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The Boys are Back: Boys State Returns to Saint John's*

Welcome to Saint John's University and Abbey. Though actually I should say, "Welcome back." Saint John's has hosted Boys State numerous times in the past, and we are delighted to be hosting the program again this summer for the first of what we hope will be many years.

There are at least three reasons why Saint John's is a great location for Boys State.

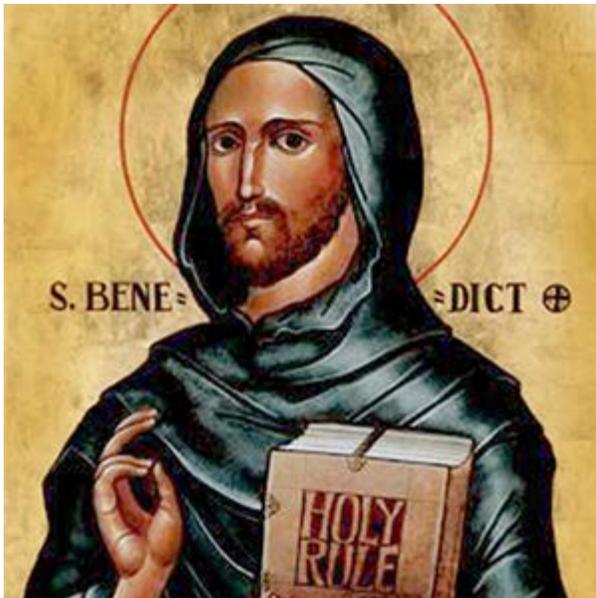
First, as I noted, we have a long history with Boys State. Lots of our students and alumni are also former Boys State participants. I know there is at least one Johnnie alum in the audience as a counselor this week and the Boys State governor from 2012, Zac McFarland, just graduated from Saint John's last month and is off to law school in the fall.

Second, Saint John's has a significant tradition of public service, especially in politics, among our alumni. There are currently several Johnnies serving in the state legislature and many others have done so in the past. Mark Kennedy '79, the current president at the University of North Dakota, was a United States Representative. Eugene McCarthy '35 and David Durenberger '55 were both United States Senators, and McCarthy was a presidential candidate in 1968. More recently Denis McDonough '92 was the White House Chief of Staff for President Obama.

Additionally, we have many Johnnies in public service in other countries. For example, January Makamba '02 was a Member of Parliament in Tanzania for two terms, a Presidential Candidate in the 2016 general elections and currently serves as Minister of Union Affairs and Environment, while Innocent Bash '02 is a Member of Parliament in Tanzania, and Abdul Kulane '13 serves as Deputy Chief of Staff for the President of Somalia.

This is a campus that has nurtured a passion for public service among our students for many generations, and I hope it might do the same for you during your week here.

Finally, there is an important part of our history and ethos that is particularly relevant for your participation in Boys State at this time in our political history. Saint John's was founded by Benedictine monks in 1857, the year before Minnesota became a state. (Our sister school, the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, where the women students live, was founded by women from the Benedictine order.) The Benedictines are a Catholic monastic order of men or women who live in community in a monastery. We still have a thriving men's monastery at Saint John's, and you will see monks around campus during your stay here. The Benedictine tradition was founded by St. Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century, over 1500 years ago. Much of the Benedictine tradition is based on a little book which has come to be called *The Rule of St. Benedict*. It was written by Benedict to help his fellow monks live out their monastic vocations well and to strengthen their monastic communities.

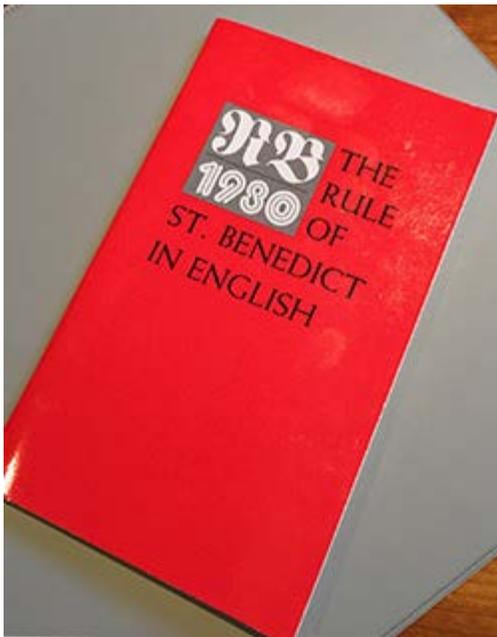


Now you might legitimately be asking, “What in the world could a 17-year-old 21st Century Gen Z-er learn from a 6th Century Catholic monk?” Well, first, any tradition that has survived and thrived in the world for over 1500 years is certainly worthy of some respect. Second, Benedict was very wise about human beings and how they might best live together in community. His wisdom might help our communities today.

The very first word in *The Rule* is, “Listen.” Benedict urges his brothers to, “Listen with the ear of their heart.” By this counsel he means to listen generously, to listen to each other as you would like to be listened to, and to consider how you are likely to be heard by your confreres or your intended audience.

This advice is especially timely for us, living as we are in a particularly contentious political time where we seem to have lost the ability to listen to each other, especially those with whom we might disagree; where polite and civil disagreement about politics or policy seems challenging at best and impossible at worst. This can be especially disconcerting for many young people who

are just coming of age politically and might be wondering if this tense, angry, and extreme political tone is simply how politics must be practiced. (As an aside from someone older, it does not have to be this way and has not always been so.)



As you consider what role you might play in civic life in the future and how to best approach this week of learning and engagement with your peers from across the state, I would simply urge you to take Benedict's advice to heart, this week and beyond. Listen. Practice that art and skill. Listen hard and listen well. Understand what others are saying to you and why. You will be a better person for it, a better friend, a better professional and a better leader in your communities.

I should note with hope and optimism that those in this auditorium surely cannot be as pessimistic about politics, policy and civic life as the most extreme political observers currently are, or you would not have decided to devote a week of your summer to Boys State. Thank you for making that decision and giving us older folks a reason for hope in the future leadership and civic life in our state and nation.

Finally, I would be remiss in my presidential duties if, as I wish you well for your Boys State week, I did not encourage you to envision yourself as a student at Saint John's University a year from now. We would love to have each and every one of you become a Johnnie. If the 300+ of you all decided by the end of your week that you will all come back to be part of the Class of 2022, it would make the job of our admissions staff much easier next year!

Seriously, please put Saint John's on your list of possible colleges and come back and visit us during the school year when classes are in session and students are on campus.

Best wishes for a great week.

*This welcome was given to the Boys State delegates who were on the SJU campus from June 11th-17th.

Boys State and Girls State are summer leadership and citizenship programs sponsored by The American Legion and the American Legion Auxiliary for high school juniors. Boys and Girls are

usually nominated by their high school during their junior year. Boys and Girls State programs both began in 1937 and are held in each of the U.S. states, usually on a college campus, within that state. (From Wikipedia.)

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | June 26th, 2017 | Categories: [Uncategorized](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).