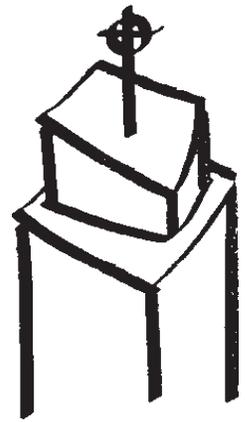


OUR FAMILY



NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

March &
April, 2019

As a monastery of the American Cassinese Congregation of Benedictine monks, St. Bede Abbey celebrates the Solemnity of the Passing of our Holy Father Benedict on March 21, the actual day of his death. We are therefore especially pleased to be able to present the following essay by Eric Hollas, O.S.B., in this March & April issue of Our Family News.

Eric Hollas is a monk of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, and currently serves as the Deputy to the President for Advancement at Saint John's University. He received a PhD at Yale University in medieval studies and has been a member of the theology department at Saint John's. In addition, for nine years he served as the executive director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, and he was instrumental in beginning The Saint John's Bible. He is a member of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and is active as a chaplain in the Western Association of the Order of Malta. He is in the eighth year of writing a weekly blog entitled A Monk's Chronicle, which can be found at www.monkschronicle.wordpress.com.

IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT

BENEDICT



Popular culture slots monks and nuns into the narrow category of people who have opted out of society. They have sequestered themselves in order to pursue lives of prayer and work, and the cloister is the architectural symbol that enforces that isolation.

All the same, those familiar with the *Rule* and *Life* of Saint Benedict as well as its lived tradition know better. Followers of Benedict through the centuries in fact have had plenty of contact with the world, and Benedict's own writings and life provide the authorization.

Readers of the *Rule* need little reminder of the instances of human contact that Benedict allows. Monks go on journeys. Monks receive guests. And in perhaps the most overlooked point of contact with outsiders, monks receive new candidates for the monastery. Such men may in time become monks, but upon entry they bring all sorts of intellectual baggage with them. How then, do monks deal with this? For what should they be alert, and how should monks relate to people who may differ radically in their thinking?

First, I think it's important to realize that Benedict lived in a pluralistic world. By his day Rome was well on the way to becoming a Christian city, but rural Italy still had a long way to go. So it was that Benedict necessarily met all sorts of people, including

Catholic and Arian Christians as well as pagans. Emblematic of those encounters is Gregory the Great's story of Benedict's catechesis of the pagans in the neighborhood of Monte Cassino. In the process he overturned the altars to the local gods, and in their place he set up an oratory in honor of Martin of Tours. The latter was a soldier who became a monk and then a bishop and a missionary. It was no accident that Benedict chose him as a patron.

Benedict also seemed fearless in meeting those whom classical Romans would have disdained or fled. Rather than barricade himself within a cloister-fortress, for example, Benedict went out to meet a Lombard chief who had come to level his monastery. The prospect of a barbarian was frightening enough, but he was likely an Arian Christian as well. None of this seemed to intimidate Benedict, however. So it was that his initiative staved off destruction, at least for a generation.

Yet another instance of Benedict's openness was his reception of a young Goth into the community. The latter was a barbarian and likely a convert from Arianism, and the mere mention of this candidate implies that he was something of a rarity within the community. All the same, it suggests that Benedict had not founded his monastery to be a bastion of either cultural or political Rome. It would be an oasis of Christian life — a place in which people gathered to pursue God. No other objective could take precedence. So it was that the young Goth had to surrender whatever cultural identity he may have brought with him. He had come, like all of his confreres, in the pursuit of a transcendent vision.

That may shed light on yet another concern of Benedict. Many have puzzled over Benedict's cautious attitude toward the acceptance of priests into the monastery. It certainly was not anticlericalism that motivated him, but all the same one wonders what all that was about. And so he asked priests to surrender any expectation of special treatment once they were clothed in the habit. The monastery was every bit Catholic, but it would not be the ecclesiastical world that they were leaving behind.

It's in that context that I've pondered Benedict's own conversion experience, and recently a low-watt light bulb went on in my mind. Benedict had left Nursia to study in Rome, but for some unexplained reason what he found in Rome deeply troubled him. Like most everyone else I've assumed that it was the lax moral code of student life that sent him fleeing into the wilderness. If so, he would not have been the first to do so. But moral laxity might not be the only explanation.

Recently I reread Richard Krautheimer's *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton University Press, 1980). It's an old favorite of mine, but chapter two about the evolution of Roman society struck me as it had not before. In it Krautheimer offers this synopsis of what had happened by the end of the fifth century: Rome had become Christian and the Church had become Roman. In that mutual embrace there were concessions on both sides, but a telling change was the Church's appropriation of classical literature as well as the assumption of growing power on the part of the clergy.

The manuscript scholar Christopher de Hamel provided a second spark to my imagination. In his book *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* (Allen Lane, 2016), de Hamel notes that by the 6th century illuminations show the apostles in the pose and the garb of Roman senators. It's a startling transformation, but it's every bit in line with the newly-acquired power that the priestly order had begun to assume.

Could these changes in the Church have provoked Benedict's flight into the wilderness? Were this the case, once again Benedict would not have been the first to react negatively to this metamorphosis. A

century earlier Saint Jerome awoke from a nightmare in which he had been condemned to eternal punishment for his love of Cicero and the pagan classics. It was a pivotal moment for him, and ultimately he too fled Rome — to Palestine and Bethlehem. There he devoted his remaining years to the study of scripture and the preparation of the Vulgate edition of the Bible.

Quite possibly, then, Jerome's story may have been Benedict's as well. Had Benedict come to Rome to study the early writers of the Church, only to discover that times and tastes had changed? It may explain why he later encouraged his own monks to read Eastern Christian writers but absent is any mention of the Latin classics.

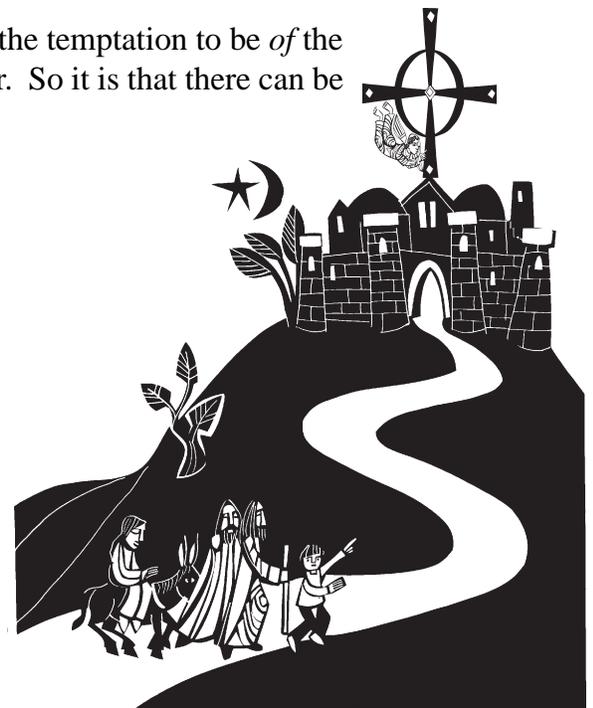
This is a roundabout route to an appreciation of Benedict's caution about interaction with the world. He feared neither the pagan nor Arian barbarian, but once in the monastery such people had to embrace the common search for God. Guests too were received with respect, but the ritual of welcome made clear that life in the guesthouse would not be like life at home. Finally, any candidate for the monastery had to leave unwanted baggage at the door to the cloister. That included any priest who expected a place of honor or power within the monastery. All were brothers, and there could be only one authority — that of the abbot who was their father.

This, it seems to me, provides ample grist for contemporary Benedictine communities and any who would follow in the spirit of the Rule. First, people living under the *Rule of Benedict* need not fear people who believe differently. As Benedict advised, monks should receive all guests as Christ, and that includes those who aren't Christian. So it is that we welcome people into our lives, not because *they* are Christian but because *we* are Christian.

Secondly, even as monks acknowledge the reality of contemporary culture, we also accept the fact that we live by a world-view that is sometimes radically different. It is Christ-centered and Christ-infused. All are created in the image of Christ, and so we believe that all should be treated as Christ.

Finally, though we are certainly *in* the world we must always resist the temptation to be *of* the world. And we need to know where to draw the line in our behavior. So it is that there can be no room for any quest for power over others, and that includes both secular and religious power. Ironically, it is not in the acquisition of power that we gain our lives, but rather in the honest search for God that our lives begin to speak most eloquently.

This is what all who follow in Benedict's spirit have to offer the world. But we offer it as a gift to the Church as well. If the early ascetics fled to the Egyptian desert, both to defy secular authority and to protest the transformation of church authority, then we should not be surprised that Benedict may have done so as well. So it is that Benedict offers the same advice to any and all who would heed his teaching. He echoes what Jesus offered to his disciples and to us: those who lose their lives for his sake will gain them. In the monastery we just happen to believe that that way of life ought to begin now.



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Our Family News is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from
1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

Sunday, March 10, 2019
Sunday, April 14, 2019
Sunday, May 5, 2019



Passage for *Lectio* at the March Meeting

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight.

Psalm 51:1-4b

Passage for *Lectio* at the April Meeting

This is what I shall say to my heart
and thus recover hope:

The favors of the Lord are not all past;
his mercies are not exhausted.
Every morning they are new,
so great is his fidelity.

Good it is to quietly wait
for the saving help of the Lord.

Lamentations 3:21-23.26

Abbey Prayer Schedule

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. The monks' schedule is as follows.

5:45 A.M. Morning Prayer*
7:45 A.M. Conventual Mass**
12:00 Noon Midday Prayer
5:30 P.M. Evening Prayer***
* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.
** on Sunday, 10:00 A.M.
*** on Saturday & Sunday, 5:00 P.M.

