

## Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition [1]

(as edited and being used by Saint John's University)

### Prologue

The origin of monastic schools can be traced to the beginnings of Benedictine life in the sixth century. Monasteries from their founding became places of reading, study and learning because it was imperative for monastics to be educated to read the psalms and practice [lectio divina](#). Over time, and long before universities or colleges in our sense of the term had arisen, monasteries became places of learning for people who came to learn alongside the monastics. Hospitality simply would not allow these people to be turned away and great life was found in this broader monastic and lay engagement in education.

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

### The Benedictine Wisdom Tradition

Benedictine education is most akin to ancient wisdom traditions in that it stresses the education of the whole person rather than the intellect alone. Benedictine education demands rigorous thinking and sets its sights on the transformation of the human heart. It is a deeply personal training (Latin, *ascesis*) for learning *and* wisdom.

The lives of Benedictine monastics are animated by three influences: Christ encountered anew each day in Scripture and the human person, the Rule of Benedict lived in community, and the rich tradition of those who have pursued Christian and monastic holiness in the past. Abundant life is the overarching goal. Benedict states, "What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?" ([RB 73.3](#)). The Rule, saturated with references to Scripture, is intended to show monastics the way to life ([RB Prol. 15-21](#)). For monastics, neither Scripture nor the Rule are in any way static. Both are interpreted through a living *tradition* that stretches to generative ends that are beyond the lifetimes of its practitioners and sometimes even beyond their awareness.

The living tradition of Benedictine monastic life can be seen as organized around a set of core values set forth in the Rule: **love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community**. Individual monastics steep themselves in these values, striving as best they can to embody them as wholeheartedly as possible. Benedict promises that by whole-heartedly following his Rule, his disciples will come to the point where they run the way of God's commands with the inexpressible sweetness of love ([RB Prol. 49](#)), a perfect love that casts out fear ([RB 7.67](#)). This is the transformation of life that is at the heart of Benedictine monastic life.

### The Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine Education

To be sure, a school is a different social and cultural entity from a monastery. But an institution of higher education founded and sponsored by a Benedictine monastery breathes the same air and drinks from the same streams as do the monastics themselves. Therefore the same core values -

**love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community** - find a home in Benedictine colleges and universities. In fact, these values should be seen as hallmarks according to which Benedictine colleges and universities are grounded in the spirit of their founders. Each of these ten hallmarks can come into being in a variety of ways as members of the educational community reckon with their core purpose. Together these hallmarks can shape an overall pattern of life for the entire educational community and renew its deepest vitality and purpose. The Benedictine wisdom tradition is not monolithic but multi-faceted and dynamic. It seeks nothing less than the surprising transformation of individual human hearts in educational communities committed to ever more expansive life.

## **1. Love of Christ and neighbor**

Love is at the heart of Benedictine monastic life. The life of the monastic, 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. Benedict uses Jesus' own words which come from the heart of the Hebrew scriptures to urge monastics to ground their lives in a whole-hearted response to that love and to share it freely with others ([RB 4.1-2](#)).

Benedictine colleges and universities should be unabashed about being grounded in love. We seek tangible ways to celebrate the love of learning and desire for God. We ask all who aspire to teach and lead, serve and study within the institution to make a real commitment to the well-being of others. This commitment can be demonstrated by the dedication of each member of the campus community to pursue what truly enkindles imagination and courage, what nurtures compassion and what gives lasting direction to a life's vocation.

In a Benedictine institution of higher education there should be no place for rivalries, no tolerance for actions that harm or diminish another, no scope for personal development at the expense of others. Even in the darkest times, members of the campus community should be able to seek reconciliation and draw on the help of others to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems.

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

Benedictine monasteries cultivate attentiveness to the multiple ways in which God is present in creation. The primary way for doing this is through the daily rhythm of a monastery's liturgical prayer. Benedict calls this the "Work of God" and directs that nothing is to be preferred to it ([RB 43.3](#)). Daily 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 that is done 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 in the world right now and how God is calling within the individual's own heart. For monastics the daily movement between common liturgical prayer and lectio opens up new space within for the development of compassion, integrity and courage.

Benedictine educational institutions cultivate a similar attentiveness. It is important that the thinking of all members - students, faculty and staff - is shaped by movement between shared engagement with ideas and close personal reading of "texts" (whether written, aural or visual). It is our intent to ground teaching and learning in a commitment to God's presence in all truth and to ensure that connections between what one studies and how one lives are cultivated by all. When important decisions are to be made, we attempt to provide ample time for shared discourse and attentive study, reflection and listening by all.

On a Benedictine campus there is a noticeable rhythm of public prayer and private attention to

the sources of Christian inspiration. We give pride of place to the chapel and invite all to participate in celebrations of the Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours. Classes, meetings and meals often begin with prayer. We seek to provide every member of the campus community with access to retreats and spiritual direction. We strive to ensure that campus art, architecture and landscape foster a spirit of *mindfulness* throughout the institution.

### **3. Stability: commitment to the daily life of this place**

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

It is important that there be a similar *commitment* to real engagement with one another among the faculty, staff, and students of Benedictine educational institutions. While higher education always opens up new horizons, there should be a fundamental commitment to share one's intellectual passions and one's bewilderments and breakthroughs with one another, to place shared effort and understanding above the pursuit of more private individual ends. The collaborative effort to listen and pursue wisdom together - as opposed to listening only long enough to carve out private understanding - makes remarkable growth possible for all.

In a Benedictine institution of higher education we seek to embed the exchange of ideas within the daily life of our members, regardless of their role or position. We strive to ensure that dialogue and debate recognize the shared human standing and diverse understandings of all participants. We put great energy into cultivating strong faculty and staff relationships with students, extending the circle of relationship to family members, and maintaining it with graduates, as well as retired faculty and staff.

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

The aim of life is the same for Benedictines as it is for all Christians - to be transformed in every part of one's life so that God's own image, in which each is created, becomes transparent and palpable. The Benedictine word for this way of life is *conversatio*, the process of letting go in day-to-day life of one's predilections and false securities so the divine life at the core of one's being can become manifest in a trustworthy pattern of living. *Conversatio* is a commitment to a lifelong conversion into the likeness of Christ. This transformation proceeds according to small steps and it is tested in surprising ways over a lifetime. To come to fruition *conversatio* requires stability, discipline, faithfulness and resilience. Along the way it is strengthened by symbols and rituals that each monastery has found useful in supporting its members' journey into newness of life.

Benedictine colleges and universities attempt to call all members of the campus community to move out of their comfort zones for the sake of learning, authenticity and integrity. We are not afraid to cultivate habits of mind and disposition that foster growth in wisdom, but will require years and years to come to fruition. We strive to keep vital curricular and co-curricular programs that challenge the commonplace, foster intellectual and personal breakthroughs, and cultivate the habits of refreshment and personal renewal that nurture 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 the Latin word *audire*, "to listen." When Benedict begins the Rule with the exhortation "Listen," he emphasizes the stance of obedience required of all who seek wisdom. Benedict asks for obedience not only to

the Abbot, but to the other members of the community. Each has something of value to say about true fullness of life. For the monastic, obedience is putting into practice what is learned by listening to the other with the ear of the heart (RB Prol. 1). Centuries of Benedictine experience show that such listening requires the cultivation of silence and an atmosphere of *leisure*.

Teaching and learning are impossible without obedience, without listening to the other with the awareness that no one possesses all truth, or knows everything worth knowing. Everyone in a Benedictine educational institution must learn to listen well in order to grow in wisdom. The necessity of listening to one another places specific demands on each person within the community, from the president and senior professor to the youngest first-year student. It also suggests the advisability of periodic reflection on the quality of human interactions with a specific eye to improving the skills for recognizing and benefiting from the gifts others provide.

The Benedictine institution of higher education should seek to create an atmosphere palpably different from the haste and frenzy that characterize much of contemporary life. It is important to emphasize that our primary goal is to live mindfully and well. The Benedictine school ought to be just that: a *schola*, that is, a place of leisure and attentive listening. It should be a place where Sabbath rest is encouraged and in which growth that cannot be measured is valued because of its inherent worth.

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

*Discipline* is a way of focusing energy and attention on what matters. 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 engage the passion and direct the cares of a person's life.

No learning takes place without *discipline*. Students must sacrifice short-time benefits for long-term goals. Maturity and autonomy involve moving from a discipline imposed from the outside to a self-discipline in which a person sets his or her own goals and determines how to achieve them. In pursuing academic excellence the faculty and staff seek to teach and model the skills for cultivating discipline. In this sense all members of the educational community strive to be zealous (Latin, *studiosus*) for continually growing in the skills and dispositions to know, love and live the truth.

Within a Benedictine institution of higher education it is our intent to shape the classroom, laboratory, and studio - as well programs in athletics, service and leadership - to call forth and support personal discipline on the part of students. We rejoice at growth in knowledge and self-understanding that is the fruit of hard work, initiative and honest assessment.

## **7. Humility: acceptance of the demand for realism and accountability**

*Humility* is Benedict's word for wisdom. He begins his extended description of the twelve degrees of humility with awe at the abiding presence of God and ends with the love that casts out fear (RB 7). Benedictine humility accepts the reality of the day-to-day world - nature, events, other people - and our true place within it. This practical realism demands *honesty* and *accountability* of everyone in a Benedictine house. Each monastic seeks to acknowledge his or her faults and weaknesses. Each strives to recognize their own gifts and the gifts of others with gratitude, seeking to contribute as much as possible to the good of the whole and accepting the care of others.

This down-to-earth ethos should inform the pursuits of students, faculty and staff in Benedictine

educational institutions. We admit that none of us can learn on our own what we most need to know or bring to completion what most needs to be done. It is our intent that individuals discover what they are good at doing and what they need others' help to achieve. Rather than fostering competition for status and eminence, we strive to engage the insights and expertise of a wide variety of persons in our collective purpose. We seek to call to account any community members who diminish the esteem of others.

## **8. Stewardship: respect for the beauty and goodness of creation as a sacrament of God**

At its core the Rule seeks to foster a fundamental reverence toward the creation that God has made. 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 at poverty. Instead, they prize good *stewardship*, the wise and moderate use of material things for the good of all, both present and future. This appreciation of the good use of material things leads to a *sacramental* stance toward all creation and the cultivation of beauty as modes of experiencing *the presence 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 seek to understand the essential interdependence of human community and the natural environment, encouraging the sustainable use of resources and just distribution of the fruits of human labor.

Benedictine colleges and universities also strive to promote the study and practice of the arts, aware of their capacity to bring all to a deeper recognition of the nature of our existence. We seek to promote awareness of contributions - past and present - to the vitality of culture, as well as to the well-being of society and the earth itself. For the sake of future generations we seek to be good stewards of the memory and practice of human creativity and generosity.

## **9. Hospitality: call to openness**

The practice of listening and humility in a Benedictine monastery enables a generous *hospitality* to friends and strangers. Benedict urges that the weaknesses of all should be supported with the greatest *patience* ([RB 72.5](#)). Particular attention is to be given to those who are weak, poor or marginalized because, as Benedict says of the guest, Christ is found especially in them. Every attempt is to be made to extend a gracious and respectful welcome to these persons as the sisters and brothers they truly are.

Hospitality, as understood by Benedict, requires cultivating an openness to being transformed by the other - be it an idea, a person or an experience. Within Benedictine educational institutions, we attempt to cultivate skills for openly and wisely engaging new ideas and perspectives. We strive to foster intercultural awareness and respectful communication between all members of the educational community, seeking to cultivate ways within the curriculum and outside of it to recognize the gifts and talents possessed by persons of various races, cultures, backgrounds and dispositions. New faculty, staff and students should be so welcomed by the campus community that they can, in turn, become eager to welcome others. And special care should be taken to design programs and configure the physical plant to serve persons with special needs.

## **10. Community: call for service to the common good and respect for the individual**

Benedictine monastic *community* is rooted in a particular place in which mutual service, especially in the mundane areas of everyday life, is demanded of everyone with no other reward than the

building up of the community. Yet for Benedictines community also stretches across time and place. There is an awareness of community with the past, with the millennia-old tradition, with past community members and friends of the monastery, with the communion of saints. There is also solidarity with other communities across the world, monastic and non-monastic, Christian and non-Christian, religious and non-religious, that make practical efforts to foster human well-being. Though directly grounded in a particular place, the commitments and aspirations of Benedictine life are catholic and universal, rather than provincial.

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 make available to all 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 diverse experiences of other cultures. We attempt to provide students with an 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.

Benedictine educational institutions seek to recognize the service their members give to promoting human well-being on campus, as well as off. It is our intent to commemorate the example and witness provided in the past, to celebrate human generosity wherever it is found, and to expand care and concern for our members on a regular basis.

### Conclusion

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

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

There is an analogous "good zeal" for a Benedictine educational institution. It results from seeking to cultivate the hallmarks of Benedictine education - **love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community** - with good and considered energy. Each Benedictine college and university will cultivate these hallmarks differently. However to the extent that a campus community keeps renewing its understanding and practice of these hallmarks, it will foster a Benedictine educational culture in keeping with the hopes of the sponsoring monastery, a culture that is strong and resilient enough to offer a superb and distinctive education, one worthy of the very best energy and support.

[1] This statement is a revision of a report by the Committee on Benedictine Intellectual Tradition (June 2005) originally commissioned by the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities. It has been prepared by Dietrich Reinhart, OSB, with the help of Dr. William Cahoy and suggestions for improvement from a group of faculty and staff from the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. This is a work in progress. It is intended to facilitate campus discussion of the proposed hallmarks of Benedictine education in preparation for formal consideration by ABCU presidents and their corresponding prioresses and abbots in June 2006.