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The secret ingredient: Benedictine Stability

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Quad 136

The Secret Ingredient: Benedictine Stability

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The Secret Ingredient: Benedictine Stability

Virtually every Johnnie has had the experience. At work or at play, you describe something about your time at SJU or something you did with a Bennie friend or how some Johnnie helped you out (or vice versa), and your non-Johnnie listener will say, “What is it with you Johnnies and Bennies? I went to X (some other good liberal arts school), and I care about my alma mater, but you guys LOVE SJU and stay so tight even after you graduate. Is there something in the water up there?”

That is a question that I have given a lot of thought to, both before I came back to my alma mater to work and certainly in the last five years as I have become even more deeply engaged with our amazing alumni community.

Every Johnnie has his own story and for each of us there is likely a constellation of factors that bind us to each other and to this place, but the more I have considered this, the more important I think the Benedictine value of stability is to binding so many of us to this place.

Among the things that tie alumni to their alma maters are the relationships they have with those they met and knew as students. Obviously their personal friendships with classmates are most important, but relationships with faculty, staff and work supervisors are central as well. When alumni return to campus for reunions or other visits, they often seek out the adults who played a formative role in their undergraduate experience, particularly faculty. As the years pass, however, ties to the campus naturally



Fr. Mark Thamert '73, SOT '79, OSB

weaken as faculty and staff move to new jobs or retire or die, and visits become more about nostalgia rather than reconnecting to a living person who both knew and knows the alumni.

At Saint John's there is an additional special aspect to alumni ties that cannot be overstated: monks. All students have some interaction with members of the monastic community during their four years, either as a faculty resident, faculty member, work supervisor or in extra-curricular activities like campus ministry. This means that when returning to campus after graduation, alumni often seek out members of the monastic community to reconnect. What makes these relationships special and unique is the stability of monastic life. Monks at Saint John's (and other Benedictine monasteries) take a vow of stability which commits them to this community and this place for the rest of their lives. They often work or study in other places, but they always come back to Collegeville. This is where they will retire, this is where they will die, and this is where they will be buried.

So when alumni come back to Saint John's, there is almost always someone on campus who knew them—even if only in passing, but often more deeply. This link can connect a Johnnie to Saint John's for a longer time than most educational institutions, often a whole lifetime. In close, lifelong friendships with the monastic community, a Johnnie is known from his youth through middle age and beyond, with all the life changes, disappointments, challenges and joys. And the alum often knows the monk through his working life, into retirement, through aging and even unto death.

All of this has been on my mind recently as the community at Saint John's has witnessed the very public dying of a beloved monk and faculty member. Fr. Mark Thamert, OSB, '73 and SOT '79 died of stomach cancer on April 29th and was buried in the Abbey cemetery last Saturday.

He had been sick for three years and decided to stop all treatments earlier this year.

While he was no longer teaching in the classroom, he did not stop living in the community. He met with colleagues, visited with alumni and friends, and gave public presentations, including a powerful *Lunch and Learn* for the **Benedictine Institute** where he offered his **insights** on **dying**.

He shared some of his favorite poetry and observed, “All these poems are now different to me. They mean something different as I approach God, as I approach the threshold.”

He found a similar experience in his relationships:

This last chamber, this last room I've entered, was every bit as much a mystery as dying itself. You have no idea what these last days, these last weeks are going to be – and they've been amazing. My relationships have all changed. Almost all of them have intensified, and have become beautiful beyond all expectation.

And he asked a favor of us as his end neared:

I want you guys to be the send-off party for me. I can picture it like a football stadium or something running through and handing me off to the Divine.

Fr. Mark's students, some of whom were at the lunch and many others who came back to visit him in his last months, would never have been able to share in the beauty, grace and courage of his dying without the Benedictine vow of stability that kept him in this place, where his relationships could be sustained and nurtured over decades.

These rare relationships with members of our Benedictine community are among the secret ingredients that make Saint John's such a special place.

I encourage alumni to take advantage of this stability. If you know a monk in the health center or living in the monastery, do not hesitate to drop in to visit. They may or may not remember you,

but you were a part of their lives and they are a part of yours.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | May 12th, 2017 | Categories: [Alumni](#) | [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](#).