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## The second Benedict option

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## Quad 136

### The Second Benedict Option

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

## The Second Benedict Option



St. Benedict is trending. Kind of hard to believe that in our 140-character social media world a 6th century monk would be of much interest. But, maybe if you survive 1600 years, you inevitably come back into fashion, and now seems to be one of those moments for St. Benedict.

My first clue was back on Valentine's Day when *New York Times* columnist David Brooks made a reference to St. Benedict. In a column entitled "How Should One Resist the Trump Administration?" Brooks **wrote**:

*It could be that the primary threat*

*[from the Trump Administration] is stagnation and corruption. In this scenario, the Trump administration doesn't create an authoritarian regime, but national politics turns into a vicious muck of tweet and countertweet, scandal and pseudoscandal, partisan attack and counterattack.*

*If that's the threat, St. Benedict is the model for resistance. Benedict was a young Umbrian man who was sent to study in Rome after the fall of the empire. Disgusted by the corruption all around, he fled to the wilderness and founded monastic communities across Europe. If Rome was going to sink into barbarism, then Benedictines could lead healthy lives and construct new forms of community far from the decaying center.*

*If we are in a Benedict moment, the smart thing to do is to ignore the degradation in Washington and make your contribution at the state and local levels. Karlyn Bowman of the American Enterprise Institute notices that some of the interns in her think tank are thinking along Benedictine lines. In years past they were angling for career tracks that would land them in Washington, but now they are angling to go back to the places they came from.*

I found Brooks' reference a little surprising. Among the *New York Times* readers, I suspect that knowledge of Catholicism, even among its many Catholic readers, doesn't typically extend to 6th century Italian saints or Benedictine monastic communities. Despite being less than 500 years old, the Jesuits tend to get **better press** and **draw the attention** of Hollywood.

But Benedict is hot, in part due to new book by Rod Dreher called *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* that came out this month. I have not read the book, but Brooks, a friend of Dreher, offers a mini-review and commentary in an eponymous column, "**The Benedict Option.**" Brooks calls the book "the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade."

Dreher offers a critique of the modern Western culture and his proposed response, primarily but not exclusively for Christians. Brooks describes Dreher's thesis as follows:

*Rod says it's futile to keep fighting the culture war, because it's over. Instead believers should follow the model of the sixth-century monk St. Benedict, who set up separate religious communities as the Roman empire collapsed around them.*

*The heroes of Rod's book are almost all monks. Christians should withdraw inward to deepen, purify and preserve their faith, he says. They should secede from mainstream culture, pull their children from public school, put down roots in separate communities.*

Brooks' initial "Benedictine possibility" was made in response to our polarized political life, while Dreher's *Benedict Option*



focuses more broadly on our cultural life. Both suggest that St. Benedict would encourage those who are disaffected to retreat from political life or the cultural world into small, self-sustaining communities.

I do think this may be a possible Benedictine moment in our culture, but not for the reasons Brooks and Dreher

hypothesize.

The Benedictine option can be critiqued from a variety of perspectives. First, and probably most obvious, few people can or want to set themselves apart from their society, culture, families and homes. Even the monks that are my heroes are not interested in that. The monks of Saint John's Abbey are among the most worldly men I know and have been deeply immersed in the world throughout their long history, even as they have chosen to live in community in central Minnesota. I wonder if Benedict himself, with his emphasis on work in addition to prayer, would encourage such segregation in the modern, post-agricultural era.

Second, setting a community apart for the sake of some utopian dream has a long and failed history. From New Lanark in Scotland to Brook Farm in Massachusetts to New Harmony in Indiana, history is filled with communities brought down by the all-too-human frailties of their residents. Even my favorite Benedictine monks would acknowledge that every human weakness is found within monastic walls. Escaping human society is well-nigh impossible unless you are the fictional Robinson Crusoe.

These brief critiques and others, however, should not suggest that St. Benedict does not have much to offer modern society, both in response to Brooks' political concerns or Dreher's cultural ones. Over its 1600 year history, Benedictine teachings have been adapted to changing times and applied more widely than to monastic life, a point that does not seem to be acknowledged by Brooks or Dreher.

I would suggest that there is a Second Benedictine option that might be a more practical and powerful response to the challenges we face. The Second Benedictine option is simply (or not so simply) to live a Benedictine life within the many communities – personal, professional,

religious, geographic – we all occupy.

The Rule of St. Benedict does not offer a definitive description of a Benedictine life but offers guidance for how to live well within any community. Benedictine Values are described on the [website](#) of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, with textual references to *The Rule*:

### *Benedictine Values*

#### *Awareness of God*

*To look for God not in the abstract but in the ordinary events of every day.*

*“We believe that the divine presence is everywhere.” R. B. 19*

#### *Community Living*

*To become who we are by our relationships with others.*

*“Let all things be common to all.” R. B. 33*

#### *Dignity of Work*

*To appreciate the dignity of work in God's creation.*

*“...they live by the labor of their hands.” R. B. 48*

#### *Hospitality*

*To offer warmth, acceptance, and joy in welcoming others.*

*“Let all...be received as Christ.” R. B. 53*

#### *Justice*

*To work toward a just order in our immediate environment and in the larger society.*

*“...that in all things God may be glorified” R. B. 57*

#### *Listening*

*To hear keenly and sensitively the voices of persons and all created beings.*

*“Listen ... with the ear of your heart.” R. B. Prologue*

### *Moderation*

*To be content with living simply and finding balance in work, prayer, and leisure.*

*“All things are to be done with moderation.” R. B. 48*

### *Peace*

*To strive for peace on all levels: with self, others, and God. R. B. Prologue*

### *Respect for Persons*

*To respect each person regardless of class, background, or professional skill.*

*“No one is to pursue what is judged best for oneself, but instead, what is better for someone else.” R. B. 72*

### *Stability*

*To cultivate rootedness and a shared sense of mission.*

*“To stand firm in one’s promises.” R. B. 58*

### *Stewardship*

*To appreciate and to care lovingly for all the goods of this place.*

*“Regard all utensils as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar.” R. B. 31*

Community living, hospitality, listening and respect for others seem particularly germane to the challenges raised by Brooks and Dreher, and all these values can be lived out in virtually any community. The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University offer one example of how Benedictine values can shape a community, both during a four-year undergraduate experience and for a lifetime afterwards.

While our community is certainly not free from the foibles, weaknesses and sins inherent in any human endeavor, we do offer a realistic, lived example of Benedictine wisdom. I’d welcome

David Brooks or Rod Dreher to come visit us (I'll cover the hospitality costs) to see how a Second Benedictine Option might provide the practical basis for a more civil political and cultural life for all of us.

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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | March 21st, 2017 | Categories: [History](#) | [4 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](#).