

SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



The Monk as Teacher

by Father Michael Brunner, OSB

[Father Michael, who was appointed to be headmaster from September, 2005 but who, because of Father Gregory's illness, had to take over a few months earlier, draws lessons from Jesus' example in the Gospels and from The Rule of Saint Benedict that apply no less to teachers today. Ed.]

"Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset." RB Prol 45-48

For nearly 1500 years, there has been an unbroken line of Benedictine monk teachers. St. Benedict's Monasteries were schools from the very beginning, but of a sort much different from Priory. They were, as the rule declares, schools for the Lord's service. The master, the teacher was the abbot, who stands in the place of Jesus Christ, the ultimate teacher - the Way, the Truth and the Life. Given the self-sufficient nature of the monasteries in the "Dark Ages", and the complex division of labor this self-sufficiency required, the teaching role of the very busy abbot was delegated to some monks who were suited to the task.

The Lord's service, for which the monastery was a school, is pre-eminently the *opus Dei*, the work of God, which is the Liturgy of the Hours. To do this work adequately requires some knowledge of music and scripture, and thus the ability to read is essential. The Rule asks the monk, when he is not praying the Liturgy of the Hours or doing the necessary manual labor, to spend his time in the prayerful reading of the scriptures, *lectio divina*. And so the first monk teachers taught the unlettered newcomers to the monastery how to read.

The rule clearly shows that young children were among these newcomers. Both rich and poor parents "offered" children to the monastery, often I suppose to ensure the child's survival as well as to boost the chances of the parents' salvation. To participate in the life of the monastery, these children too would need to be able to read. A child who upon reaching the age of majority elected to leave the monastery, would be educated and have a distinct advantage in life in those days when only the very rich could afford tutors.

Monastery schools came into their own thanks to the first Holy Roman Emperor Charles the Great, who recognized the possibilities in those best functioning institutions of the time, and thanks to the intrepid monk from York, England named Alcuin, who made Charles' vision of large scale education actually happen in the monasteries, which were required to have schools, open to even non monks.

Schools, as everyone knows, need books. And once people knew how to read, they wanted something to read (once they had memorized the Bible.) And so in addition to being schools, the monasteries became producers of books, as the lettered monks produced beautiful manuscript copies of not only the Bible but also the works of classical



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literature, which have come down to us only because of this effort. This important work was done in the monastery scriptorium.

Since monasteries were producing books and had students needing something to read and study, it is natural that great libraries came to be, which in turn attracted and stimulated scholarship. Prior to the beginnings of intense urbanization, and the growth of universities which accompanied that phenomenon, monasteries were the great educational institutions of Christendom and monks were the teachers. The tradition of monastic scholarship endured and so did the monastic schools, although on a smaller scale than the universities.

America, of course, had not the benefit of monks and monasteries with schools upon its founding. But our founding fathers, like Charles the Great, recognized the importance of education for the good of society, and especially for the beneficial and effective functioning of a free and democratic republic. In America education became not only the right of a citizen, but a civic duty.

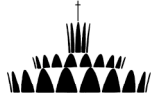
The English Benedictine Congregation has been diligent in this work for hundreds of years in its schools at Ampleforth, Worth, Downside and Ealing Abbeys in England. Towards the middle of the 20th Century, the congregation's reputation and expertise in education resulted in the foundations of Abbeys with schools in America at Washington, DC, Portsmouth, Rhode Island, and of course here in Saint Louis. As it happened, this last school was founded on good soil by intrepid monks from Yorkshire, faithfully following the rule of St. Benedict and in the footsteps of Alcuin.

The Vocation of Teacher

I attended a high school much like Priory, but without the benefit of Benedictine monks, the closest of whom were busy raising sheep some 100 miles away. We did have many diocesan priests as teachers, however, and my classmates and I were severe judges of their pedagogical ability and suitability. We were delighted to learn from George Bernard Shaw's "Man and Superman", in its appendix "Maxims for Revolutionists" the wonderful dictum "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." Since in the turbulent 1960's we fancied ourselves revolutionaries, we often employed this useful phrase in our criticism of teachers, lay as well as religious. Docility is not a particular virtue of teenagers, and some things (like patience with the shortcomings of others) are learned more gradually in the school of hard knocks. Nevertheless, many of these brave men and women had a lasting and profound impact upon us, and no doubt that has been the experience of Priory students with their teachers.

It is indeed a fearsome thing to stand in front of a group of sixteen- year old boys and dare to teach them something. I think the apostles themselves realized this. The Letter of James (3:1-2) soberly states, "*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you realize that we will be judged more strictly, for we all fall short in many respects.*" Fearsome as the job may be, someone has to do it. Saint Benedict, and so his monks, take to heart the words of St. Paul to the Romans: "*Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching;*" Rm 12:6-7

Therefore not all monks are teachers in the monastery school.



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Jesus Christ - The Model Teacher

But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. Jn 8:2

Jesus Christ is King, Priest and Prophet. The Church calls each of these roles a *munus*, an office of service in which the Church shares. Teaching comes with the office of Prophet.

In his life, Jesus modeled the vocation of teacher for us. It was in fact how most of his contemporaries thought of Him, and is the title most often applied to him in the Gospels.

Now someone approached him and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?" Mt 19:16

While the Gospels show Jesus teaching at times in lectures (such as the Sermon on the Mount) his most frequent pedagogical technique was the parable and the simple answering of questions. (As you might guess, one of the easiest ways to induce sleep in teenage boys is to lecture to them.) He was finely attuned to the needs and concerns of his students, showing the utmost compassion at all times, feeding the mind, the soul and the body. He was tireless.

As he came down the mountain from His Transfiguration, he was besieged by a crowd.

"Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I have brought to you my son possessed by a dumb spirit." Mk 9:17

Our departed Brother Ed was fond of a translation of scripture which rendered this verse "I have brought you my son, for he is an idiot." Either way, Jesus' reply is the same:

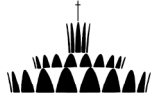
Jesus said in reply, ... Bring your son here." Lk 9:41

As Jesus shows us, teaching is a healing, compassionate art. And so we seek to do likewise, although the sons entrusted to us are far from being idiots or dumb. They are, however, in need of education.

The Gifted and Chosen

Among Jesus' disciples (i.e. students) there were twelve who stood out and whom he trained for leadership. He went to extraordinary lengths with them, and their training was rigorous and sometimes harsh. He brought them into his realm of experience.

Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him,



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"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Mark 4:38

Of course Jesus did care, but he knew that a good teacher must be able to understand and employ the helplessness of ignorance in order to enable others to overcome it, and he knew that a good student also needs to clearly understand his lack of knowledge in order to be motivated to learn. There is a Sufi saying that "the veil of ignorance is easier to pierce than the veil of knowledge."

Although these twelve were exceptional, from all we can tell they did not excel in their studies. They mastered some elements, and when Jesus sent them out to share what they had learned and experienced, they were able to heal and cast out demons and such. But again and again they failed to make all the connections and understand what was happening all around them. Just before the end of their three years of study, they seemingly failed miserably. And yet after their final separation from their Teacher, after graduation as it were, when they went on to do what they were trained for, they were successful beyond their own imagining. They did not know until then what they knew. They were transformed.

And all day long, both at the temple and in their homes, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus. Acts 5: 42

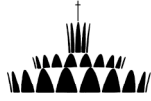
The vocation of teaching is much like this experience of Jesus and his apostles. Exceptional boys come to us to be taught and to learn, but all do not really excel on paper in such a rigorous academic program. But when they graduate into their independent lives, the excellence appears in their economic, family and spiritual lives, and in their contributions to society and the Church.

Guidance from Scripture and the Rule on Teaching . . .

Saint Francis told his friars "Preach the Gospel always, and when necessary use words." No doubt he got this from Saint Benedict and his monks.

"Furthermore, anyone who receives the name of abbot is to lead his disciples by a twofold teaching: he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words, proposing the commandments of the Lord to receptive disciples with words, but demonstrating God's instructions to the stubborn and the dull by a living example. Again, if he teaches his disciples that something is not to be done, then neither must he do it. . . RB 2:11-13

I have always learned much more from individual persons than from books. Certainly the apostles learned what they did from the person of Jesus Christ. Ten years ago when I first appeared at St. Louis Abbey, a student asked me "Why did you come here ?" The answer I gave him I hope will always be true of our school. "Because of the integrity of the monks in living and witnessing to the teaching of Jesus Christ." Others may talk the talk, but may we always be known for doing it. "He who can, does" and therefore also teaches.



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"In his teaching, the abbot should always observe the Apostle's recommendation, in which he says: Use argument, appeal, reproof (2 Tim 4:2). This means he must vary with circumstances, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender as only a father can be. With the undisciplined and restless, he will use firm argument; with the obedient and docile and patient, he will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge him to use reproof and rebuke." RB 2:23-26

Above all, a teacher must be flexible in style and substance. In the 21st century, as information and knowledge expand exponentially, there's no standing still. Continuing education and knowledge of computers, audio-visual technology, etc. are a must. Of course, since the time of the Desert Fathers, a good monk is a master of psychology.

... and The Environment for Teaching

"Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because He will say: 'I was a stranger and you took Me in' (Mt 25:35). And let due honor be shown to all, especially to those "of the household of the faith" (Gal 6:10) and to wayfarers... When the guests have been received, let them be accompanied to prayer, and after that let the Superior, or whom he shall bid, sit down with them. Let the divine law be read to the guest that he may be edified, after which let every kindness be shown him." RB 53:1, 3

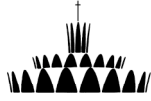
What I hope stands out about monks and teachers at Priory is that we do see each student as Jesus Christ, here with us for six years so that we may foster his growth in wisdom, age and grace. This lofty vision is not always easy to maintain, since on any given day many students do not particularly act like Christ.

"Let all, however, exercise diligent and watchful care over the discipline of children, until the age of fifteen; but even that, within due limits and with discretion." RB 70: 1

Discipline, as any parent knows, is a definite challenge. St Benedict warns us not to rub too hard while polishing a vessel lest we inadvertently break it. The students whom Jesus taught were not always respectful and well behaved; some had their own agendas and others just wanted to make him look bad. It would be unreasonable for monks to expect much different today.

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Mk 10:35

They came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone's opinion. You do not regard a person's status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it lawful to pay the census tax to



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Caesar or not? Should we pay or should we not pay?" Mk 12:14

Red herrings and trick questions have been around for as long as teachers and students have. Hopefully, like Jesus, we face these with good humor and (when possible) a keen wit.

"One who is being instructed in the word should share all good things with his instructor." Gal 6: 6

I have definitely experienced the reality of learning from my students just as much, if not more, than I have taught them. They have grown up in a faster and more aware, interconnected world than I have ever known or experienced. This mutual learning and teaching is what Benedictine obedience is all about, and is essential to what we know as the Priory family. Ultimately God is the only teacher.

"You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers." Mt 23:8b

What the Monk Teaches

It could be mathematics, art, English, Latin or a modern language, history, music or theology. All knowledge of truth and beauty has its source in God. The particular subject doesn't matter. Each is a vehicle for evangelization. Christ, through his Church, seeks to transform culture and the lives within it.

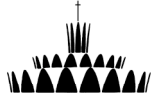
Socrates, no slouch of a teacher himself, admonished, "Know yourself!" Down from those psychological Desert Fathers until now monks have sought "kardiagnosis," the knowledge and transformation of their own hearts. It begins there, with the most basic and deepest knowledge. No one can give what he doesn't have.

What the monk brings to teaching is described by St. Thomas Aquinas, who tried being a monk but settled for being a friar, in the *Summa Theologiae* as: "Contemplari et aliis tradere contemplata", to contemplate and to pass on to others the fruit of one's contemplation. Contemplation is the highest form of prayer. And as one of our students just explained to me last weekend when he informed me that I had to quickly come up with a prayer for a group of Boy Scouts, "It's what monks do." Hopefully our contemplation and prayer add a dimension of depth and connection to the Divine Truth in every subject and in all that we do. This, at least, is our goal.

That God May Be All in All

Having received my B.A. in Sociology in the early 1970's, and fancying myself a revolutionary who could effect significant change in society, I came to realize that those social institutions which were put in place to alleviate poverty were actually self-serving and dependent upon the poor and suffering. Real change would have to come some other way.

Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. This we teach, and to grasp this knowledge is liberating. The monk teacher is working to build the Kingdom Jesus



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inaugurated, in which ultimately *“they shall not teach, each one his fellow citizen and kinsman, saying, 'Know the Lord', for all shall know me, from least to greatest.” Hebrews 8:11 quoting Jeremiah 31.34*

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