Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities

The Benedictine Charism Today, Part I

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 one 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.

Continued in Part II

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