



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



A School for the Twenty-first Century

by Father Gregory Mohrman, OSB

[Benedictine schools have always wished to be Benedictine and to impart to their students this sense of being Benedictine. In surroundings where Christianity, Catholicism and even monasticism were more or less understood and accepted, this could be done, and perhaps best done, in a rather low-key way. As it becomes less and less possible to take this understanding and acceptance for granted, it becomes more and more necessary for Benedictine schools to be more explicitly Benedictine. Father Gregory, headmaster from 1995 to 2005, shows how this could be done both within one school and among many schools. Ed.]

I. Introduction - Benedictine Schools Around the World

The past ten years have seen a remarkable growth in the mutual awareness and interaction of Benedictine Schools worldwide. This interchange of information and personnel has done much to raise the consciousness of many to the role which the work of education plays in the Benedictine Confederation, and to the unique contribution which Benedictine communities make in the broader context of Catholic education.

Benedictine Schools have always suffered something of a disadvantage from their counterparts in other religious orders—the very autonomy of Benedictine communities made more difficult the “networking” which came naturally to more centralized religious orders. Despite that, Benedictine Heads of School have met on a regular basis in a number of countries for many years. In the United States, however, a regular meeting of Benedictine educators is a fairly recent event—began under the leadership of St. Mary’s Abbey (Delbarton School) in Morristown, New Jersey, in the mid-1990s.

Around the same time, Worth Abbey, in England, undertook to sponsor a first-ever international meeting of Benedictine Educators (held in the Fall of 1999.) The success of the Worth Conference led to a second gathering in Sao Paulo, Brazil (Fall 2002), with a third Conference planned for the Fall of 2005. At the Worth Conference, it was agreed to hold periodic Congresses for Youth—the first in 2001 in Germany, the second in 2004 in the United States, with a third planned to coincide with World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005. The momentum established by the Worth Conference and the Sao Paulo meeting let the Abbot Primate to establish a permanent International Commission on Benedictine Education, thus recognizing the significant role played by Benedictine Schools in the worldwide Confederation of Benedictine monasteries.

Another “fruit” of the Worth Conference was the establishment of the Cunaco Group—a yearly meeting of Benedictine Heads of School from Chile, Brazil, the United States and the United Kingdom—whose purpose is to form a community of educators who devote several days a year to reflection and discussion on the nature of Benedictine education.

The last ten years have indeed witnessed a remarkable flowering of interest in and exchange of information and experiences about Benedictine education. What has been learned from it all?

First, like their monasteries, Benedictine Schools around the world are amazingly diverse—yet, they all share some very common elements, which are ultimately rooted in



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their common Benedictine heritage. This heritage is enshrined in The Rule of St. Benedict, which serves many of the Schools as a foundational document providing a vision of how the School should live. In that sense, the schools are just like monasteries.

What follows are several main themes that have emerged in these meetings as fundamental to many Benedictine Schools. They can serve as touchstones for any Benedictine School to plan for the future.

II. Evangelization

“Evangelization” can arouse suspicion to American ears, but in the context of the teachings of Pope John Paul II, and in the way it is used in international Benedictine gatherings, it evokes a powerful message—to preach the Gospel, and bring the faith to the young. The Holy Father has made the evangelization of youth one of the main goals of his pontificate—World Youth Day is a prime example—and he has time and again emphasized that evangelization is the central goal of all Catholic education.

This focus on education as a vehicle to bring the hearts of the young to greater faith has not been lost on Benedictine educators, for it resonates deeply with some basic messages in the Rule itself. For, in the end, the whole purpose of the monastic life as Benedict envisioned it is to “seek God” and to “encounter Christ.”

The Pope has said that bringing the hearts of the young to meet Christ, to believe in Him, and to give their lives over to Him, is crucial for the establishment of what he calls “the civilization of love.” Clearly, Benedictine Schools can play a role in this, if they themselves are faithful in bringing Christ to the young people they serve. For Benedictine Schools, the Rule is the crucial “template” by which that encounter is effected. The challenge for all our schools has been, and continues to be: how to translate the vision and principles in the Rule into an effective mode for School life?

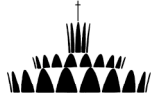
III. “Listen”

“Listen” is the first word of the Rule, and listening is a crucial theme throughout. St. Benedict tells us to listen “with the ears or our heart.” A heartfelt listening is indeed something special! It suggests an attentiveness and total engagement in seeking to understand (at the deepest level) not just *what* the other is saying, but *who* the other is who is speaking.

St. Benedict tells us to listen to many different people: the Abbot is to listen to all his monks, the monks to the Abbot and to one another; all are to listen to the Word of God proclaimed in Scripture, at the liturgy and in *Lectio Divina*; and each person is to listen to that “still small voice” that is the Lord speaking in depths of the heart.

Imagine the quality of a School where such attentive listening went on! Where teachers listened—always in a heartfelt way—to students, students to teachers, students to one another, parents to their children....

Such listening would indeed witness to the world of a whole new way of living—“the civilization of love.”



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IV. Humility

The virtue of humility was supremely important to Benedict, and he devotes his longest chapter in the Rule to it. It is often a misunderstood concept in today's world, and is certainly a counter cultural virtue. Yet, if we are to build the new "civilization of love," then it is vital to cultivate in the young a proper sense of humility.

Latinists will tell you that humility is linked to the work *humus*, meaning "earth." Humility is the virtue of earthliness, of being firmly rooted and grounded. It is the virtue of knowing who and what you are—and who and what you are not.

The Scriptures tell us that the Original Sin consisted of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God, which was animated by the mistaken notion (suggested to them by the serpent) that they could become like gods. At its heart, the Original Sin was rooted in their dissatisfaction at being who they were. And Pride has led us that way ever since.

Humility is the virtue which counteracts a false sense of self, by calling to mind the honest truth about myself. Humility is above all about truth telling. In this it is so very counter cultural, for we see so often in our media, our politics and our social life, nothing but deception. A Benedictine School which fosters humility in all its members would stand in stark contrast to the rest of society.

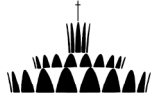
Yet, contrary to popular myth, this humility would not be about cultivating low self-esteem or a negative self-image. For if humility is about the truth, then the real truth about myself includes both strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices, faults and accomplishments. But, as the Christian tradition makes so clear, all one's virtues, talents and gifts are always seen in the light of God's grace—they are manifestations of His love for each of us, and thus not of our own making or choosing. The exemplar of this proper humility is the Blessed Virgin, the highest of all creation, who is exalted not by her own doing, but by God's gift, and who never stops giving the glory to her Lord.

A Benedictine School filled with this spirit of humility would instill in its students and faculty a proper sense of self-worth, a realistic sense of accountability, and a genuine sense of gratitude to God for what he has given.

V. "Excellence"

Excellence is something every good school strives for; what, then, would be unique in a Benedictine School about excellence? For Benedict, there is a total union between the sacred and the profane—the world of the altar and the world of the workshop are interwoven in an intimate sharing of a common spiritual reality. This being the case, then every genuine human endeavor—every work, every hobby and pastime, every recreation, every kind of leisure—contains within it the seeds of holiness. If that is true, then excellence is the natural outcome of any human action, for anything undertaken with such an understanding of its holiness, must be attempted with deliberation, care and energy.

Thus, while Benedictine Schools will strive for excellence (just like everybody else) its meaning, source, and ultimate purpose will be different, for excellence will not be driven by competition, but by contemplation—the awareness of the indwelling



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presence of God in all we see and do. Benedictine Schools will produce results, but with a difference.

Excellence also contains within it the seeds of two important values. To strive for excellence—to push oneself to the limit, whether that be intellectually, artistically, physically, spiritually—necessarily engages one in an activity which cultivates any number of human virtues. For Benedict, such a program of human formation helps bring the individual “along the way” and prepares him in all aspects of life to enter more deeply into the life of grace. But in another way, the striving for excellence is itself a profound spiritual experience. As Saint Irenaeus said, “the Glory of God is man fully alive.” Excellence achieved in any aspect of human life is a reflection of that total excellence, which is the “fully actualized” human person. Such a one embodies directly a manifestation of the glory of God. So, excellence in a Benedictine School, becomes in itself, an encounter with the Divine—as it was with Mary. It becomes a place and a time of revelation, blessing, and faith.

VI. Prayer, *Lectio*, Worship

For a Benedictine School to be centered on a vision of God, present in and among all its members, it must have an active and vibrant spiritual life. Just as prayer and worship lie at the heart of every Benedictine monastery, so too at the heart of every Benedictine School.

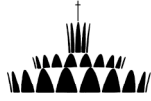
Typically, the central prayer of a Benedictine School is the Eucharist, when the whole community gathers to celebrate the Paschal Mystery and to encounter Christ present in the Sacrament. But more and more, Benedictine Schools are appropriating other forms of Benedictine prayer—notably the Liturgy of the Hours and *Lectio Divina*—into the spiritual life of their students and teachers.

Lectio Divina has become an increasingly important practice in Benedictine Schools, as it enables students and teachers to encounter Christ in His Word, and to learn to experience the Scriptures as a way to hear God speaking to them in the midst of their own experience.

For Benedictine Schools to explore more deeply the rich heritage of prayer and spirituality, which they have in the monastic tradition, is surely a gift they can give to their students. For a student to leave a Benedictine School with a lively sense of the many ways one can encounter God would be a great treasure indeed.

VII. Community Life: Obedience and the School of Charity

Schools and monasteries have a lot in common: they are both collections of diverse and sinful individuals who must learn to live together. If a school genuinely aspires to be Benedictine, then the goal of this living together must be love. Above all else, St. Benedict hoped that the monks in his monasteries would learn how to love one another with the genuine and heartfelt charity, which is inspired by the Gospel and is the fruit of a holy life. A Benedictine School should be no different. And what was clear to St.



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Benedict was that the key to genuine charity in community is obedience: the laying aside of self-will, self-determination, and self-importance, for the sake of the other. Such obedience is demonstrated to one's superiors, one's peers, and even one's subordinates. Mutual obedience, exercised at all levels, creates the climate where real love and compassion can thrive.

For Benedict, obedience was a value for two reasons—the first, practical, was that it ensured good order, and protected the community from mistreatment; the second, far more spiritual, was that it enabled each member of the community to conform his life to that of Christ, by imitating the Lord directly in his obedience. Obedience becomes itself an experience of encounter with Christ.

Thus, in a Benedictine School, mutual obedience, exercised by all, not only promotes good order and fosters genuine Christian charity, but becomes in itself a powerful spiritual experience, giving all members of the School a profound identification with Christ in his Passion, death and Resurrection. Obedience becomes the vehicle for entering deeply into the Paschal Mystery.

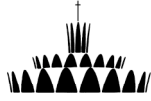
VIII. Contemplation

In the end, all of these themes, and all aspects of Benedictine life, converge into one single goal—the contemplation of God. For a Benedictine School, the sole purpose of every aspect of its program, every segment of its day, every activity, project, or department, must be to encounter Christ. This encounter—in a person, in a text, in nature, in an academic subject, in a competition, in an activity or pastime—will always lead one to see ultimately that everything we do, and everything we are, is rooted in God and returns to God. To know God as the source and end of all things is the goal of the Christian life—it is at the heart of the Benedictine vision, and should be the ultimate purpose of a Benedictine School.

For Benedictine educators to dedicate their lives to foster this awareness in young people is a lofty ambition. And it is often hard to measure its success. But it is ever more clear that the times call for such a commitment, as our youth face a future that is increasingly confusing and antithetical to the Christian vision of a “civilization of love.” To form them in a community which embraces that Christian vision is a great calling, privilege, and responsibility. And men and women around the world are accepting it with enthusiasm and joy.

IX. Conclusion

We have never needed what Benedictine Schools have to offer more than we do now. But the good news is that Benedictine educators have never been in a better position to rise to the challenge. There are more and more Benedictine schools worldwide, and more and more young people attending them. And the schools themselves are increasingly aware of the unique contribution which their Benedictine heritage can make to the establishment of “the civilization of love.” Networks are forming, meetings and gatherings are held, wisdom is shared, and mutual support is offered. The Benedictine



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educational world is waking up, and rising to meet the challenge the new Millennium presents.

It is a great time to be engaged in this holy work.

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