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**BENEDICTINE SCHOOLS, OR SCHOOLS WITH BENEDICTINES —
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?**

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Introduction:

When Fr. Michael suggested that I consider sharing my thoughts on this topic with you, I must admit to have feeling some reluctance, since I really didn't think I had anything to share that would be pertinent to Benedictine priesthood. Yet, my experience over the past 10-15 years has given me some perspective on the evolving nature of Benedictine education (at least at the secondary school level), and I will suggest (at the end of this paper) that those insights might well inform the question of Benedictine pastoral ministry as a whole.

First, a little background about me, and my interest in Benedictine education. I am a monk of Saint Louis Abbey, having entered there from college in 1979. I did my Theological studies here at St. John's, and have many happy memories of my years here, and of the gracious hospitality which the Community showed me. After my ordination, I returned to my monastery and began teaching full-time in our high school. In 1995, I was appointed Headmaster of the School, and served in that capacity for ten years — it was,



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understandably, during that time that the whole question of the nature of Benedictine education became very important to me. In 2005, I retired as Headmaster, and was appointed Prior, Choirmaster, and Novicemaster — posts in which I continue to serve to this day.

It was during my years here at St. John's that the whole question of Benedictine education (and Benedictine pastoral ministry in general) first became a real issue for me. I was in my final year of theology, and Fr. Adelbert de Vogue came to deliver a lecture (I believe it ended up being something about fasting). What particularly challenged me was his vehement opposition to the notion of Benedictines undertaking any form of pastoral ministry (especially schools and parishes). This seemed to undercut everything I had known of Benedictine life, both in my own English Benedictine Congregation monastery and at St. John's.

I recall that I explored this challenge a bit in my final paper for my MDiv. at St. John's, but after that, I really didn't think about it much — I had far too much to 'do' beginning my teaching career and reintegrating myself into my own community.

That all changed when I was appointed Headmaster. The burden of responsibility in heading a school, and the sheer demands (both in time, and in emotional and spiritual energy) made me pause and think long and hard about what I was being asked to do. Specifically, I felt I needed to find a way reconcile the enormous effort being Headmaster



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demanded with what I considered to be my fundamental vocation to be a monk. And this challenge entailed more than just whether I would be able to make it to all the prayer-times — it was about answering the question “How does being a Headmaster reconcile itself with the vision of monastic life in the Rule?”

In my way of thinking, answering that question required that the ‘work’ of running a school (be it as the Headmaster, the Dean of Students, or any other teacher) had to be reconciled with the monastic life as the Rule of Benedict envisions it. What came to me was that the Rule itself could serve as a very powerful blueprint for operating a school — you will note that this idea has also been applied quite successfully to business. My Abbot encouraged me to try and articulate this idea more fully, and I ended up writing an article in which I suggested that various texts from the Rule could serve directly as a guide in various situations in a school — one needed only change the noun ‘Abbot’ to ‘teacher’ and ‘monk’ to ‘student’. So, for instance, I suggested that the Rule’s advice to the Abbot on being fair with his monks worked equally well for teachers and students:

(A teacher) should avoid all favoritism (in the classroom).

(He) is not to love one more than another unless (he) finds someone better in good actions (and obedience). (. . .) Only in this are we distinguished in (God’s) sight: if we are found better than others in good works.... Therefore, the (teacher) is to show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits.



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The (teacher) must always remember what (he) is and remember what (he) is called, aware that more will be expected of one to whom more has been entrusted. (He) must know what a difficult and demanding burden (he) has undertaken: coaxing, reproof and encouraging (students) as appropriate. (He) must accommodate and adapt (himself) to each one's character and intelligence . . .

A particular area where the Rule can inform the life of a school is in discipline; again, passages of the Rule 'translated' into an educational context read like this:

In (his) teaching, the (teacher) 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. (He) should not gloss over the (sins) of those who err, but cut them out while (he) can, as soon as they begin to sprout. . . .



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There ought to be due proportion between the seriousness of a fault and the measure of . . . discipline.

The (Head of School) must exercise the utmost care and concern for wayward (students), because it is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick. Therefore, (he) ought to use every skill of a wise physician and send in senpectae, that is, mature and wise (teachers) who, under the cloak of secrecy, may support the wavering (student), urge (him) to be humble as a way of making satisfaction, and console (him) lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Rather, as the Apostle also says: Let love for him be reaffirmed, and let all pray for him.

(He) should always let “mercy triumph over judgment” so that (he) too may win mercy. (He) must hate faults but love the (students). When (he) must punish them, (he) should use prudence and avoid extremes; otherwise, by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, (he) may break the vessel. (He) is to distrust (his) own frailty and remember ‘not to crush the bruised reed.’ By this we do not mean that (he) should allow faults to flourish, but rather, as we have already said



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*(he) should prune them away with prudence and love as
(he) sees best for each individual. Let him strive to be loved
rather than feared.*

The article I wrote continued in this way, exploring various texts from the Rule and what they might tell us about how a school based on the Rule might look.

At the same time as I was exploring these issues, I was invited by several Benedictine Headmasters from around the country to make a kind of ‘visitation’ of their schools — they wanted me to come and view their schools, not through the eyes of the various accreditation agencies which all of us have come to know (and perhaps dread!), but through the lens of the Rule and Benedictine spirituality. I agreed, and tried to reflect to them what I saw in their schools that seemed to resonate with what I saw in the Rule itself, as well as offer suggestions as to how they might develop in their Benedictine ‘spirit’.

These experiences of visiting other Benedictine schools led me to consider at greater depth the whole question of what makes a school ‘Benedictine’, and I began to ask around among my colleagues to see if other schools were attempting to articulate their Benedictine character in similar ways. It happened that I was led to connect with a series of schools in Santiago, Chile, which were sponsored not by a monastery but by a group of lay people, who had undertaken to live their lives according to the Rule. Perhaps because they had not been founded from an existing monastery (and thus felt all the more the need



to have their schools ‘inspired’ by the Rule), these lay men and women had a particular passion for taking the Rule and applying it in the life of their schools — virtually every aspect of school life had been examined in great detail, and had been integrated into a vision of education grounded in the Rule and Benedictine spirituality.

I was enormously excited (and challenged) by what I found, and my ongoing contact with the Manquehue Schools in Chile has proved to be a powerful driver in my understanding of this whole idea of “Benedictine education”.

At the same time as all this was happening, the Benedictine educational world was coming together — Benedictine heads of school in this country were meeting periodically to share their experiences (the same was happening in other countries as well), and in 1999 the first International Conference on Benedictine Education was held at Worth Abbey in England. Those Conferences have continued (the last one was held in Santiago this past October), and have proved invaluable in exploring at greater depth the various aspects of what makes a school ‘Benedictine’.

Benedictine Schools or Schools with Benedictines?

Which brings me to the title of this paper: “Benedictine Schools, or Schools with Benedictines?” My visiting of various schools over the years, my work with the International Commission on Benedictine Education, and my ongoing exposure to the



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work of the Manquehue Schools in Chile, leads me to draw a distinction between “Benedictine schools” (that is, schools which have intentionally developed a self-understanding which is rooted in the Rule of St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality, leading to an explicit rationale that consistently looks to the Rule of St. Benedict and draws from it principles which impact the concrete operations of the school), and “schools with Benedictines” (that is more-or-less generic Catholic schools, which happen to be sponsored by a Benedictine community, where some component of the Administration and faculty are, in fact, members of the monastic community). In making this distinction, I am not suggesting one kind is necessarily ‘better’ than another; but it seems clear that such a distinction will impact significantly both the character and mission of a school.

I believe that more and more of our schools are examining which kind of school they want to be — in many ways we are little behind some of the other Catholic schools sponsored by religious orders, perhaps because of the characteristic autonomy of each monastic house. We all know of how this process of “formation to mission” has gone on for years in Jesuit, Marianist, Sacred Heart, Christian Brothers, and many other religious institutes.

It seems to me that this phenomenon is the result of two factors: the call of the Vatican Council for religious institutes to return to their fundamental charism and recapture it in their works; and the rapid reduction in numbers which many institutes experienced in the



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years following the Council. For those institutes with schools, this meant that their faculties (once largely composed of religious, now largely made up of lay people) no longer had that “critical mass” of religious who could (by their mere presence in large numbers) ensure that the character of the institute’s charism would be present in the school.

Prior to the mass departures after the Council, one could see large numbers of Catholic schools, each run by its own distinctive religious institute — one school with Jesuits, one with Marianists, one with Sisters of St. Joseph, etc. — and no one thought much about what in the culture of the school was directly due to the influence of the charism of the institute itself. When so many schools lost most of their religious, this was no longer a viable way forward — many institutes then focused on “formation to mission” as a way to preserve the Institute’s ‘mark’ on the school.

Some might view this as a necessary (but somewhat unfortunate) concession to the fact that there are no longer enough religious to operate Catholic schools. But I think it is important to see what has happened as a positive development, which was desirable even if the vocations’ crisis had never happened, because it is a direct fruit of the Council’s mandate for the renewal of religious life — if the religious institutes were serious about recapturing their fundamental charism, that would inevitably have inspired them to find ways to reinvigorate their apostolates with the same charism. The Benedictines were a



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little slower at this, but the past ten years has seen an enormous amount of work in this area, from all around the world.

The Characteristics of a ‘Benedictine’ School:

So, what actually makes a ‘Benedictine’ school? The following are some of the major elements:

I. Evangelization

“Evangelization” can arouse suspicion to American ears, but in the context of the teachings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, 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. Pope John Paul II made the evangelization of youth one of the main goals of his pontificate -- World Youth Day is a prime example -- and he 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.”



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Pope John Paul II 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 called “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 model for School life?

II. Listening

“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.



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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.”

III. Humility

The virtue of humility was supremely important to Benedict, and he devotes his longest chapter in the Rule on it. It is often a misunderstood concept in today’s world, and is certainly a countercultural 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.



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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 countercultural, 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 our culture's mistaken understanding, 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.

IV. "Excellence"



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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 as all good schools do), 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 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, or 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



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spiritual experience. As the ancient theologians 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.

V. Prayer, Lectio, Worship

For a Benedictine school to be centered on a vision of God, present in and among all its members, requires that it 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 act of worship in a Benedictine school is the Eucharist, when the whole community gathers to celebrate the Paschal Mystery and to encounter Christ present in the Blessed 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 (especially in a small group setting) has become an increasingly important practice in Benedictine schools, as it enables students and teachers to encounter Christ in



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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, is a great treasure indeed.

VI. 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. 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.



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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.

VII. 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



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Christian life -- it is at the heart of the Benedictine vision, and should be the ultimate purpose of a Benedictine school.

Implications for Other Forms of Pastoral Activity:

So, finally we turn to the question of how these themes might be used in the context of other pastoral activities which form part of the landscape of Benedictine priesthood. I would suggest that the major themes I have outlined — Evangelization, Listening, Humility, Excellence, Prayer/*lectio*/worship, and Community life — can be applied in any comparable pastoral setting. And while none of them is unique to Benedictine life, as Benedictines we can apply them in a way consistent to our charism by being consistently aware of the how the Rule itself addresses these themes.

The world of Benedictine education has changed dramatically in the past ten years; it has opened up whole new avenues for exploration of how one might infuse the best of what the Rule has to give, in a multitude of contexts. The same holds true, I believe, for other forms of apostolic work in which Benedictines labor — I believe Benedictine communities stand on the threshold of an exciting future!