

Kardong, Terrence, OSB. "The Humanism of Benedict of Nursia."

I. Introduction

To speak about Benedictine values for the twenty-first century implies that one has some idea of what the coming century will be in particular need of. As far as I can see, there will be an urgent need to defend and maintain human nature against threats that undermine it. I think there will be an increasing need to promote a healthy humanism in the face of dehumanization.

Immediately someone may want to argue that humanism is precisely what has been dehumanizing us for several decades now. I would call that "secular humanism," the kind that denies all transcendent values. I certainly don't plan to defend that stance in a paper like this. Neither do I want to set the human species apart from the rest of the environment: we are all in this together.

One might also contend that the defense of humanity against dehumanization has always been a struggle. Yes, but recent times have seen the Nazi holocaust, the Soviet gulags and the Cambodian killing fields, violations against humanity so enormous as to make one wonder if some people simply forget what it is to be a human being at all. In the first year of the twenty-first century, there is a new threat. Now science has apparently cracked the DNA code to such an extent that the manipulation of human genes will soon be a possibility. This could be a great opportunity as well as a threat, depending on what we make of it. Given the politics currently raging behind the scenes of the Genome Project, I take it to be more of a danger than anything else. Most of all, I am afraid that some multinational corporation may decide to redesign human beings to automatically crave what they have to sell.

II. Early Christian Background

A. Early Christian Humanism

The struggle for the human reaches far back into Christian history, indeed, to the very beginning. When the Romans began to persecute the Christians, about the time of the Emperor Nero, one of the reasons given in justification for this by the historian Tacitus was that the Christians "hated the human race."¹ This is about the worst thing you could say about anybody, but it represents more of an emotional than an objective judgment. It does show that the earliest Christians were quite different than the general population in their approach to life. Apparently their lifestyle was so visibly different that it threatened many people, including the great writer Tacitus.

Although it is clear that the Christians did not merit Tacitus' horrid remark, it is not too hard to imagine why they were denounced. For one thing, they claimed to be eating the very body and blood of Jesus Christ in their Eucharist. Isn't that cannibalism?"² And secondly, they resolutely refused to worship the gods of the Roman state religion. Consequently, they were accused of atheism. It seems that the people most threatened by the Christians were the conservative and the pious Romans, not the profligate or the impious. They were threatening what seemed to be the solidest human values of that society. That may be why some of the best emperors were the worst persecutors."³

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But there is another side to this matter as well. No matter how upright and righteous the Roman pagans were, they countenanced certain practices that we would now consider barbaric. For example, they regularly practiced the exposure of infants; it was no crime to abandon unwanted babies, usually females, in the town dump. Abortion was a given, although it was more dangerous than exposure. Another typical Roman practice was the treatment of plague victims, who were usually thrown out into the street to die. Since they had absolutely no knowledge of the causes or the cure of plague, we can sympathize with them, but we still shake our heads at their hardness of heart.

How did this all change? It seems that the Christians, those "haters of the human race," those atheists, refused to accept these practices. They believed that their discipleship in the gospel of Jesus Christ forbade them to expose infants and abandon the sick. And so they rescued infants and tried to comfort the dying. Not surprisingly, this kind of behavior attracted notice. People first thought it was borderline insanity, but eventually it had its effect. Pagans began to question their own humanism. They recognized that Christianity indeed had a higher standard of morality, a better way to be human. According to Rodney Stark in his wonderful book, *The Rise of Christianity*, this was one of the chief reasons why Christianity eventually prevailed in the late Roman Empire."⁴

B. Early Monastic Humanism

But there is another reason why early Christianity prevailed in the Roman Empire: it became the state religion. Christianity evolved from being the object of bloody persecution to toleration in the Edict of Constantine in AD 315. By the end of the century, the Emperor Theodosius had declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Now it was disadvantageous, and even dangerous, to remain a pagan. Anyone interested in doing well in the new society had to become a Christian.

Not all Christians were happy with this development."5 Many of the old guard felt that mass Christianity of this type was a sure way to guarantee hypocrisy and a watering down of the gospel. A lot of the asceticism of the early Church can be explained as a reaction against the new, "convenient Christianity." And certainly the most spectacular form of asceticism was monasticism. We might define it as a "turning away from the world," which often involved a physical withdrawal to remote locations away from ordinary society."6 Before the fourth century, there were professional "religious" in the Church. But they lived scattered in the cities and in the parishes, not in segregated and remote for ms. In addition, these new monachoi usually gathered in some kind of groups to reinforce their intense form of Christianity.

A more cautious approach might be to ask how this movement could possibly have flourished and gained such enormous popularity if it really was so inhumane?

Perhaps not all of the earliest monks and nuns were consciously rejecting ordinary life in the Church, but there is no doubt that their practices and attitudes were distinctly counter-cultural. Most notably, they did not marry and raise up families. That was the hallmark of the "religious" from the beginning of the Church, but the new monks and nuns added a couple of other features that made their lifestyle even more radical: they put aside all personal property and they lived in obedience to a religious superior, usually called an abba or an amma. To put it another way, they vowed and lived poverty, chastity and obedience, and that lifestyle has become characteristic of all religious to this day.

This kind of counter-cultural radicalism was not appreciated by everyone in the fourth century, and the same goes for today. The pagans thought the monks were even crazier than the rest of the Christians, but many pious Christians were also horrified by the spectacle of their fellow-religionists abandoning society and trekking off to the monastery or convent. What sense does it make for a man or woman to voluntarily put aside some of the most cherished human values: the right to a spouse and children; the right to own property; the right to make the choices to determine one's own future? Many people felt that this was an inhuman lifestyle, one that flew in the face of everything ordinary people loved and valued.

One of the most acerbic critics of the early monks was the British historian Edward Gibbon. In his classic book *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he blames Christianity for ruining that great civilization. And he saves some of his bitterest vitriol for the monks:

These unhappy exiles from social life were impelled by the dark and

Implacable genius of superstition. . . . Reason might subdue, or passion might suspend, its influence, but (it) acted most forcibly on the infirm minds of children and females; they were strengthened by secret remorse or accidental misfortune; and they might derive some aid from the temporal considerations of vanity or interest."7

Yet Gibbon might be forgiven his spleen against the monks, since the literature of the early monasticism itself often gives the impression of such extraordinary asceticism as would seem quite inhuman to a neutral observer, even one as sophisticated as Gibbon. The lives of the earliest monks sometimes paint a picture of people intent on ruining their own bodies with penances, and the primitive monastic legislation often seems to set a standard of renunciation quite beyond what any ordinary human being could accomplish."8 Even a person less prejudiced than Gibbon could be excused for suspecting that monasticism was designed by perverts for the enjoyment of masochists.

A more cautious approach might be to ask how this movement could possibly have flourished and gained such enormous popularity if it really was so inhumane? If one were to start from the presumption that the early monks and nuns were seeking a more humane lifestyle than what they found in contemporary society, we might read those texts differently. With an eye for the humane, we might notice, for example, how often the stories present monks or nuns engaged in thoughtful conversations about how to live a wise and balanced life. When a seeker said: "Abba, give me a word of life," the answer was often surprisingly humane and fresh with wisdom and insight. It is also notable how often the earliest monks extended mercy to each other and refused to judge each other harshly. Indeed, the literature

of the Egyptian desert is today considered some of the most humanly attractive stuff to come down to us from ancient times."9

III. The Humanism of Benedict

When we come to study Saint Benedict's humanism, there are many ways to approach the question. Since he only uses the word "human" three times in his entire Rule, that does not offer much linguistic data to build on. But I propose to use those three instances as a kind of framework upon which to hang my thoughts on the subject.

A. RB 37.1: Old people and Children

The first mention of humanity in the Rule occurs in a tiny chapter concerning old people and children. It may surprise us to learn that there were always children in early medieval monasteries. We can understand that monks might reach old age, but what were children doing in such a place, apart from their parents and family life? The simplest answer is that there were no other schools for them at the time, and also that some of them were dedicated to God by their parents as infants. But that leads to more questions that I do not intend to answer. At any rate, Benedict wants these children treated tenderly: "While human nature itself is indulgent toward these two groups, namely the aged and children, the authority of the Rule should also look out for them." He then goes on to say that they should be allowed to eat before the regular time. The rest of the monks usually did not eat before mid-afternoon, so this was an important concession.

In more practical terms, Benedict does not assume that the monks in his monasteries are all nice people who would not dream of doing nasty things.

Rather than deal with the particulars of this minor rule, we might take a more general look at Benedict's remark about "human nature."10 The thing that is most striking about it is its optimism about the human condition. Benedict seems confident that people will generally be kind and good, especially toward the weakest members of society such as infants and the aged. We have already seen, however, that before the advent of Christianity, ancient Roman society was anything but "indulgent" towards infants. If they were defective or the wrong sex, they were unceremoniously abandoned.11 And we have probably heard that many primitive tribes banished old people from the group when they were felt to be overly burdensome.

Nevertheless, Benedict does not hesitate to claim that human nature in itself has merciful impulses. This could be looked on as an offhand remark, but in view of the rest of his Rule, I take it to be his basic view of humanity. I think it is accurate to say that when it comes to people, Benedict is optimistic. Which reminds me of a line from an extraordinary movie entitled Harold and Maude that tells of a romance between an 18-year-old boy and an 82-year-old woman. The latter is the star of the show, a really nice person. At one point, Harold says in amazement: "You really like people, don't you?" "Why not, says Maude, after all, they are my species!"

It seems to me that this is also true of Benedict: he likes people. Since one of the definitions of humanism given by Webster is "devotion to human welfare or strong interest and concern for human beings," this qualifies Benedict as a humanist. I do not propose to run through the Holy Rule pulling up examples of Benedict's sensitivity and care for people. I would prefer to discuss the question from the standpoint of literary criticism.

One of the most startling and revolutionary discoveries of modern research on the Rule of Benedict is simply this: the author is a copy-cat. It used to be thought that Benedict was one of the most original and creative minds of the middle ages, or at least that he had organized a vast amount of previous, untidy monastic legislation into a neat package. Now we know different. In fact, he reworked an older document, called the Rule of the Master, and in places he copied it for verse after verse."12 If you are a traditional-minded Benedictine, the idea that Benedict copied the Master is hard enough to swallow. What is even worse is the suspicion that the Master is not a healthy personality.

This comes through in many ways in his Rule. For example, in dealing with guests, the Master assumes they will be thieves and lazy bums. So he says they should be put to work after three days. Furthermore, there should be two monks in charge of them so that when one must sleep, the other should watch the guests. They need to be watched, even when they rise to go to the bathroom at night. You never know what they might do."13 Another place where the Master displays his paranoia is in regard to the sick, and he is not too subtle about it, either:

Brothers who say they are ill and do not rise for the Work of God and stay lying down, should not be called to task, but for their meal let them receive only liquids and eggs or warm water, which the sick can really hardly get down, so that if they are pretending, hunger at least will force them to get up (RM 69.1-3).

But even if they are willing to drag their sick bodies to prayer, they should still not be trusted:

If a brother is very tired, with aching limbs but no fever, does not want to incur the punishment of excommunication mentioned above, let him at least go into the chapel with the brothers at the usual time. And if he cannot stand, let him chant the psalms lying on a mat as if at prayer. But let the brother standing next to him keep an eye on him so he does not go to sleep (RM 69. 9-11). **"14**

It would be easy to go on quoting this kind of strange stuff from the Master. **"15** The point I want to make here is that Benedict has carefully avoided almost all of it. For example, his chapters on the guests and the sick betray little or no suspicion of those people. And in general he manages to transcend the Master's suspicion of human nature. Probably that is why the Rule of Benedict has become a standard for Western monks for a thousand years, while the Rule of the Master has been studiously ignored.

Someone glancing through Benedict's Rule for the first time, however, might well suspect that I am exaggerating his optimism about human nature. For example, the very first lines of the Prologue do not flatter the candidate but tell him bluntly that he is a sinner who has turned away from God; his only chance is to return to God by way of obedience. So Benedict completely shares the view of the Bible that the only possibility of human salvation lies in repentance and submission to the will of God.

In more practical terms, Benedict does not assume that the monks in his monasteries are all nice people who would not dream of doing nasty things. In fact, he expects that some of them will do awful things, and so they will have to be punished. Moreover, he thinks that all of the monks need to be kept under a certain amount of discipline for their own good. So he is not naïve about human potential. He believes that everyone, including the abbot, is a sinner and that the way of salvation is long and narrow. But that still does not make him a radical pessimist.

In this section I have presented Saint Benedict as a relatively optimistic personality who is inclined to trust people. It seems to me that a school that claims to carry on the values of Benedict must retain something of this attitude. There is plenty of pessimism at work in our society today; if there were not, we in the United States would not be the only major western nation to employ the death penalty, nor would we lead the western world in percentage of citizens in prison. I realize that these are hard questions, and no easy answers are available. Even within Christianity, some traditions are more or less optimistic than others. But at the end of the day, we should remember that Benedict never fed his monks raw eggs to drive them out of bed and back to work!

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Notes:

1 First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much "on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race (odio humani generis)." **Annals**, xv.44. **Loeb Classical Library**, transl. John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1937) 285. Tacitus is referring to the charge of arson brought against Roman Christians by Nero. He does not believe they were guilty of that, but he certainly does not hold them in high esteem.

2 "The charges bandied about in the next century were those always favored in such cases: ritual murder, nameless abomination with extinguished lights, et hoc genus omne (**Justin Martyr**, Apol. 1.26, etc.)." Translator's note in Tacitus, (note 1 above) p. 282.

3 At least this seems to be true of **Hadrian** and **Marcus Aurelius** in the second century.

4 Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1996. **Stark** is a sociologist, with a keen interest in the history of early Christianity. The most relevant chapters are 2: The Mission to the Jews: Why it probably succeeded; 3: Epidemics, Networks and Conversion; 4: The Role of Women in Christian Growth.

5 This is true, even today when many church historians consider that the embrace of Christianity by Constantine and his successors was very harmful to the Christian Church. A good example would be **Godfrey Diekmann**, who declares flatly that the **Peace of Constantine** was "the worst thing that ever happened to the Church!" Private conversation, June 10, 2000.

6 For a balanced and relatively up-to-date account of the beginnings of monasticism, see Mark Sheridan's essay "**Anachoresis** and the **Eremitical Movement**" in RB 1980 (Collegeville, MN: **Liturgical**, 1981) 17 ff.

7 **The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire** (original, 1776-1788; quoted version Modern Library, 11.6).

8 Two reliable modern English translations of this material are found in **The Lives of the Desert Fathers** (Cistercian, 1981) and **The Sayings of the Desert Fathers** (Cistercian, 1975).

9 Graham Gould, **The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community** (Oxford, Clarendon: 1993).

10 For a detailed commentary on this chapter [RB37], see **Aquinata Böckmann**, "Of Old People and Children," **The American Benedictine Review** (1998:4) 343-355.

11 Of course not everyone in ancient pagan society was heartless. Some people rescued infants and adopted orphans. For a full study of this matter, see John Boswell, **The Kindness of Strangers** (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

12 Although he did not himself discover this relationship, the scholar who has done the most to prove it and to explore its ramifications is **Adalbert de Vogüé** in his monumental commentary *La Règle de Saint Benoît* (Paris: Cerf, 1972) six volumes.

13 RM 79.5,10,16.

14 Translation of Luke Eberle in **The Rule of the Master** (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1977).

15 The Master's pessimism is not limited to behavior that he distrusts. He actually believes that most people operate with a fundamentally crippled will that virtually guarantees they will reject the commandments of God. See my forthcoming study, "Will and Self-Will in the Rule of Benedict," in **Studia Monastica** (Abbey of Montserrat, Spain).