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Review of Benedictine Options: Learning To Live from the Sons and Daughters of Saints Benedict and Scholastica

William Droel
National Center for the Laity

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***Benedictine Options: Learning To Live from the Sons and Daughters of Saints Benedict and Scholastica.* Patrick Henry. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021. 159 pp., \$19.95, ISBN 978081-466681430**

William Droel
National Center for the Laity
Chicago, IL USA

Rod Dreher is a 50ish-year old conservative writer from Louisiana. His 2017 book, *The Benedict Option* (Sentinel Press) was widely reviewed and debated in magazines and journals. Dreher says that our secular culture is “growing cold, dead and dark.” Therefore, serious Christians should withdraw from mainstream culture as much as possible and form “intentional communities” to support one another. Dreher’s critique is pitched in particular to people alarmed over gender issues and those who decide for home schooling. Dreher traces his conclusions to Benedict of Nursia/Norcia in Umbria (480-547), who is a saint in Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Anglicanism.

In *Benedictine Options* Patrick Henry, author of several other books, responds to Dreher—not as in a ten-round prize fight, but in an insightful meditation informed by St. Benedict and his twin St. Scholastica (480-543), by St. Benedict’s Rule of 516 and particularly by those in the United States who live in a Benedictine monastery or who are inspired by Benedictine spirituality.

My college students and many others mistakenly equate monks in monasteries with hermits in caves or cloisters. Benedictines “are not forsaking the world but are for the sake of the world,” Henry explains. Thus Dreher misappropriates the Benedictine label to argue for withdrawal. “The monastery is not a fortress, but a school for the Lord’s service,” Henry continues. “Benedictine options aren’t locked in a box. They keep popping out of it.” Further, a community is not a prior construct or an abstract theory. It is by-product of living in common. “Real community is a gift,” Henry says.

Benedictine Options stands in contrast to sectarian Christianity, notably in a chapter on common heresies. Within the chapter, Henry elucidates outward-reaching hospitality, a key characteristic of Benedictines that contrasts with the culture despisers. He does so with insights into the virtue of justice, with help from Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and his novel *Crime and Punishment*.

In the novel Katerina is a widow by only a few hours when she is evicted. Yet she is convinced that despite the injustice all around, including the death of her husband and the eviction, justice can be found, that the world makes sense. “It is sad beyond measure,” Henry writes, that Katerina “does not find her way to a monastery. What she really seeks is not justice but hospitality.” Justice would require that she plead her case but “she is in no condition to do that.” Benedictines understand that hospitality, not necessarily charity, must precede justice. At their core Benedictines are not exclusionary. They simply receive people as though they are Christ.

Henry’s point reminds me of a lawyer friend, a foremost expert on evictions. Over many years he has constructed legal arguments on behalf of clients victimized by predatory banks. Yet he knows that many cases are nearly hopeless. The bank hires well-connected lawyers and because

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the case drags on for months and years. Consequently, my friend's clients likely become incapacitated or die before justice is rendered. And so, prior to any legal action my friend takes in his clients. He practices hospitality and then the law.

Henry repeatedly demonstrates that Benedictines are not interested in a pure and faithful remnant. They are not afraid of so-called corrupting influences. It is self-defeating to feel that one has to have their act together before they can get involved. Benedictines, he writes, come to know who they are only through extending themselves in prayer, advocacy and especially hospitality. They are self-assured, but never a finished product.

Two chapters in *Benedictine Options* support the outward-reaching theme by detailing how and why Benedictines are consciously ecumenical and interreligious. For example, Henry recounts his participation in a dialogue process between Catholic monks and Buddhist monks.

Henry's thought-provoking book does not really need Dreher as its foil. Henry nonetheless gives his verdict near the conclusion of *Benedictine Options*: Dreher's book "isn't a genuine Benedictine option at all."

Benedictines presumably know their tradition. Nonetheless this book--with its references to poems, novels, music theory and popular culture--will benefit their interior and exterior growth. A general reader will also find it worthwhile, even someone who cares little about Benedictine tradition. This is the type of book that can profitably be opened randomly to nearly any page.

St. John XXIII (1881-1963) warned us against "prophets of gloom." Henry invites us to learn from "the children of light," his Benedictine friends.

William Droel is a board member of National Center for the Laity (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629).