



Benedictine Education And You



**First-Year
Symposium
2020**



Belmont Abbey
COLLEGE



Belmont Abbey

C O L L E G E

Dear First Year Student at Belmont Abbey College,

The First Year Symposium is your gateway college class. It has several purposes. In it, you learn the basics about the Benedictine Monastic tradition. Second, you will form a community with other freshmen in your class. As we will explain when you get here, you do some things together as an FYS class, in addition to individual academic assignments. Third, your FYS teacher will also be your advisor until you declare a major. Finally, you will be given an overview of our core curriculum and the rationale for Liberal Arts, and be introduced to the resources of the college in a “hands-on” way. Most students find their FYS class to be a foundational part of their whole college experience.

This booklet contains required readings and the instructions for your first assignment at Belmont Abbey College. This assignment is to be turned in at the first regular meeting of your First Year Symposium class. It amounts to preparing two pages of some personal answers to a few questions, typed and printed-out, double-spaced, in 12 point font. It is a required assignment. More specific instructions are given on the next page, “Instructions for the Hallmarks Assignment.”

Before you do that assignment, you will need to read carefully the two short essays in this booklet about the Benedictine Hallmarks (“Education within the Benedictine Tradition”) and “The Benedictine Life.” The first assignment is based on these essays, which also introduce you to the first unit of the First Year Symposium course on the Benedictine tradition.

The Benedictine tradition has its origins in the early history of Christianity, as explained in the second essay, “The Benedictine Life.” The Benedictines played the founding role for ALL western liberal arts education programs today, whether Christian or secular, so it makes sense that our approach to it at Belmont Abbey College would have some authentic features that are too often and too widely neglected in many American and European colleges. The ten Benedictine Hallmarks, described in the first essay that follows, are a good way to grasp those

features. We want you to choose TWO of them that you, personally, already understand and connect with, and tell us *why*. That is your summer assignment. We want you to answer three questions about each of your two Hallmarks (see “Instructions for the Hallmark Assignment,” and the accompanying question-template).

The tenth and final Hallmark – community – is probably the most fundamental. Although few of our professors are monks, the monks of Belmont Abbey are closely involved with the college and we model ourselves and our educational work on the Benedictine tradition of a Christian “life in community” (Greek *koinos bios*, Latin “coenobium”). We take very seriously the *power of community* in helping students seek out and accomplish their personal goals. We want to teach you how to learn and live in a community that bridges the future-oriented, academic and professional, career-planning world, with the present-oriented, more private but socially pre-occupied, at times bewildering world of the everyday life of a college student. *At many colleges and universities, especially large ones, these two worlds are separate worlds. They lack true community.* At Belmont Abbey, we want to give you an education where you are “at home” with your studies and your classmates, and your studies and interests, in turn, are part of your home and social life.

Our college is distinctive, and we want you to understand this from the very start of your time here. Your education is our special concern, and we want it to be a good one.

**Instructions for the
Hallmarks Assignment:
Due first day of class**

This will be your first college assignment and will count for approximately 5% of your grade for the course.

Please read carefully the two essays in this booklet: “Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition” (starting on p. 5) and “The Benedictine Life” (starting on p. 16).

Then write a paper, type it in Word with 12 point font, and print it at home before coming to campus in August.

The paper should have **three** pages.

- On the **first two pages**, write TWO brief essays (one essay per page) on ANY TWO of the ten Benedictine Hallmarks.

Relate your past, present and future to each Hallmark.

- Past: What in your past has led you to think about this particular Hallmark?
 - Present: What goals do you have for yourself right now as you begin college at Belmont Abbey?
 - Future: What kind of community do you look forward to belonging to, in college and afterwards?
- The **third page** will be another brief essay on “The Benedictine Life.”
 - Begin (first paragraph) by stating in your own words the essentials of the History and Way of Life of the Benedictine Monks which you have learned in the article by a Belmont Abbey monk, the late Brother Anselm Biggs.
 - Then (second paragraph) pick out one important feature of that Benedictine life that you would like to incorporate into your life as a student at Belmont Abbey College.

Here is brief review of the Ten Hallmarks as described in the article to follow:

1. **Love:** “Love One Another” “God is Love”
2. **Prayer:** Talking to God, listening to Him, and asking Him; Bible study
3. **Stability:** Lasting relationships; staying in one place
4. **Conversatio:** Give-and-take of words and actions in a peaceful daily routine
5. **Obedience:** Accepting authority, that someone else may have a better idea
6. **Discipline:** Stretching oneself beyond the comfort level to learn something
7. **Humility:** Accepting that we are all human: I need help and I can give help
8. **Stewardship:** Respecting and improving the fruits of human labor on the earth
9. **Hospitality:** Never turn the stranger from your door
10. **Community:** “We are all in this together”

Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition

Prologue: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition¹

From the earliest years of Christianity the disciples of Jesus faced the challenge of how to live faithfully and 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 and wherever else the Gospel spread. One of the earliest instances of this engagement with a different culture is the apostle Paul's address to the Athenians at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-32).

Over many generations sustained reflection on how Christianity could interact with various cultures created a nuanced and resilient intellectual tradition, marked by the capacity to adapt and transform methods of inquiry, ways of knowing and educational processes originating outside a Christian context. This intellectual tradition has become a powerful force for understanding and communicating the Christian message, as well as a touchstone for judging new ideas. It sets its sights on the full development of virtues that make for a good life and foster the common good. The questions with which this tradition wrestles are as important and long-lasting as the truths it proclaims.

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 norms for living, 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 include a commitment to think seriously about the culture in which one lives, to attend with respect to the ideas and

¹This prologue draws heavily from "Benedictine Wisdom and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition," an address delivered by William J. Cahoy at the meeting of the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities on June 28, 2006. An enormous list of books and articles have been written about the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, as well as church-related higher education and Catholic education, in particular. A selected bibliography, as well as links to Dr. Cahoy's address and other important sources, may be found at <www.abcu.info/>.

world views of others, 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 has created a distinctive approach to education. It stresses the continuity of faith and reason and respects the cumulative wisdom of the past. It places a high value on inclusivity, emphasizing the communal character of redemption and the integration of each person's studies into life lived with others. Animating all this is a keen sacramental awareness of the ways in which the divine is manifest in the created world, in history and ritual, imagination and the human heart.²

The Catholic intellectual tradition shares these intellectual values with other traditions of inquiry, religious and secular, but it attends to them in a way that is distinctive. Those who are shaped by the Catholic intellectual tradition have an abiding hunger to understand the nature of human life and God's ways in the world. They are unafraid of ambiguity or the unknown, cognizant of vulnerability and failure, vigorous in self-criticism, and yet 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. As with the Gospel itself, not all who aspire to these ideals succeed in embodying them. Yet over time even failures quite large can play a role in clarifying what is essential and life-giving in the tradition.

The Role of Benedictine Monasticism

In prescribing for all monastics the praying of psalms and meditative reading of Scripture and other sacred texts, St. Benedict (480-547) guaranteed that monasteries would be places of reading, study and learning within the larger orbit of Christian life and the Catholic intellectual tradition. From the sixth century beginnings of Benedictine life, monasteries welcomed guests into their midst, as well as young people studying to prepare for a monastic vocation as well as adult life in the broader church and society. This interaction with guests and the

²Monika Hellwig, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University," *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition* (ed. Anthony Cernera and Oliver Morgan; Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2000), 1-18 [available at http://www.sacredheart.edu/pages/2523_cit_in_the_catholic_university.cfm] and "What Can the Roman Catholic Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education," *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Richard Hughes and William Adrian; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1997), 13-23.

young fostered a powerful exchange of ideas and opinions and helped shape the intellectual lives of all involved. As a result, long before universities or colleges in our sense of the term had arisen, monasteries functioned as centers of thought and learning for the larger world.

Through many centuries, monasteries have cultivated theology and the arts and sciences, 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 monastic men and women and, taken together, has been a source of social, economic and cultural grounding for entire civilizations.

Benedictine Colleges and Universities in a North American Context

As immigrants flocked to North America in the nineteenth century, a number of Benedictine monasteries were established in the United States and Canada. The impetus for their founding was a revival of monastic life in Europe, as well as a missionary urge to be of service to the Church in a new land. These new monasteries, drawing on an ancient heritage of communal life, prayer, study and work, often started schools to help preserve the immigrants' Catholic faith and cultural heritage, as well as foster new vocations to monastic life. These schools, colleges and seminaries sank deep local roots and as times changed came to serve broader and more diverse populations.³ Initially staffed by sisters and monks, their development was aided by a growing cadre of dedicated lay colleagues who today constitute the vast majority of the faculty and staff.

The Benedictine colleges and universities of today participate in a millennial saga of thought and learning. As Catholic institutions of higher education, each is a “primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture.”⁴ As Catholic institutions of higher education founded and sponsored by Benedictine monasteries, each seeks to cultivate in the lives of faculty, staff and students, board members, parents and friends virtues that resonate with particular strength in the world of Benedictine monastic life.

³Joel Rippinger, OSB, *The Benedictine Order in the United States: An Interpretive Essay* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 116-29.

⁴John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1996), n. 43.

The Benedictine Wisdom Tradition

Like the most ancient of wisdom traditions,⁵ Benedictine education sets its sights on the transformation of the human mind and heart. Benedictine education stresses the formation of the whole person rather than the intellect alone. At its best, it calls for a lively interplay between rigorous thinking and the development of practices for right living.

Three influences animate Benedictine education: *Christ* who is encountered anew each day in Scripture and the human person, the *Rule of Benedict* as it is lived in community, and the extensive and 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 73.3⁶). 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 originating in time and places far distant from today's monastic practitioners and remarkably more generative than contemporaries often realize.

Ten core values can be distilled from the *Rule of Benedict*: **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), including fear of the unknown, the new or the stranger. 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

⁵See 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.

⁶References 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).

sponsored by a Benedictine monastery cannot help but be 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 and can be seen as hallmarks of educational vitality and fidelity to their mission. To the extent these hallmarks shape a pattern of life for the campus community, they foster a particularly fruitful – and particularly Benedictine – engagement with the Catholic intellectual tradition. There is no single way to embody these hallmarks. They cannot be decreed. Instead, as the members of a Benedictine educational institution reckon with them in pursuit of their own deepest educational goals, they sink their roots into their particular place in the broader Church and culture. As they do so, a more expansive life emerges for all, the collective result 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 seek, above all, to be grounded in love and animated by it. The “love of learning and desire for God,” so celebrated as part of Benedictine culture,⁷ make demands on all and are expansive enough to engage the deepest purpose of persons from all backgrounds who desire to teach and to study, to serve and to lead. We call all to pursue a rigorous and disciplined search for truth and to support one another when that quest becomes difficult. We recognize how easy it is for all to hold on to habits of mind and behavior that diminish one's own potential or impede the development of others. Yet we possess a confidence borne of long experience in the capacity of all persons to grow and develop, to cultivate habits of mind and behavior that are life-giving and contribute to the good of all.

⁷John Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd ed., 1982.

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 (RB 71:1-2). 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 are encouraged to 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 others and the world 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.

Time and again, this simple, balanced perspective engages 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, confident 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 creative and sustainable use of resources and their just distribution for the good of all. 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. A blessing accompanies both the offering and the receiving of *hospitality*.⁸

⁸See Aquinata Böckmann, OSB, *Perspectives on the Rule of Saint Benedict: Expanding Our Hearts in Christ* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 163-194.

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, often in the face of overwhelming obstacles. 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, near and far, in meeting their most critical needs.

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 cultivating the hallmarks of Benedictine education – **love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community** – with wise and carefully directed energy. To be sure, these hallmarks will manifest themselves differently in each Benedictine college and university. But to the extent that a campus community keeps renewing its understanding of and fidelity to these hallmarks, it will provide a lively home for the Catholic intellectual tradition in keeping with the culture and spirituality, the core values and hopes of the sponsoring monastery. The graduates of such a school will be able to engage the promise and peril of their times with confidence, deepening and expanding the reach of peace, justice and human dignity throughout their lives. Fostering the educational experience capable of producing such graduates is worthy of the varied gifts and talents, the passionate commitment and full support of the entire campus community, as well as the broader human family.

Endorsed by the ABCU Executive Committee, August 27, 2007

The Benedictine Life

by

Anselm G. Biggs, O.S.B.

How did it all start?

From the beginnings of Christianity there have always been persons who, eager for the closest possible union with God in this life, have sought to do far more than is strictly required of all true followers of Christ. Today we would say they were “seeking perfection.” At first such a special way of life was possible only within the privacy of the home. Persons so inclined, who were known as ascetics,¹ spent long hours in prayer, fasted more often than was expected of their fellow Christians, and devoted themselves to the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Many of them abstained from marriage or, if already married, lived as though unmarried. Those who were blessed with an abundance of worldly goods kept their own needs to a minimum and used their wealth for the relief of the poor and the care of the sick and travelers. These early ascetics continued to belong to the society of their own city and local church and to take a more or less active part in the life of the day. Their special character as ascetics was something over and above their role as citizens and Christians. But toward the end of the third century, some of them sought greater seclusion and more freedom for their ascetical practices and so there began a process of withdrawal from “the world.” This new form of the ascetical life is known as monasticism, or the life of the monks. It differed from the original form in its flight from society and in its organized structure.

A Rapid History of Monasticism from ancient Christian Europe to North Carolina

Monasticism, as an organized way of life, began in Egypt early in the fourth century and spread rapidly into Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor. In the same century, it became known in

¹ From Greek *askēsis*, “training, athletic exercise.”

Italy, Gaul, and other parts of the West, and here too it acquired great popularity. Everywhere it assumed one of two forms. The earlier ascetic type was the eremitical² or hermit life, in which the monk lived in a more or less total seclusion from all human society. While the eremitical type produced a number of great heroes of sanctity, the difficulties inherent in it were such that it was not suited for the great majority of those seeking Christian perfection. And so a second form, the cenobitic³ life, was called into existence. Cenobites, while withdrawing from the world, live in community. They are governed by a superior and other officials, and their activities are regulated by a rule which seeks to apply the teachings of the Gospel in such a way as to promote the particular aims of the community or of an association of communities.

Ascetical practices which were relatively easy in the warm, dry climate of Egypt were eventually found to be impracticable in other areas, notably in Western Europe. And so, after an auspicious beginning, the monastic life went into decline in Italy in the fifth century, at the very moment when the Western Roman Empire was being absorbed by various Germanic invaders and many persons thought that the end of the world, or at least of the civilized world, was rapidly approaching. But in A.D. 480, four years after the deposition of the last Western Emperor, there was born a man who was destined to rescue western monasticism from its degradation, adapt it to local conditions, and fit it to be the instrument for converting and educating the new Germanic kingdoms and thus for constructing a new Europe. This was Saint Benedict, whom Pope Pius XII in 1947 honored with the title of "Father of Europe."

Benedict at first had no intention of reforming the monastic way of life; even less was he preoccupied with bringing a new Europe into existence. As a youth, he felt restless in the society of his own middle class and aspired to a life that was more satisfying and productive of good than was possible in his native town of Nursia or in Rome. And so, like many before him, he withdrew into solitude to live as a hermit. But before long his retreat was discovered and like-minded persons asked to be allowed to live with him under his direction. Abandoning the eremitical life he became a cenobite and eventually the Father of Western Monasticism. After years of practical experience he wrote his celebrated *Rule of Monasteries*, in which he laid down the principles he

² From Greek *erēmos*, "solitude, wilderness, desert."

³ From Greek *koinos*, "common, shared" + *bios* "life" = "community life."

had discovered and legislated for a way of life, which he regarded as only the first step in the path of perfection. His chief aim was to make his form of the monastic life accessible to all men of good will. It was not intended to be easy, but neither were its demands so severe as to scare away all but the most heroic souls.⁴ It was intended to satisfy the needs and abilities of the ordinary person and to encourage the generous and the strong to do even more for God.

Saint Benedict founded only three monasteries –Subiaco, Monte Cassino, and Terracina – but he indicates various modifications of the *Rule* that may have to be made for differing climates,⁵ and so he probably expected it would be adopted elsewhere. In any event, that is what happened. His rule was found to be so moderate and sensible that it spread throughout Italy and into the Frankish Kingdom, England, and Germany. From the close of the eighth century until the beginning of the thirteenth century it was virtually the only form of religious life in Western Europe. Benedictine monks played a prominent role in converting the pagan Anglo-Saxons, Germans, Scandinavians, Slavs, and Magyars, and in renewing the Christian life in lands which had long been converted but where the invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries and later of the ninth and tenth centuries had produced chaos and a breakdown of orderly life.

With the rise of the mendicant orders of friars and of other forms of the religious life from the thirteenth century, the Benedictine Rule ceased to hold a monopoly in this field. But it continued to exist alongside the newer groups and spread wherever Christianity was carried, especially from the time of the great voyages of discovery. It was, however, relatively late in reaching North America. The first Benedictine monastery in the United States, Saint Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, was founded in 1846 as an offshoot of the Bavarian Abbey of Metten. Among Saint Vincent's numerous foundations was Belmont Abbey, established as a dependent priory in 1876 and raised to abbatial rank in 1884.

⁴ Cf. *The Rule of Benedict*, ch. 64, 19: “. . . that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.”

⁵ For instance, adjustments to various “local conditions” are referred to in ch. 40, 5 - 8 and in ch. 48, 7.

The Nature of Benedictine Monasticism today, in general terms

The Benedictine religious family is not an “order” in the strict sense. It is not organized under a supreme superior, who has the authority to dispose of the individual members as he sees fit and to intervene at will in the individual houses throughout the world. Actually, the only common bond among the monasteries is the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. The “order” consists of individual monasteries, each leading its own life according to the *Rule*. But for the sake of supervision and of maintaining good discipline and in the interests of a minimal uniformity of observance, the monasteries are grouped into congregations, based chiefly on geographical location and the circumstances of their origin. Each congregation is presided over by an elected President and his council, and the highest authority reposes in its General Chapter, which meets at specified intervals. But, even so, the congregation does not absorb the member monasteries or encroach upon their own lives. Its main purpose is to detect and uproot abuses that may creep in. All the congregations are further united in a worldwide Confederation of Monks, headed by the Abbot Primate, who resides in Rome at the Abbey of Sant’Anselmo. While the Primate is the first ranking Benedictine in the world, he is not the “general” of an order or its supreme superior. He is the special contact of the Benedictine institute with the Holy See, which may delegate him to carry out specified functions in the interests of the Benedictine family or of a part of it.

And so, while it may seem to be organized like the great centralized orders in the Church, the Benedictine institute essentially consists of individual autonomous monasteries which regulate their own affairs subject to the canon law of the Church and in accord with the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. Each monastery is a particular family with its own private and public life, in no sense dependent on any other monastery or on any other superior than its own Abbot or Prior and, of course, the Vicar of Christ.⁶ Dom David Knowles, in his excellent work, *The Benedictines*, says: “Independence and autonomy, unity and variety, and ever renewed vitality have always been characteristics of Benedictine monasticism.”

This family idea is one of the chief attractions of the Benedictine way of life. It means that the monk joins, not an order, but a particular

⁶ This is another name for the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church

monastic family and that, except in extraordinary circumstances, he will belong to and remain in that family until death. He cannot be assigned to any other monastery, even though for some urgent reason he may be asked to assist another family for a more or less extended period. The monastery he entered as a candidate remains his family for life. It sinks roots in its locality and ordinarily draws most of its recruits from that general area. It carries out its apostolate locally, seeking to make Christ better known and to draw to Him all whom its influence can there reach. While certain monasteries acquire a national or international reputation and their influence extends far beyond their locality, ordinarily the monastery integrates itself into the territory of its immediate vicinity and devotes its efforts primarily to this area. The monastic family is directed by its abbot, who is elected, usually for life, by the community. (A small, newly founded monastery will often be, not an abbey, but a priory, whose superior is a Conventual Prior. This is a temporary expedient and, once the community has grown sufficiently, it will become an abbey.⁷) In general, the abbot's authority is final. He is required to consult the community before deciding the most important questions and his small council before undertaking matters of lesser importance. The canon law of the Church makes the consent of the community or council necessary before the abbot can do certain specified things, such as accepting candidates and spending large sums.

The abbot presides over the family and directs it, but he cannot attend to all details and so he is assisted by officials who are appointed by him and hold office at his good pleasure. The prior, his second-in-command, takes care of the details of the day-to-day life. At need the prior is aided by the subprior, who also acts in the prior's absence. The training of the recruits is the duty of the master of novices. The newly professed monks are under the care of the master of juniors until they have completed their period of religious formation. The cellarer or procurator is in charge of all temporal affairs, in particular of providing food and clothing and other material necessities. The sacristan takes care of the abbey church and all that pertains to the worship of God. In addition to these monastic officials in the strict sense, there will be others, whose functions will be determined by the abbey's special apostolate.

⁷ For instance, what is now known as Belmont Abbey was first established as a Priory in 1876, and was raised to the status of an Abbey (Mary Help of Christians Abbey) in 1884.

The *Rule* specifies that the monks are to devote themselves daily to three activities: solemn public worship, called the “Work of God,”⁸ serious reading, and work. The times for each are to be so arranged that monotony and boredom will be avoided and a happy balance will be established in the interest of physical and mental health.

The Benedictine’s activity of predilection is the Work of God. The community meets in its abbey church several times a day in order to worship God, not merely as individuals, but as a Christian family, presided over by its father. Saint Benedict specified the times and the content of the prayer and his regulations were adhered to until our day. Now however, the Church is permitting individual monasteries to celebrate this office in their vernacular language and to experiment with different forms of this prayer in order to adapt it to changed conditions. At present the monks of Belmont Abbey assemble six times a day: for Vigils, Morning Prayer, Community Mass, Mid-day Prayer, Vespers, and Compline. Each office consists of the reciting or singing of a number of psalms, a hymn, and the reading of Scripture and of other appropriate works. The emphasis is on simplification and on abbreviation instead of the formerly much longer and more complicated structure of the office. The concelebrated Community Mass is the high point of the liturgical observance of each day, not only for the monastic community but also for the students of the college and for many friends who live in the area.⁹

The rest of the monk’s day is divided between serious reading and work, but time is also allowed for necessary recreation and relaxation. In Saint Benedict’s day, the reading consisted almost exclusively of a prayerful study of Scripture and the early ecclesiastical writers, and the work was almost entirely manual labor. But in time a change was introduced. The reading was broadened to include all books of a serious nature, and the work became chiefly the education of youth and the preaching of the Gospel to pagan peoples. Now these two elements of the monk’s day are combined under the term “apostolate,” which denotes whatever pertains to the individual monastery’s occupations. Dom Knowles says: “Among the direct descendants of Saint Benedict, reading and work have in a manner coalesced. They still remain real elements in every true Benedictine life, and their primary influence must always be upon the soul of the individual monk, but their secondary influence has passed far beyond the cloister into the

⁸ In Latin, *Opus Dei*.

⁹ At Belmont Abbey, Daily Mass is celebrated at 5 pm during school semesters and at 11 am between semesters and in summer.

civilization and education of the West.” Very many Benedictine monasteries, especially in the United States and Britain, devote themselves to the education of youth, on the high school, the college, or the seminary level. Others have selected the home or foreign missions or pure scholarship as their field of activity. Some are dedicated to the contemplative life in the narrow sense and have few direct contacts with the outside world. All receive guests and tend to their spiritual needs, especially in the form of private retreats and conferences. Many monks are entirely engaged in parochial work, either at their abbey or in churches entrusted to its care. Others devote themselves to various forms of artistic work or to farming. Some monasteries are shrines or pilgrimage centers and the monks’ time is absorbed in caring for the many visitors.

What is the Special Work of the Benedictines at Belmont Abbey?

It should be evident that there is no specifically Benedictine activity. Each abbey devotes itself to whatever the local or general needs of the Church require. This has been true from the beginning. Saint Benedict himself took care of the youngsters sent to him by their parents from Rome to Subiaco and preached to the neglected souls he found at Monte Cassino.¹⁰ At the end of the sixth century, a group of Roman Benedictines was sent by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Less than a century later, Anglo-Saxon Benedictines were preaching in Frisia and then in the interior of Germany. In the ninth century, Benedictines undertook to spread the faith in Scandinavia; in the tenth century, in Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary. From the eighth century every monastery was required to conduct a school for the educating of the youngsters of the area. From the ninth to the twelfth century the monastic schools were the best in Europe. Dom Knowles has this to say about external activities: “Yet in the *Rule*, if anywhere, the necessity for work is insisted upon, and the great variety of activities in which Benedictines have taken part is in many ways due to their freedom from limitation. As Christians they refuse no work that is religious in its scope. Such work may be of great variety, but it is normally such as can be accomplished within the framework of community life, with attendance at the common prayer. As a result of these conditions, normal Benedictine work has the characteristic that it is in most cases consciously felt to be a community work.”

¹⁰ Cf. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book 2 (“The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict”), ch. 3, 14 and chs. 9 – 35 for an ancient account of these events.

Belmont Abbey has adopted the venerable tradition of Benedictine education. Its principal apostolate is the conducting of Belmont Abbey College, Belmont, North Carolina, and Benedictine College Preparatory School, Richmond, Virginia. But education in the narrow sense is not its only activity. The students of Belmont Abbey College constitute the parish of Belmont Abbey Cathedral.¹¹ The priest-monks celebrate Mass, preach, hear confessions, and are available for consultation and counseling. They involve themselves in campus activities as participants, advisers, or moderators. Some of the monks are engaged in research and publication. Some are assigned to parish work or act as chaplains in the dioceses of Charlotte, Richmond, and Savannah, or in the Veterans' Administration or the Armed Forces. Some monks assist in various parishes of the Charlotte diocese. Hence, while education is the abbey's chief apostolate, it is not its only work.

The Shape of the Benedictine Life

All who join a Benedictine monastery are monks. Some monks receive the priesthood, while others do not. In Saint Benedict's day and for the next few centuries each monastery would have one or two priests, who would tend to the spiritual needs of the community. But gradually it became the practice for all, or almost all, monks to advance to ordination. In the eleventh century, the institute of lay brothers was introduced to attend to the necessary manual labor. The lay brothers were not monks in the strict sense; in fact, they were entirely distinct from the monks. This division of the family into two separate communities has now been abolished; the entire family consists of monks, some of whom are priests or candidates for the priesthood, some of whom do not wish to receive ordination. All make the same vows and follow the same observance; seniority is reckoned from the date of monastic profession without regard for holy orders or their absence.

All recruits are expected to have at least a high school education, on which their religious formation can be based. Ideally, the recruit enters the monastery after his sophomore year in college. After the community has had an opportunity to get to know him, he applies in writing for admission to the community. If the chapter, consisting of all who have made solemn profession, accepts his petition, he is clothed in the habit and entrusted to the master of novices. During his year of trial,

¹¹ Officially designated in 2002 as a Basilica.

the novitiate, the novice is instructed in the religious life in general and the Benedictine *Rule* in particular. He is introduced to the study of Holy Scripture and to the history of the Benedictine Order. He is assigned special duties. And he lives the life along with the rest of the community. He has leisure to reflect and to determine whether this is really his vocation. Periodically, the master of novices reports his progress to the community. When the year of novitiate is drawing to a close, the novice makes his decision. If he feels that this is where God intends him to be, he applies for admission to profession. If the community's verdict is favorable, the abbot designates a suitable day on which the novice makes profession of the religious vows for a period of three years. During these three years he is a junior and is under the care of the master of juniors. His religious formation continues. If he wishes to advance to the priesthood, he enters upon his special philosophical and theological studies. Even if he does not intend to become a priest, he follows courses in Philosophy, Theology, and other branches of study that will contribute to his religious formation. And he takes a more active part in the family life by means of the heavier duties assigned to him. As the juniorate is nearing its end, the junior monk must again reach a decision: either to ratify his triennial vows or to return to the world. If he chooses the former, he makes his solemn profession of vows. This profession is final. The monk is now a permanent member of the community, qualified to take part in the deliberations of the Chapter, that is, of the community meeting to advise the abbot or to deal with other business. If he is to be advanced to the priesthood, he will continue his theological studies. Meanwhile, various duties will be entrusted to him so that he can make his own contribution to the community's apostolate.

Absolutely essential to every form of the religious life are the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These are the great renunciations, whereby, for the sake of a more excellent good, the religious voluntarily gives up certain lawful goods. By the vow of poverty he relinquishes his right to acquire and own property of any sort. Everything that he obtains for his use is given to him by the abbot or, with the abbot's permission by someone outside the community. The community as such will own the property that is necessary for the lodging and support of the members, and for the carrying out of its apostolate, but the individual religious can own nothing. By the vow of chastity, he voluntarily yields his right to marry and to establish a family of his own. His monastic family and the larger family of God's People have replaced the family he might have founded. Without a wife and children of his own he can give himself wholeheartedly and without

distraction to the seeking of intimate union with God and to the service of God's People. By the vow of obedience the religious gives up his right to determine his life. His abbot is the visible representative of Christ in the community and decides in what external activity each monk shall engage. The abbot does not make such decisions arbitrarily or capriciously. The monk himself is consulted and an effort is made to determine what he is best suited for. But the abbot's decision must also consider the larger general good of the community and the needs of the Church, and the monk must prefer this common welfare to his own personal wishes.

All religious make profession of these three essential vows, but the Benedictine mentions only obedience specifically. In addition, he binds himself by two other vows. The vow of stability guarantees the existence of the family. In taking it the monk promises to remain for life in the community in which he made profession. The vow of *conversatio morum* obliges the monk to live the Benedictine form of the cenobitic life in his striving for perfection.¹²

The monastic life is based on the profession of the vows. By them the monk deprives himself of certain goods which could be an obstacle to his total giving of self to God. On the ground thus cleared he must erect the edifice of a deep inner life. The life that he has chosen is especially adapted to this work of construction. He sees Christ in his abbot, in the sick, and in guests. The common life is an especially important help because the monks aid one another by their example, their encouragement, their sympathy, their fraternal love, and their mere closeness. In the celebration of the liturgy the community stands before God several times a day and calls down His blessing on its members and their work. The monk spends part of his day in private prayer and meditation, communing with God in his own soul. His spiritual reading provides ever new inspiration and motivation. Frequent conferences by the abbot and the annual retreat encourage him to take stock of his situation, point out dangers and weaknesses, and enable him to make constant improvement. And in his and the community's apostolate he serves God by ministering directly to his fellowmen and women, seeking, in Saint Benedict's words, "that in all things God may be glorified."¹³

¹² For the three Benedictine vows, see *Rule of Benedict*, ch. 58, 17. *Conversatio morum* or *conversio morum* is an ancient expression for the constant spiritual growth of the individual monk through life in community.

¹³ *Rule of Benedict* 57, 9, quoting the First Letter of Peter, in the Bible (*1 Peter* 4:11).

Conclusion

Today, as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council,¹⁴ the Catholic Church is engaged in a tumultuous process of renewal and adaptation. The Benedictine family, like all other institutes, is sharing in this work. Adaptation refers to external changes necessary because of the new needs and circumstances of our time. More important is renewal, which signifies the interior renovation of the spirit by which the very essence of the religious life may be lived ever more profoundly. The Church is encouraging monks and other religious to seek to understand better the Gospel and the spirit of their respective founders and rules. Necessary are a deepened spiritual insight and life. Adaptation means that certain external characteristics of Benedictine life will be altered or even abolished if they no longer serve their original purpose or have become an obstacle to the living of the true spirit of the Gospel and of the *Rule*. Renewal, however, will mean the reinvigoration of Benedictine life, as the individual monasteries and their monks look more deeply into the Gospel message and Saint Benedict's doctrinal teaching and try to understand and carry them out in a manner that is perhaps nearer to their authentic content than has thus far been realized. Dom Knowles says: "The *Rule* has something of the divine impersonality of the Gospel teaching without limitations and yet intensely individual; nor should this surprise us, for the *Rule* is the Gospel teaching." We must be clear about this: the Benedictine life is not something just for a special elite or for persons who feel called to a life of penance. It is merely the living of the Gospel. The better the Gospel and the *Rule* are understood, the more closely will the monk approach the direct imitation of Christ. Saint Benedict legislated for all who wanted to devote themselves to God in a particular form of life, and he referred to that life as a "school of the Lord's service."¹⁵ It is, again to quote Knowles, "a life of prayer, of meditative reading, and of work, lived in common under one common father, and softened by a spirit of humanity which gives to all the daily relations the help of a natural and a supernatural affection." Its aim is "by a sober use, by friction and assimilation, to establish a kind of equilibrium in which active or intellectual works and interest are themselves a spiritual discipline and become spiritualized, along with all the powers and affections of the soul." "Benedictine monachism"¹⁶ presents an objective form of life, sane, strong, unchanging from year to

¹⁴ The Second Vatican Council took place in Rome from 1962–1965.

¹⁵ *Rule of Benedict*, Prologue, 45.

¹⁶ *Monachism*, an older expression, is equivalent to *monasticism*.

year, a life of work and liturgical prayer which can be seen and heard, lived in conditions which aim at representing all that is best in the basic family life of Christianity, aided by all human courtesies, reverences, and affections. It is . . . an ordered form of ordinary life.”

The Benedictine monk, then, does not exist in order to carry out the Work of God or to teach or to do research or to preach or to farm. He comes to the monastery in order to seek God. He finds God in choir, in the abbot, in the society of his community, and in serving the People of God by engaging in his monastery’s apostolate. He hopes in this way to become a more perfect Christian.



The cedar tree with the motto *Crescat* (Let it grow!) is the Coat of Arms of Belmont Abbey. The story behind the emblem is that Abbot-Bishop Leo Haid came upon one of the brothers about to cut down a small cedar tree in front of the monastery. Abbot Leo said to the brother, “Crescat,” and the tree was left to grow.



The college seal is encircled by the Latin inscription: “The Seal of Belmont Abbey College,” with the date of the founding of the college. The shield is framed by two laurel branches, indicating that it is an educational institution. The letters U I O G D stand for the Latin motto *Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus* (That in all things God be glorified). The figure of the lion and the ten stars represent Leo Haid and the first ten choir monks who came from St. Vincent Archabbey to establish the new Abbey of Mary Help of Christians (the Latin word *leo* = lion).



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may be glorified*

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