

The Rule of Benedict
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If asked to identify the specific teaching of Saint Benedict on the environment, most of his followers would be hard pressed to come up with chapter and verse. Benedict never mentions a specific love for nature, or a concern for ecology, or even acknowledgement of the relationship between the monastic community and nature.

Yet there must be something inherently healthy in a way of life which is known for its ability to live simply and in harmony with nature. Certainly this has not been the case in some times and places but, by and large, the good reputation has been there.

If the key is not in his words, his instructions, one might have to look at the life and conclude that there is some underlying spirit which causes people to act the way they do. First of all, Benedict is not the founder of the monastic tradition. He does not come at the beginning of an innovative period, but at the end of one, as synthesizer and purifier of the tradition. The impulse which first brought people to form communities was wrought by the transition from the ideal of the early Church and the realities of life under persecution. One of the ideals which moved the first monastics in the desert was the teaching of Jesus that “the kingdom is here; the kingdom is now.” They believed in the eschatological nature of life—that everything should move towards the fulfillment of the kingdom. Paul identified Jesus as the new Adam; the one who had opened the gates of paradise and would restore the natural goodness and balance.

These people concluded that if the kingdom is here and now, then someone ought to be acting like it. What would that life be like and how, by beginning to model it, can we bring it closer to fulfillment? Just as today there is the catch-phrase “What would Jesus do?”, perhaps monasticism is founded on “Would this happen in Eden?” It is no accident that so many of the desert stories are about the monastics’ relationships with animals, the earth providing miraculously for their needs, the development of communities that were of one heart. It was to be the place where the ideal relationship of all creation began to live again. The desert was to become the flowing garden of primeval holiness.

Benedict, however, doesn’t really use any parchment theologizing about this. He simply assumes the premise that a harmonious community of people, committed to living a life that is accountable and holy, will strive to do the right thing. He merely describes in his Rule how those people live and function. Right thinking will evoke right practice and right practice will lead to right thinking.

The foundation of their practice is that they are to live in “the school of the Lord’s service.” On the most practical of levels, the Benedictine is committed to stability, professes stability. This place and this people will be my place and my people for my entire life. Stability requires environmental responsibility because I cannot poison my own well. A farmer does not take everything from the land and then just move next door. A family may not exhaust all of its resources and expect more to fall from the sky. A neighborhood cannot dump its waste in its own

streets and not suffer ill effects of body and spirit. A monastery is a tangible place and the monastic is a person of a place.

It is no wonder, then, that Benedictines, especially Cistercians, contributed so much to the technical and engineering aspects of land and water conservation in past centuries. Benedict does lay the foundation for this in his comment in chapter 66:6, “The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities . . . are contained.” His are practical concerns. He also notes in chapter 55:7 that for other items, such as clothing, the community should “use what is available in the vicinity at a reasonable cost.”

Needless to say, modern life has taken us further and further from these goals as we become more and more dependent on others for our energy sources, our food, our material resources. We are trapped in many ways in the modern world’s systems, struggling mightily (or sometimes not even motivated to struggle) to reduce our carbon footprint, eat local foods, get off the grid, reduce our waste, and on and on.

The good news, though, is that we are grappling with the issues. Something in our deepest sense of Benedict’s teaching is still tugging at our consciousness. Where is it? What is it? I would like to submit one possibility—one which, when I first discovered it some years ago, seemed so amazingly obvious and at the same time so subconscious. It is in the one place where Benedict does address the relationship of the monastic with all of creation, his chapters on material goods, chapters 31 to 34.

If you were to press the contemporary Benedictine to find some piece of something ecologically conscious in the Rule, as I suggested in my opening sentences, he or she would most likely go to the line in chapter 31:10 that all things “are to be treated as vessels of the altar” and, in fact, one cannot get a better and more complete piece of advice than that. I would like, however, to go deeper into it and suggest that it is in the layers of it that one finds an even more profound truth than the already challenging and inspiring literal meaning.

First of all, many monastics forget that the admonition about the vessels of the altar was not originally directed towards each individual but towards one individual, the cellarer. This person was the true steward of the goods of the monastery and everyone else was to follow his example. By his faithfulness, it can be suggested, the others would be inspired and would not dare to show any less reverence or they would certainly be embarrassed and accountable. This is usually more effective in human encounters than preaching or punishing as a way of improving behavior.

Benedict gives a whole list of qualities this cellarer is to have, essentially the same as those for the abbot, and taken almost verbatim from Paul’s list of qualities for bishops. The cellarer, then, is an “abbot over things.” By extension, then, each person is to give and receive in the same spirit.

These things are given to be used by the community members, but not randomly. They are given as needed. Those who need less should consume less. Those who need more should receive it in humility and recognize that their weakness is being accommodated. This turns the world’s notion

of consumption upside down. We live in a world that preaches consumption for consumption's sake. If you can have it, then you should. If you can't quite afford it, you should get it anyway and delay the consequences. If you have more, it is a mark of success, strength and even happiness. A current TV commercial has a man going to an electronics store to get a new television. The Greek chorus behind him sings repeatedly, "I want it all, I want it all, I want it all, AND I WANT IT NOW." Is this not perhaps our national anthem?

In the monastery, says Benedict, one should receive not only as there is need, but also with the consideration of the person's ability to use responsibly. The cellarer issues things to those "in whose manner of life he has confidence" (32:1). Things are given, used, given back. This is the essence of communal life and, if we develop the ability to see the whole world as a community, then this is the cycle which is to motivate all life and all use of resources.

As if this were not a powerful enough image, I would like to take it one step further. Probably the most profound and shocking bit of theology occurs when one begins to realize that this chapter on the goods of the monastery has a familiar ring from somewhere else in the Rule. Some years ago, I published an article in which I laid out in parallel columns two pieces of the Rule. Their similarities were unmistakable.

CHAPTER 32: THE TOOLS AND GOODS OF THE MONASTERY

1The goods of the monastery, that is, its tools, clothing or anything else, should be entrusted to brothers whom the abbot appoints and in whose manner of life he has confidence.

2He will, as he sees fit, issue to them the various articles to be cared for and collected after use.

3The abbot will maintain a list of these, so that when the brothers succeed one another in their assigned tasks, he may be aware of what he hands out and what he receives back.

4Whoever fails to keep the things belonging to the monastery clean or treats them carelessly should be reprov'd, 5If he does not amend, let him be subjected to the discipline of the rule.

CHAPTER 4. THE TOOLS FOR GOOD WORKS

5These, then, are the tools of the spiritual craft.

76When we have used them without ceasing day and night and have returned them on judgment day, our wages will be the reward the Lord has promised.

78The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.

Thus, the cosmic wholeness of St. Benedict's sense of the world is summed up in these simple paragraphs. There is no such thing as a small act or a meaningless act in life if one lives in mindfulness. Everything points to a total and universal truth—that all creation is united in the movement towards its ultimate unity and harmony. Every time I pick up a broom or a hammer, every time I run water or turn on an appliance, I am acting out my understanding of the final judgment: that all I have has been given as gift and I must return it both positively maintained and positively used.

As if this were not a clear enough mandate, I would like to return to that lovely line about the vessels of the altar and add even one more layer. This line is not original to Benedict. It is

another one of his pervasive scriptural citations, coming from an obscure line in a minor prophet, Zechariah. Zechariah 14:20-21 announces that “the pots . . . shall be as the libation bowls before the altar. And every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holy to the lord of hosts.” The prophet was making one of the “on that day” prophecies. When the day of the Lord comes, and Jerusalem is restored, everything will be a vessel of the altar. Thus Benedict evokes the eschatological image: everything has become sacred in the already/not yet kingdom, the new Jerusalem/new Eden that the monastery is to symbolize. Every person is a sanctified minister of God, ennobled and empowered to share in the divine mysteries and the divine ministry.

If once every thousand times we used a tool or a natural resource, we would realize the totality of this truth, we would be transformed. If by our example, we could bring others to this, they might be transformed. Yet to develop such mindfulness is always a challenge. Once again, we return to the notion of thinking shaping practice and practice shaping thinking.

We have to continue to ask ourselves hard questions in a time of great complexity. It is no longer reasonable to assume that everything we need will be produced and contained in the monastery, but how do we at least keep reminding ourselves about our dependencies? How do we develop awareness of where things come from and how they are produced? How committed are we to a simple lifestyle? How much can we adjust our expectations, and do we even want to? If we can't do everything, do we at least attempt to do something? If we do have bountiful resources how to we preserve them, reverence them, share them, steward them?

The central question remains, “If the kingdom is here and the kingdom is now, who will act like it? Would this happen in Eden?” If people can't look to those who are supposed to be connected to the spiritual world, those who are supposed to understand the unity of all creation, to whom can they look? We don't have to be perfect, but we have to be trying.

In the Life of St. Benedict, St. Gregory tells a story about Benedict having a vision in which “the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light. “All creation,” Gregory explains, “is bound to appear small to a soul that sees the creator.” This does not merely suggest, however, that contemplation raises one to where the entire world is insignificant in perspective, but that the entire world may be seen and understood as a single entity, a single responsibility, all acts in every single act, and all life in a single light.