

***Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition<sup>1</sup>***  
*From the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities*

**Prologue**

Great apostolic orders founded in the last millennium, like the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits, have distinct “intellectual traditions” that proceed directly from the vision of the founder and a small number of early followers. Along with modern apostolic orders such as the Christian Brothers, Religious of the Sacred Heart and Sisters of Mercy, they also have cogent statements of core values designed to animate wide-scale educational activities. In contrast, Benedictine monasticism, with its much earlier origin in the confluence of monastic movements in the first chaotic centuries of Christianity, east and west, is uncomfortable with intellectual systems. Educational involvement by individual Benedictine monasteries is most often simply an outgrowth of that monastery’s life, a way of providing service to others and at the same time supporting the economic well-being of the monastery. Benedictine education, rather than being based in statements of core values intended for wide application, deals with something that is analogous to the life of monastics themselves – the surprising transformation of individuals in community. As such, Benedictine education is more akin to ancient wisdom traditions with their stress on the whole person rather than the intellect alone and their focus on the deepest, transformative stirrings of the individual human heart.

Benedictines are often at a loss for a compelling set of ideas and core principles to rival those of the apostolic orders. But the experiential focus of Benedictine education and the local improvisation by which it proceeds are every bit as compelling.

Benedictine educational institutions are inspired by the three building blocks that animate the lives of monastics: Scripture encountered in the human heart, the Rule of Benedict lived in community, and awareness of the tradition of those who have pursued the monastic life in past ages. These three building blocks have a single goal: life. Benedict asks, “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). Benedict’s Rule, which is permeated by Scripture, is intended to show monastics the way to life (RB Prol. 15-21). Scripture and the Rule are not static blocks but are interpreted through *tradition*. Benedictine institutions grow out of and thrive as part of a living

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revision of the Report of the Committee on Benedictine Intellectual Tradition (June 2005) commissioned by the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities. It is intended to facilitate discussion of proposed hallmarks of Benedictine education at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University.

tradition. Fidelity to the Benedictine tradition is not so much the transmission of a body of knowledge as it is the handing on of a task. A significant element in this transmission is storytelling. The stories of each generation are handed on to the next. This task is performed by successive generations who write the historical narrative. The Benedictine tradition continues to be molded by the people who are living it, transformed in ways they cannot easily describe and to ends that often escape their awareness.

Because Benedictine monasteries are generally autonomous, each Benedictine educational institution has its own particular character and culture. Yet, because of the inspiration at the core of the Benedictine way of life, Benedictine educational institutions also have a strong sense of connectedness with each other. The unique Benedictine quality of diversity within unity demands that Benedictine colleges and universities be characterized by respect for the gifts of the past and by tolerance, flexibility and a sense that something new is coming to life as each institution and each of its members move into the future. The Benedictine wisdom tradition is not monolithic but dynamic and living. It seeks nothing less than the surprising transformation of individual human hearts in ever-expanding human communities.

### **The Charter: RB 72**

All the hallmarks that characterize a Benedictine educational institution can be found in the Rule of Benedict, chapter 72: The Good Zeal of Monks:

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.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Principles: Ten Hallmarks**

The qualities of life in a Benedictine monastery can be distilled into ten hallmarks that animate a Benedictine educational institution: prayer, obedience, stability, discipline, stewardship, humility, community, hospitality, *conversatio*, and love. These hallmarks cannot easily be organized into a set of principles because, after all, their intent is individual

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<sup>2</sup> Translation from *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (ed. Timothy Fry, OSB, et al.; Colledgeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981) 293, 295.

transformation in communities that are highly localized, rather than conformity to an overarching educational vision replicable apart from those communities. But these hallmarks are not any less important for their open-endedness or the initial local environments in which they take shape.

Each hallmark of Benedictine education is comprised of elements analogous to the three building blocks of Benedictine life: (1) it is manifest in a plurality of ways within the hearts of individual members of the educational community; (2) it shapes an overall pattern of life for the entire educational community; and (3) it is sustained by memories of local exemplars from the past and a sense of joining with them in a witness that transcends time and creates possibilities for future generations.

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

Benedictine monasteries are attentive to multiple ways in which God is present in creation. They have a daily rhythm of liturgical prayer and *lectio divina*, the slow meditative reading of Scriptures and other sacred texts with an eye to their impact on the individual human heart.

In Benedictine educational institutions 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 or aural or visual, whether static or multimedia). Teaching is faith-based with an awareness of God’s presence in all truth. Knowledge is not separated from spirituality. The implications of what one studies on how one is to live are cultivated by all.

On a Benedictine campus there is a rhythm of public prayer and private reckoning with the sources of Christian inspiration. Opportunities for *liturgical worship*, especially Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours, are provided. Reverence for the liturgy is evident through both the regularity and the excellence of its practice. Classes and meetings are begun with prayer. Students, faculty and staff have access to retreats and spiritual direction.

Benedictine educational institutions give pride of place to their chapel and other spaces for prayer, inviting students, faculty and staff as full participants. Architecture and art foster a spirit of *mindfulness* throughout the institution. Decisions are made collectively after time for attentive study and reflection by all members.

### ***2. Obedience: cultivating silence and leisure in order to listen well***

Benedictine life is unthinkable without *obedience*. In the Rule Benedict asks not only obedience to the Abbot, but also “mutual obedience” to the other members of the community.

This mutual obedience is the result of respect and care for the other. The root of obedience is the Latin word *audire*, “to hear.” The first word in the Rule is “Listen,” and *listening* is a necessary skill and attitude for Benedictine wisdom. The complementary skill of the soul, highly valued in Benedictine life, is *silence*. The atmosphere in which silence and listening are developed is that of *leisure*.

Teaching and learning are impossible without obedience. Everyone in a Benedictine educational institution must learn to listen well in order to respond to the demands of an intentional life. The demands of listening to one another place specific demands on each person within the community, from the president to the youngest first-year student.

The Benedictine institution of higher education is not characterized by the haste and frenzy of so much of contemporary life. Productivity is not the goal; living well is. The Benedictine school is just that: a *schola*, that is, a place of leisure. It is a place where Sabbath rest is encouraged and the growth that cannot be measured is valued. These characteristics provide for the cultivation of wisdom.

Benedictine educational institutions provide occasions for reflecting on the quality of human relationships and cultivating the skills for recognizing the gifts provided by others.

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

*Stability* shapes a Benedictine monastery. Its members are committed to seeking God together and do so in daily interactions with one another that stretch throughout a lifetime.

A similar *commitment* is characteristic also of the faculty, staff, and students of Benedictine educational institutions. They are not distracted by a restless search for the novel and surprising, but persevere in seeking true wisdom in a particular place with particular people at a particular time.

The Benedictine institution of higher education recognizes the supreme worth of interactions between members of the academic community, regardless of their role or position. The exchange of ideas is encouraged and care is taken to ensure that dialogue and debate recognize the shared human standing of all participants.

Benedictine educational institutions seek ways to embed the exchange of ideas within the simple daily life of their members. They cultivate strong relationships with graduates, as well as faculty and staff who have retired.

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

Benedictine life is built around a fundamental discipline of prayer, work and relationships that seeks to free the individual to take delight in the presence of God within oneself, the community and the world. Skills for cultivating the discipline of monastic life are taught to new members and cultivated throughout a monastic's entire life.

No learning takes place without *discipline*. Students must sacrifice short-time benefits for long-term goals. Discipline is also a basic component of autonomy; rather than being forced to do something, autonomous persons have the self-discipline to set goals for themselves and to carry them out. The faculty and staff teach and model the skills for cultivating discipline. In this sense all members of the educational community are students, zealous (Latin, *studiosus*) for the truth.

Within a Benedictine institution of higher education, classroom instruction is built around teaching the skills required for engaging and achieving some mastery of the subject matter. Service and leadership programs, sports and the arts are all shaped to call forth and support selflessness, dedication and perseverance on the part of students. And work processes are constructed to engage the initiative and dedication of faculty and staff.

Benedictine educational institutions recognize the achievements of their members and periodically seek to refresh understanding of the skills which foster worthwhile human success.

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

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 *stewardship* is not dire poverty, but a genuine care of all the good things held in common. Wise use of material things is encouraged throughout the Rule, so much so that the Rule of Benedict is often seen today as a manual of good business practices. On a much deeper level, this appreciation of material things has led to a *sacramental* stance toward all creation and the cultivation of *beauty*, as modes of experiencing *the presence of God*.

Throughout many centuries, monasteries have cultivated arts and letters and promoted understanding of the earth and the wise use of its resources. This work has drawn on the combined labors of countless individuals and, taken together, has been a powerful source of cultural grounding for entire civilizations. The search for wisdom in a Benedictine educational context participates in this great saga, cultivating in students, faculty and staff the understanding of the perspectives and practices that make full, worthwhile human lives possible.

Within a Benedictine institution of higher education there is recognition that wisdom is meant to be embodied – in people, things, experiences – and to be passed on and enkindled in others. Education is conducted in such a way as to foster awareness of the ways in which wisdom is gained and shared with others.

Benedictine educational institutions seek ways to promote awareness of contributions, past, present and future, to the vitality of culture and the well-being of society and the earth itself. They are stewards of the memory and practice of human creativity.

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

*Humility* is Benedict's word for wisdom. In his lengthy description of the twelve degrees of humility he begins with awe at the abiding presence of God and ends with the love that casts out fear (RB 7). Benedictine humility is the acceptance of reality in the everyday world around us, evident in events, other people, and ourselves. This practical realism demands *accountability* of everyone in a Benedictine house. Each person acknowledges faults and weaknesses as well as strengths. Each person recognizes with gratitude the gifts of others. Each person contributes as much as possible to the good of the whole.

This ethos spills over into the pursuits of students, faculty and staff. Rather than fostering competition for status and eminence, Benedictine educational institutions expend great energy in engaging the wide involvement of all in their core activities.

Within a Benedictine institution of higher education, individuals discover what they are good at doing and what they need others' help to achieve. Individuals who diminish the esteem of others are called to account for their behavior. Within programs of study, leadership and service, emphasis is paid to the diversity of gifts and skills needed for any worthwhile human undertaking to be completed.

Benedictine educational institutions recognize the achievements proceeding from shared purpose and collaborative activity. They periodically seek to refresh understanding of the skills needed to engage the experience and insights of a wide variety of persons.

#### **7. *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* is demanded of everyone, especially in the mundane areas of everyday life, 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 – and also solidarity with other communities across the world that make practical efforts to foster human well-being. Though directly grounded in a particular place, Benedictine life is catholic and universal, rather than provincial, in its commitments and its aspirations.

Benedictine educational institutions draw on this practical focus on community building and its profound openness to human history and global experience. They make available to all a focus on the nature of responsible living that is enriched by local example, grounded in the wisdom of the past and refreshed by diverse experiences of other cultures.

Within a Benedictine institution of higher education, there are curricular and co-curricular programs that help students make the connection between the local and global, the present and the past. These programs are continually refreshed by the initiatives of students, faculty and staff, alumni and parents.

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

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

The sense of community in a Benedictine monastery enables a generous *hospitality* to friends and strangers, even those who initially appear threatening. The weaknesses of all are supported with the greatest *patience* (RB 72.5). And particular attention is 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 made to extend a gracious and respectful welcome to these sisters and brothers.

This commitment to hospitality and inclusiveness is essential within Benedictine educational institutions. There is an openness to new ideas and new perspectives within the curriculum and within the institution's programs. And faculty, students and staff develop their skills for openly and wisely considering whatever presents itself as novel or unfamiliar.

Within a Benedictine institution of higher education, special efforts are made to foster intercultural awareness and respectful communication between all members of the academic community. Programs are designed and the physical plant is configured to serve persons with special needs.

Benedictine educational institutions seek ways to reach out to persons who are weak, poor or marginalized and to engage them as full members of the academic community. They cultivate ways both within the curriculum and outside of it to expand the realm of discourse beyond smugness and ethnocentrism.

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

The aim of Benedictine life is transformation of the individual monastic into the very image of God. The Benedictine word for this way of life is *conversatio*, the willingness truly to let go of one's predilections and false securities and to be shaped together day after day in community. *Conversatio* is a commitment to an identifiable way of life. It begins with small steps and is tested in surprising ways over a lifetime. It requires faithfulness and resilience to come to fruition. And it is strengthened along the way by symbols and rituals that each monastery has found useful in supporting its members' journey into newness of life.

Benedictine education is formation for life; its aim is transformation – the development of the whole human person. It calls student, faculty and staff to move out of their comfort zones for the sake of authenticity and integrity. It is unafraid of cultivating important habits of mind and disposition that will take years and years to come to fruition in the lives of graduates.

Within a Benedictine institution of higher education curricular and co-curricular programs are designed to scrape away illusions of self-sufficiency, to challenge settling for the commonplace, to foster and affirm intellectual and personal breakthroughs, and to cultivate the habits of refreshment and personal renewal that foster learning over a lifetime.

Benedictine educational institutions demonstrate their commitment to lifelong learning through the kind of professional and personal development opportunities they offer to faculty and staff, the depth and range of speakers and fine arts events that they sponsor, and occasions they provide for the entire campus community to deepen its understanding of particular aspects of their educational mission.

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

Benedict promises that the monastic who follows the way of life set down in the Rule will come to the point where they run the way of God's commands with the inexpressible sweetness of love (RB Prol. \_\_\_\_), a love which casts out fear (RB 7.67). There is no search for Benedictine wisdom without love.

Benedictine education is unabashed about being grounded in love. Respect for the well-being of each person is primary. In Benedictine colleges and universities the interrelationships between administration, faculty, staff, and students are rooted and founded on love.

In a Benedictine institution of higher education there is 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, one can draw on the resources of others to find ways of dealing with seemingly insurmountable problems.

Benedictine higher education asks all who would teach and lead, serve and study within the institution to make a real commitment to the well-being of others. This is demonstrated by the personal dedication of each member to pursue what truly kindles their imagination and courage, what nurtures compassion and gives lasting direction to their vocation in life.

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### **The Method: Questions for Assessment**

There is no easy five-step way to assess these hallmarks that make an institution of higher education characteristically Benedictine. Nonetheless, if a college or university is truly Benedictine, all these qualities will be evident. Each educational institution will cultivate and measure these qualities differently, but to the extent that the institution is mindful of its goals in these areas it will have a Benedictine 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 worthy of the very best energy and support. Thus it would be advantageous for each Benedictine institution of higher education to evaluate every area, including the top administration, faculty, kitchen service and maintenance, student life and campus ministry, in light of these hallmarks.

Here are some sample questions.<sup>3</sup> They are by no means exhaustive and in every case would need to be made specific in order to fit the particular institution. Questions could be developed in each area of the institution for each of the ten hallmarks listed above.

#### *Mission*

1. How are these ten hallmarks integrated with the institution's mission statement?
2. How is the mission statement enflashed throughout the institution?

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<sup>3</sup> These questions have not been revised to foster optimal assessment of the hallmarks presented above. Perhaps that is the next task after evaluating the suitability of the revisions proposed above.

### *Administration*

1. How are these hallmarks evident in the way you run a meeting? In the way you hire and dismiss faculty and staff? In the way you make major or minor decisions?
2. How do students see these hallmarks in your service?
3. How are visitors welcomed? Are these hallmarks evident to them?

### *Faculty*

1. How does your style of teaching demonstrate these ten hallmarks?
2. Where are these hallmarks in your syllabus? Your assignments? Your exams?
3. How are these hallmarks demonstrated in your interaction with students outside the classroom?
4. Do you pray at the beginning of class?
5. Are you an example of commitment to learning and to each class you teach (*stability*)? How can you help your students develop commitment?
6. Do you demand sacrifice from your students (*discipline*)? Do you model such sacrifice in your own ongoing learning and teaching? Do you strive to make your students independent learners? Do you prepare them for the rigors of your field? Do you strive to enable them to achieve a mastery that can be measured?

### *Curriculum* (emphasis on the three building blocks and the hallmarks)

1. What Scripture courses are offered? How many Scripture courses do most students take?
2. Is there a course on the *Rule of Benedict* or the history of monasticism or monastic spirituality?
3. Since Scripture demands interpretation, where do students learn how to read and interpret a text? Is this part of the task of language and literature departments (including English)?
4. In what courses do students develop a historical sense? How do they learn to interpret the past and the present? How do they learn to be open to other cultures?
5. How is a global sense encouraged (*hospitality*)? What courses help students be open to that which is new and strange? Is there a foreign exchange program?
6. What classes help students understand what it means to be and live as a human being (*conversatio*)?
7. How does the curriculum help form the graduates to take on the identity of their profession?
8. How is the curriculum integrated with the life of the institution—liturgy and spirituality, student life, the physical plant?

### *Liturgy and Spirituality: Campus Ministry*

1. What is the availability of sacramental ministry? How do schedules meet the realities of student life?
2. What is the availability of other spiritual resources: Bible study groups, group *lectio*, spiritual direction, devotional prayer?
3. What are the resources for service projects: Hunger Coalition, Meals on Wheels? What service projects introduce the students to our global responsibility?

### *Students*

1. Is commitment to each class demanded of the students (*stability*)? Are they expected to arrive on time and to be not only physically but emotionally and intellectually present for class? Are they prepared for class and do they hand in assignments on time?

2. Are they developing a commitment to learning for its own sake and for the service of others?
3. What programs—in residence halls or otherwise—foster community building?
4. How are students encouraged to share appropriately in the life of the monastic community?

#### *Library*

1. What are the resources for Scripture study?
2. What are the resources for the study of monastic history and spirituality?
3. What biblical and monastic periodicals are available?
4. How does the library encourage students and faculty to be open to a breadth of knowledge—current, classical, experimental?

#### *Food Service*

1. How is respect for all the tools of the institution evident in the kitchen and serving area?
2. How is hospitality shown to everyone who comes?
3. How are students and faculty encouraged to wait on one another?

#### *Maintenance and Grounds*

1. How is the love for beauty and care for the earth shown in your work?
2. How are drives and sidewalks maintained so that hospitality can be shown to all?
3. How are all members of the institution encouraged to recycle and limit their demand on resources?

### **Some Resources**

Le Mée, Katharine. *The Benedictine Gift to Music*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2003. *A book that could function as a sample for a faculty member in a particular discipline who wanted to look at the Benedictine contribution to his or her particular field.*

Lichtman, Maria. *The Teacher's Way: Teaching and the Contemplative Life*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2005. *Teaching with a lectio method.*

Mabillon, Dom Jean. *Treatise on Monastic Studies: 1691*. Trans. John Paul McDonald; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004. *A beginning for the historical research.*

Stewart, Columba, OSB. *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*. Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998. *An excellent treatment of Benedictine principles and values.*