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Benedictine Life and Care for the Environment

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In this presentation I want to show in simple terms how monastic life provides spiritual practices for our community to live the Gospel in a way that is responsive and respectful to the environment. Consequently, I organize my presentation around four words or phrases from the Rule of Benedict (RB). The first one is the community of goods. The second is stability. The third is frugality, and the fourth is a contemplative stance. These four words or phrases provide the frame for this presentation and are central to spirituality of the Rule of Saint Benedict.

Keywords: Rule of St. Benedict, Care for Environment, Community of Goods, Stability, Frugality, Contemplative Stance

Thank you all for being here this afternoon on a beautiful sunny, warm afternoon. I wish to begin my remarks with a brief tribute to my beloved confrere Father Rene McGraw, who was critical to the formation of the Peace Studies program. Father Rene died on November 20, 2022. He was one of the founding members and inspiration for the Peace Studies program here at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. Of course, many faculty colleagues and students strongly supported that initiative and made it possible.

René’s interest in the resolution of conflict was transformed by a one-year sabbatical at Harvard University in the late 70s and early 80s under Professor Gene Sharp. Sharp had looked backwards to see where nonviolence and nonviolent strategies had been successful in pushing back against and resisting oppression. We need to remember that the 70s and early 80s were a time when the Soviet Union and United States had a combined 50,000 nuclear weapons and both sides were in a launch-on-warning position in eastern and western Europe. There were so many nuclear warheads that the people who targeted them didn’t have any place to use all of them.

On the micro and more immediate level, René wanted us as communities to be aware of the practice of nonviolence in our everyday lives. He wanted the practice to be integrated into the way we live with each other as human beings, as colleagues, spouses and family members, in our businesses, in the way we relate to the creation itself. How does one go about understanding people and situations well enough to consciously choose a nonviolent response? How does one develop the courage, the internal strength to withstand and speak out and resist evil and to resist forces in the culture that wanted to take away or diminish our agency?

René cultivated a profound skepticism of easy solutions, of grand promises. I don’t think this stance was just for the sake of being skeptical. I think it was René’s realization of the many ways that human beings can find to go off the path and just not understand the significance of things. In our monastic community, René would often hear the challenge -- this is probably my unique contribution to the understanding of Rene -- he would often hear the challenge of his brother monks: “René, you are just too dark, just too dark in your outlook. You need to share some light,
Thus, René worked hard and consistently to express genuine hope for us, for the nations, for creation, and for the human project. For him as a monk and a priest this hope was ultimately anchored in a deep personal faith in the Risen Christ, which was nourished by prayer, by Eucharist, by the practice of silence, and by living in the middle of the community. And communities where love in the midst of failure is a daily goal. Always we ask: did we love each other in all of this, and that question provided the ultimate context for what he was trying to do in Peace Studies.

In this presentation I want to show in simple terms how monastic life provides spiritual practices for our community to live the Gospel in a way that is responsive and respectful to the environment. Initially, I prepared a presentation that I realized was too formal for this situation. Consequently, I chose to make this presentation oral and organize it around four words or phrases from the Rule of Benedict (RB). The first one is the community of goods. The second is stability. The third is frugality, and the fourth is a contemplative stance. These four words or phrases provide the frame for this presentation and are central to spirituality of the Rule of Saint Benedict (RB).

A community of goods (RB 33, 34, and 55)
How can we share things in our life together in such a way that we can avoid being really good consumers? If there is a way that we as human beings can live in a more nonviolent, nondestructive way in the environment, we have to dramatically reduce our level of consumption. We need to learn how to take the Link [bus]. We need to have an imagination for the place where we live in such a way that all of us are taking care of it. Whether it is picking up the trash on the streets or on the floor; if it is making sure we do not throw and discard trash indiscriminately. Within the monastery, the community of goods is very hard. For example, we have a given number of cars that we share. It is a challenge to do this well. Why, you may ask. Because people have different senses of what it means to keep a car clean; how to how to make sure there is gas in the tank; how to make sure the vehicle gets repaired when something is amiss. I am using this simple example, but you can take it and spin it out in twenty different ways. If we want to learn how to be nonviolent toward the creation, it begins with the care of our common home.

Stability (RB 58)
Stability is a unique Benedictine commitment. We are different from the Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, and other religious orders because we make a commitment to live in a community and in a place for a long period of time. We need to be like good farmers who want to hand this place on to the next generation in such a way that it is as good and as beautiful or more than it was when we came into it. That commitment to stability is why we make sure that when we harvest oak trees we also replant them and make sure that they survive. We make sure that the water where we live is not polluted. We have to be extremely careful with that. Stability means that we will work in systematic ways to reduce our carbon footprint going forward. We just voted as a community to install new turbines in the powerhouse so regain a capacity for cogeneration. Our powerhouse has been doing cogeneration since 1946, using high-pressure steam to drive turbines which were producing 25% of the electricity that we use on the [St. John’s University] campus. Those generators were unwittingly destroyed in 2021 when a backup system didn’t work. Thus, we are going to put in a new cogeneration system that will produce between 25 and 50% of the
electrical demand on the campus. The payback time for this investment is eight years, but one of the positive outcomes of stability is the commitment to a longer-term vision.

**Frugality (RB 39, 40)**
Frugality is not a nice-sounding word. It has a pinched feeling about it. One might think, “you are going to stop being hospitable.” Nothing could be further from the truth, but what it does mean is we are going to avoid wasting resources. We are going to use what we been given extremely carefully. If you sit with us in our monastic dining room, we have some beautiful tables that were made in the 1920s that are about forty inches wide, about eight feet long and are very strong. The wood is beautiful, but if you look at the tables carefully, you will see a small little square in places. It is obvious that a wooden insert has been made. The woodworker refused to throw away the whole board because it had a knot in it. He put in this little insert and it fits perfectly. We call them “Huberts,” in honor of Brother Hubert Schneider, who was a master woodworker for about forty years in Abbey Woodworking. This is an example of frugality, that is, refusing to throw away a beautiful piece of wood because we have an inflated sense of perfectionism. There are many other examples I could give, but I hope these make the point. Monks sometimes get carried away with frugality so that those who wash our T-shirts finally have to throw them away because there is nothing left of them. Frugality is a creative response to the “throwaway culture.”

**Contemplative stance (RB Prologue and 20)**
A single important dimension of monastic life is a contemplative stance toward our life, toward each other, toward the world we live in. It is stopping long enough to see each other, to see the woods, the water in the lake and way the light moves, to listen to the birds, to feel what is happening with our bodies, to feel when we read a text, to feel and hear the words; what do they sound like. We speak them so that we can understand when we are looking at something. There may be a tree or a pathway that we were unaware of. A contemplative stance is the ability to sit long enough to be actually engaged with the creation and each other. Truly, this stance is transformative, to avoid going through life as if were always on a speeding bullet train.

Four things that give meaning to Benedictine Life and Care for the Environment: a community of goods, stability, frugality, and a contemplative stance. Thank you for your kind attention.

This is a transcript of a conference presentation by Fr. John Klassen, OSB, at the Thirty-Fourth Annual Peace Studies Conference, which took place at the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John’s University on September 18, 2023 (Peace Studies Department, CSB+SJU, n.d.). Fr. Klassen is a monk at St. John’s Abbey, which is located next to St. John’s University, in Collegeville, Minnesota. Fr. Klassen served as Abbot of the monastery from 2000 through January 2024.

**References**