again. It's so full of images, and images get

to us, not intellectually to our minds but to our hearts which is the essence of our self. That's where they grow and work in us.

So we stay with this image of holding the pot, not merely as a vessel but as something to be handled with care. Then we realize that the image is speaking to us of a Eucharistic vessel. This takes us deeper into Benedict's incarnational, sacramental understanding. And then comes this important connection: The way we handle things and the way we handle people are related. Exploitation of one leads to exploitation of the other. Benedict is in line with many in today's society, like Wendell Barry who is so well-known to you, who are telling us this. There's an uncanny resemblance between our behavior towards each other and our behavior towards things and our behavior towards the earth. By some connection that we don't recognize, the willingness to exploit on e becomes the willingness to exploit the other. It's impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth.

I saw this vividly in Johannesburg. The waste dumps left from gold mining represent the exploitation of the black people of South Africa under Apartheid. What is secret and hidden about Apartheid elsewhere is clearly revealed here. What I saw in Johannesburg I also see daily in London, exploitation of people and exploitation of things.

Images again. In recent years, I've come to much appreciation of **Thomas Merton**. There is a real prophetic person. If you haven't yet discovered Merton, you're very lucky for great riches await you. A Trappist monk, living therefore by the Rule of Benedict, I've come to know him recently through his photographs. They've told me a lot about the way he saw the world. They express how much he lived out of the Rule. Imagine Merton living in his hermitage outside the **Abbey of Gethsemani** in the blue Kentucky hills. The good friend who lent him his camera, John Howard Griffin, a remarkable journalist, said that the way Thomas Merton focused on people was also the way he focused on things. He was totally present to the person or thing before him. Listening, he let each person, each thing, have its own voice. He stood back never trying to possess, to label, to organize.

Merton didn't believe that we come to God through the truncation of our humanity but through the wholeness of our humanity. All the senses are to be valued. He told his novices that the body is good; listen to what it tells you. He recognized that all the senses, particularly the senses of sight, sound and touch can teach us much. In those hermitage years, he was nurtured by long periods of silence, getting up at two in the morning to pray. Those hours before dawn enfolded him in the gentleness of the world around his hermitage. He learned those relations with his body and the world about him produced joy, openness and dialogue. I think that he used his camera to express this. He walked gently through the woods around the hermitage using his camera as a contemplative instrument. What and how he saw came out of his hours of prayer.

While writing a book on Merton using his photos, I saw that you've just got to stay with the simplicity of his vision, standing in front of piece of wood and some stones, which we otherwise might easily pass by. The texture and the relationship speak to him. Seeing an old workbench with a nail and all the scars of that battered wood, he stands back and lets it express itself in its own voice. He doesn't want to control or to possess. It's as if he goes beyond the things themselves to their essence, to the integrity of the things.

This is also true of Benedict. He is always moving beyond the individuals to the common, the corporate, the shared, the underlying essence, all the while saying that each individual person is unique and matters. The opening words to the Rule are totally personal: "Listen, carefully, my son," Benedict says, addressing each one of us, I believe, as the prodigal. The whole theme of the Rule is that each of us is the unique son or daughter of a loving Father, but each of us has gone astray. The whole purpose of the Rule is to bring us back to the embrace of the Creator Father. Each person is unique. And every single thing matters, which is why Benedict says something very profound in an almost absurd, throw-away line: "If anything gets broken or damaged in the pantry, own up at once." Own up at once because every single thing matters.

Above all, Benedictine spirituality is a shared, common, **corporate spirituality**. We have all these good things to share with the whole of God's family. We are partners with God in handling all these good gifts. This isn't an individualistic or isolated spirituality. It's about community life in whatever shape or form that may take. For those of us who are living outside monastic communities, we expect that form to change throughout our lives, involving overlapping circles as we are inserted into a succession of relationships, including relationships with the non-human. Benedict touches a deep and universal truth which traditional peoples know. Time and again in Celtic understanding-- and you know it from Native American experience-- we see that we are inserted into the whole web of creation. It's important that we stay with this.

There is a sweeping tide of interest in spirituality which, in my most cynical moments, I think is making a spirituality one more consumer product, an offer of in-built success. You buy it, and with it comes the promise of ultimate or even instant success. I haven't read anything by Ariana Huffington, but she is noticed in England. I quote her from something that I read just before I left England. She said, "The contemporary spiritual search is like a gigantic medieval fare where we wander between stores and booths and hawkers selling promises, and these promises, I've attempted to say, come very close to the promise of self-discovery, self-fulfillment, the rented me-ism that can be so seductive."

Benedict takes us into the theme of unity and connectedness. And again we come back to images. When I first picked up the Rule in Canterbury, I discovered the way of Benedict not just through a written text but through the actual monastic buildings amongst which I was living. The buildings were an expression of the way life that was lived by a great monastic community during the Middle Ages. What was it that I experienced as I walked through the cloisters or past the granary, the brew house or the bake house at the end of the garden? I knew where the herb garden was and what had been the infirmary and the guest house. And not the least, I explored a marvelous succession of underground tunnels through which an enterprising 12th century prior brought piped water to the monastic community. They built these tunnels with enormous care and skill. Nobody would have seen them. Yet, they were made with beautifully cut stone, set in rounded arches to carry the lead pipes. This speaks of their care for infinite detail, whether they were piping water, growing herbs or welcoming guests.

As I walked around the cloister, I saw all the buildings that depended on the cloister. Benedict's respect and reverence for the unity of body, mind and spirit was set out before my eyes. There was the dormitory. Benedict says enough sleep is very important. Eight hours sleep is what he said. There was the refectory. He loved and respected food and wanted it to be carefully served with reverence. There was the scriptorium, expressing respect for the intellect, for extending and challenging the mind. And there at the base of it all, anchoring it, was the church telling us that everything must flow into prayer. This life is a seamless garment said Dominic Milroy OSB. And it's very appropriate that he should, since he's a Benedictine and the headmaster of England's biggest Benedictine school at **Ampelforth**. This holistic approach recognizes the importance of the whole of ourselves, body, mind and spirit, and the rhythm by which we let it be part of our daily life.

Someone who recently joined a Benedictine community reported, "We came expecting to be taught a prayer technique. Instead, you are told that when you take your shoes off, you put them parallel to each other and not pigeon-toed, that you should close the door behind you quietly, that you should walk calmly and eat slowly and leave things ready for the next person to use. At first I thought this stuff is for the beginners. The real stuff will come later on. Then I came to understand that that is the real thing. It is how we do the little actions that makes us mindful of God or our neighbor."

The fascinating thing about that quotation is that I have taken it from the sermon preached on Passion Sunday in an Anglican parish church in a small market town on the border of Wales, close to where I now live. It's a parish that was a Benedictine power in the Middle Ages. But that meant nothing to any of its people until a year ago when the rector and his wife spent two weeks in a Benedictine community in Normandy. It turned their lives around. They felt the warmth, the love and the care in the guest house, which made every meal a loving and sharing experience and built a gentle friendship between the guests and the community. They returned saying, "This is given to us, too, at a parish. Ordinary lay people are given this grace by the very fact of this place in which we worship. We neglected it, but now we will return to it as our vision and guide to deepen our community life in our very ordinary small market town. Ordinary people at the end of the 20th Century." Throughout Lent there has been teaching, study and discussion at this parish. And people, with amazement, say how liberating and natural this is. They say they are allowed to feel and live the way they deep down always wanted to live.

In that sermon, the priest told them, "When you stand at the kitchen stove, that is the center; that is the altar. When you lie in your bed, your bed becomes the altar. When you wash a dish or pick up litter, you are the altar. You are always standing on holy ground. Any moment can be the moment. Any place can be the place." He led them to see the image so powerfully given in the buildings themselves, that all these daily activities would be impossible were it not for the heart of the monastic building-- the empty space of the cloister. It is the cloister, the enclosure, that holds everything together. They are around an empty space in the middle that keeps everything together and in harmony. This empty space of the cloister garden is symbolic of something that runs all the way through the Rule, and that is the emptiness of the individual before God's constant presence. He went on to remind them of the Eastern saying that what allows the wheel to turn is the empty space that joins the axle bar of the cart to the wheel. Without that emptiness, the wheel won't turn.

Here I think of Thomas Merton's photograph of the great cart wheel he had outside his hermitage, which he photographed with such love and care. There, surely, is that image of the empty space at the heart of the monastic buildings, and of our own self too. For me that image was movingly expressed when I managed to get to Subiaco 18 months ago. In that monastery, the cloister is an inner cloister garth or garden. The garden was watered and made fruitful from a water system which stood in its center. The whole image of tending a garden and of the changing seasons of the garden is written out there.

I recently and movingly experienced the power of that inner cloister, that inner garth or garden, when I went back to South Africa. What took me to South Africa in the years of Apartheid was an invitation from Desmond Tutu. He asked me to do in South Africa what I had done in England, and to some extent in America. We had a **Benedictine experience** week in which we grew together, 25 people, using the Rule as a guide for our daily rhythm of praying, studying and working together. We formed a temporary lay community which drew its inspiration from the insights of St. Benedict. The people who came to live, work and pray together were drawn from all the divides of the South African church-- Dutch Reformed, Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic-- and from the racial divides-- black, colored and white. These people haven't lived close together and shared their life together the way that we did that week. We did this first in Johannesburg then in Cape Town. And Benedict spoke to African consciousness because of this wonderful African concept of "ubuntu." It's untranslatable, but Desmond Tutu expresses it with his favorite saying, "A person is a person in relation to other people." The South Africans were excited by what the Rule could give them. "Why was this good news kept from us?" they said. "Here is a wonderful tool. Here is a means we need to build the coming church in the new South Africa."

I went back after Christmas to have continuing conversations with people whom I had gotten to know well. When I was in Cape Town I visited a place that is no longer a living monastery because the monks have left it. Imagine with me this simple monastic building built from a very simple courtyard. The chapel, the kitchen, the refectory and so on run off the foreside. The cells above look down into the central open space. No longer used as a monastic building, it has become a trauma center for the victims of racial conflict, torture, exile, suffering and violence that have troubled South Africa in recent years. As the warden greeted me, he had no idea who I was. He didn't know that I was interested in monastic tradition. He greeted me saying, "This place is, in itself, healing. It's healing just to cross this threshold, just to stand here with this courtyard opening up before us with the sense of the prayers of the monks who are no longer here. But their presence through their prayers is still with us. This is the start of the healing process for these damaged people as they come here, and it begins just as soon as they cross this threshold." I found it so moving that I went to my bag to get the trauma center's simple logo, which pictures prison bars where the bars have become flowering branches with the promise of new life.

And so, the cloister or the enclosure makes possible the welcome and the openness to those in need. And so, we have this picture of the open door depending on the cloister, whether it is written out in the monastic buildings and lived out in a strictly monastic community, or whether it is the principle by which we live that openness, that unity, refusing to be filled up which leads to exhaustion, tiredness, depression. Benedict wants energy for us. He is a man who writes with vibrancy and urgency. Above all he wants the church and society to get behind the divide, the dualities, the divisions and the splits to that centeredness by which we can hold things together. From that center we can reach out with the loving welcome, the fullness of hospitality that is so much the Benedictine charism.

I end with a quotation from Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Merton writes: "There is nothing whatsoever of the ghetto spirit in St. Benedict. That is the wonderful thing about the **Rule** and about **Benedict** himself, the freshness, the freedom, the sanity, the broadness, and the healthiness of the **Benedictine life**." This man gives us a sign, a promise and a challenge as much today as when the Rule was written. Shall we in our generation be able to handle the gift of Benedict's Rule with respect, reverence and responsibility and share this gift with **others**?