

Benedictine Education Today

Hello, my name is Travis Feezell, and it's my great honor to serve as the Provost at Belmont Abbey College. And to have this opportunity to speak a little bit today about Benedictine education and Benedictine education at Belmont Abbey College.

Let me begin with two quotes both from this book which I'll be referring to quite generously. It's *Saint Benedict and Catholic Education Today, Glory in All Things* by Andre Gushurst-Moore. Beautiful book. Sorry, the first quote actually comes from someone else but someone that he has quoted, and it says this. It comes from Tony Little, a former headmaster at Eton College in England who said this, "It's a sad thing where men once spoke of the Age of Enlightenment. Now we live in the Age of Measurement." Next, a quote from our author page 19. He says, "What can young people expect to experience in this coming century? It may be a time when imagination is needed more than reason or even prudence, however much these faculties will never be superfluous. The Benedictine commitment to listening obedience, conversatio morum, the spiritual transformation of life and stabilitas loci, making a home, brightening the corner in which one finds oneself, and sanctifying the everyday. This presents a valuable way of responding to the challenges of the world, capable of providing both individuals and communities with a life worth living in time and for eternity. The Benedictine gift for bringing the secular order under cultivation, under the tool of ora et labora, the hard-edged ploughshare of the monastic discipline enables the planting of the Gospel in the human heart, to bear fruit in the civility, learning, beauty, and peace. This is what once made the civilization of Europe and may help today in its recovery."

Indeed, both of these quotes speak to an age, a moment, now where education seems to have as its aim a kind of utility. We hear it in the language of many. What's the value of education? How will it help me get a job? Do we even need higher education at all? And in deference to our living in the age of measurement, we indeed look to metrics as opposed to the search for the true, the good, the beautiful in our education. It's a utilitarian education. It's one that seems focused on a very narrow set of content. It's useful; it's education for a career, not an education for a life. And perhaps, we shouldn't be surprised at this, particularly in the realm of higher education now. Twenty-first century higher education where advertised costs seem to have outpaced inflation and often the ability of others to pay for this education. It's no longer it seems a public good. Something for the good of the community, the good of our culture. It's no wonder that we continue to use terms like ROI and earned lifetime income. Our language of something more in education has gone away. But what I find most interesting is the cry from many who want education to be more particularly in this moment of our culture.

On a personal note, I spent the last few years talking to employers, CEOs, organizational leaders asking what they desire most in college graduates. And, to a person, not one has said, "I need a graduate with a specific skill." Instead, what has been said explicitly at times and by implication at others is that notion of a content that is specific skill is no longer priority. In fact, what a specific today will be obsolete tomorrow. New content, new specific skills can be taught. Instead, what they have said and what I would proffer in this conversation today, what is most vital, what is most in-demand, are students. Those that have been produced, the outcomes of education were character, wisdom, generosity, curiosity: students, citizens, someone who can



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work in a community and be directed to some greater good. And I might proffer indeed that this sounds like Benedictine education.

So let us shift then to answering the question. What is Benedictine education? What are the foundational elements of Benedictine education? Let me also return to this beautiful and wonderful book, *Glory in All Things*, and try to summarize at least some of the foundational characteristics. So much of this, I think grounded in the monastic life. And so much of it grounded in the rule of St. Benedict. So these foundations include one, a foundation in the supremacy of Christ. Two, a foundation in the balance of work and prayer. As our author says very specifically, between otium, leisure, and negotium, not leisure. Three, a foundation in the local, the community here at hand. Four, a foundation of reading, not just for the sake of utility to explore content but reading to grow closer to the true, the good, the beautiful, to grow closer to Christ. We'll talk more on this later. And five, a foundation of restoration. Restoration of our community, restoration of the individual, restoration as we come to education. So in this, the aim of Benedictine education seems to me to be to create a local community of learning, of deep reflection, reading, and of work, and of prayer, of balance between that otium and negotium, where the primacy of Christ sits at the heart of all. The aim or the outcome is not this utility that we've been talking about in the sense of career. No, the aim of Benedictine education, it seems, is a meaningful and full life found in community and found in Christ.

So as an expression of this, let us then be reminded of the 10 Hallmarks of Benedictine Colleges and Universities. Perhaps to see these as deep expressions of the foundations. Number one, love. In this, all colleges and universities, educational institutions, welcoming all in personae Christi, God in everyone, to see them and to see in them the light and how we might serve others. Second of these hallmarks: prayer. The language of the community. Three, stability. A commitment to the everyday strengthening of this place, this educational institution, this university. Conversatio morum, a focus on both formation and transformation. The need to grow and learn and become something in this community. Obedience, a commitment to listening to that authority. Discipline, a way, a path to learning, and to freedom. Humility, a knowledge of oneself, one's weaknesses in the eyes of God and in each other in the community. Stewardship, a care of the resources of the community and the wise and directed use of those resources. Hospitality, an embrace of all who come to us. And the last of these hallmarks, community. A call to serve the common good, to strengthen and celebrate this place.

Let me, even for a moment, though, concentrate on one particular hallmark, one that our author points out. But one I think that has been reflective of much of my thinking over the years, conversatio morum. This notion of transformation, because it does, it sits at the heart of the work and the outcomes of Benedictine education. Again, not in the utilitarian sense of moving into a career but transforming the heart and the direction to God through the experiences in this educational community. Something our author calls a crossing over that occurs. So again, a quote from our author, he says, "Conversion of life is growth in love. So the process of learning, of education, is a relational one that arises from this community of persons." And in doing so, in transforming, it seems to me that we are called to mind of Frederick Buechner's oft-quoted



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definition of vocation. Vocation in the greatest sense. That place where a personal hunger or passion, your deep gladness, as Buechner says, meets the world's need.

So placed deep within this educational process also is this notion of Lectio Divina, Divine Reading, and its four steps. Let's examine these just very briefly—the first Lectio. Reading, and here there might be an emphasis on reading the great texts, those that have spanned ages, in their questioning, in their search for truth. Following Lectio, meditatio, a meditation on the text and on its truth. I love what the author says here in this book. He says it is “a chewing upon things.” Oratio, speaking, rhetoric. But only after one has meditated fully on this. And lastly, contemplatio. To contemplate the truth that has been revealed. What has been read and said. And then you see in these four steps from lectio to contemplatio; you see in this in elevation from reading to truth and a kind of sensibility, A moving closer to Christ. A moving closer to the ultimate truth. And in this, we see, as the author says again, "That Benedictine education reveals the sacredness of all things." And with this understanding of purpose, of this move to be transformed, closer to Christ, closer to truth. And with our foundations and hallmarks, and in particular this beautiful process of Lectio Divina.

Let us turn towards Belmont Abbey College as perhaps an exemplar of Benedictine education. I'm going to take a moment and read the very first words of our catalog. And while it may be a bit tedious, I think it expresses in all these things a very intentional way of thinking about Benedictine education here. So first, the vision statement. Belmont Abbey College finds its center in Jesus Christ, and by His light, we grasp the true image and likeness of God that every human is called upon to live out. We strive to renew that likeness in all dimensions of college life through curricular and co-curricular programs of excellence and virtue-based in the liberal arts as practiced in the Catholic and Benedictine intellectual traditions. By excellence and virtue, we mean the skills, attitudes, and stable dispositions of character that make possible the consistent practice of the good throughout the full range of human pursuits, scholarly, professional, and personal. Recognizing that each field has its own standards of excellence, we strive to achieve them, led by St. Benedict's desire that in all things, God may be glorified. As a Benedictine institution, we find this glory especially revealed in the development of the whole person. Guided by the liberal arts, our goal is to be responsible stewards of the true, the beautiful, and the good. We welcome the talents of everyone from any background and tradition who is committed to fostering that development and contributing to the mission of the college. To the members of the Belmont Abbey College community, we offer a community animated by this vision where they may work towards their own full potential.

We then read the mission statement of the institution. Our mission is to educate students in the liberal arts and sciences so that in all things, God may be glorified. And in this endeavor, we are guided by the Catholic intellectual tradition and the Benedictine spirit of prayer and learning. Exemplifying Benedictine hospitality, we welcome a diverse body of students and provide them with an education that will enable them to lead lives of integrity, to succeed professionally, to become responsible citizens, and to be a blessing to themselves and to others. You hear in these words both a richness of the commitment



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to Benedictine education and its foundational elements. Indeed, there's a deep and continued search for the good, the true, and the beautiful.

But let me even be more particular with examples. First, Belmont Abbey College has a unique focus on the traditional liberal arts. The college sees the study of these liberal arts as liberating—study which brings the freedom to the intellect and develops the mind in and of itself. The liberation so we might have a full life. The study of the liberal arts is also to study God, humanity, and nature and to foster exploration of life's most important questions. And in this, we integrate faith and reason. A quote again from the mission statement. "Enabling young men and women to be at once persons of integrity and faith, responsible citizens, and specialists in any given academic discipline."

Second, Belmont Abbey College has at the center of its curriculum the core. Those general education requirements that each student must complete regardless of the choice of major or a particular study. And in this, students are required to take the following. Rhetoric, a foundational course on writing and speaking. Quantitative thinking, a course in mathematics. An investigation into the beautiful order that God has given us in the world. Theology, two courses, one in scripture, the other in theology. Philosophy, two courses, either in political philosophy or courses that investigate the more traditional philosophical questions. History, two courses in Western civilization. Literature, two courses in the classics of Western civilization. Fine arts, a course in theater, art, or music. Natural sciences, two lab sciences, one in biology, the other in physical science or chemistry. Political science, a course on the US constitution. And lastly, social science, a course in economics, criminal justice, sociology, or psychology.

This core is a deep foundation for living a full life. And in these courses students are introduced to great texts, great ideas, great truths. We listen to the authority. And that core provides a shared foundation for our academic community and a shared language. And frankly, is transformational. For in this, in this deep investigation, many students have only encountered these texts and these ideas minimally, and for some, not at all. Transformation, indeed.

Third and lastly, let me also mention the co-curriculum as vital to a Benedictine education. Something that our author makes great note of. And it is no less so at Belmont Abbey College. The co-curriculum provides students great opportunity to grow in leadership and in humility. An opportunity to further strengthen and build community. And as our author states, the co-curriculum has as its emphasis the opportunity for "making something more." He says this, "It is a temporal and physical place apart to bring the true, the good, and the beautiful into being." And clearly, this co-curriculum is part of our emphasis at Belmont Abbey College. A vibrant and thriving sports program of over 35 sports teams. A longstanding and rewarding theater program, a Catholic leadership program. These are only a few of the "spaces apart," as our author says, where Benedictine education lives and develops. In all of this, we want to put great emphasis on true and lasting friendships—those mutual bonds of trust to sustain our community here and beyond.



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I leave you with these words from our author. His conclusion that certainly or truer of Benedictine education, he proclaims, "An education of the mind and the heart, the body, and the soul, will be an integrated vision of who man is and who he is called to be."

Indeed.

Amen.

Thank you.

