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Review of Monastic Ecological Wisdom: A Living Tradition

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What Can We Learn from Christian Monasteries about Ecological Sustainability?

Monastic Ecological Wisdom: A Living Tradition. Samuel Torvend. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2023, paper, 160 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8146-6797-2.

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What contribution could monasticism possibly make to effectively mitigate the ecological crisis of our planet? Some might think it has nothing to offer since monastics strive for an “other worldly” existence, that they look to escape from the material world into the spiritual realm. Samuel Torvend in *Monastic Ecological Wisdom* effectively corrects any such dualistic interpretations by pointing out and exploring the ways Christian monasticism, specifically that of Saint Benedict and Benedictine communities past and present, cherish and nurture the natural environment. In doing so he highlights many long-standing Benedictine values and practices that can support and inform contemporary efforts to address this crisis.

General Theme

In his Introduction Torvend identifies two recent events that were a catalyst for writing this book. The first is Pope Francis' 2015 publication of *Laudato Si*, his encyclical on *Care for our Common Home*. The second, the Italian UN delegation's 2016 request to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, to designate eight medieval monastic foundations as World Heritage Sites. The latter was requested not only because of the architectural and artistic quality of these monasteries, but also because of the way they “fit harmoniously into the natural environment. . . and offer a model of coexistence, sustainable development, and conservation of the environment, providing a valuable message for contemporary society and for future generations” (p. x). Torvend comments further on the way the values of contemporary monastic communities include careful stewardship of natural resources and respect for local ecology. He notes that they, along with many other Christian communities, value and put into practice the ecological principles highlighted by *Laudato Si* and the UNESCO application.

Following the Table of Contents and seven-page Introduction, this slim volume has seven chapters, the first six 20-25 pages long, with the last being like a short epilogue of six pages. The book concludes with a ten-page Bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and a five-page Index. Footnotes are provided at the bottom of the pages in each chapter.

Summary of Content

Chapter 1: “Early Christian Resistance to Imperial Domination of the Earth,” highlights the way the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus in the gospels challenges imperial Rome in every dimension of life—economic, environmental, political, religious, social. The author identifies the gospel approach as “Resistance Poetics,” texts with a worldview the mirror opposite of the Roman imperial view—the world belongs to God, not the emperor; the poor will inherit the earth, not the rich and powerful. Roman achievement—road systems, monumental buildings, economic dominance, military supremacy, colonial control—led to destruction of the natural world. The much touted “Pax Romana” was accomplished by deadly force and devastation of earth's

resources. Jesus preached a different kind of kingdom, one of peace rooted in justice, compassionate care for and loving attention to the natural world--lilies of the field, birds of the air, the mustard seed, and every sparrow.

In Chapter 2: “Benedict’s Journey Out of Imperial Christianity,” Torvend first traces the rise of an imperial Church. In the fourth century the Emperor Constantine’s policies and practices heightened the imperial shift away from the natural world. With the decree of Theodosius in 380 the Christian faith succumbed to imperialization. It became an “*established imperial institution*.” (p. 42) No longer a resistance movement, Christianity became the religion of the dominant, now sought out by many seeking to be on the safe side of power. Benedict (born 480) abandoned his studies in imperial Rome and fled to the wilds of Subiaco. This was a rejection of his fellow students’ decadent way of life and could also be interpreted as a rejection of ecologically destructive imperial values and practices of Rome and the Roman Church

In Chapter 3: “Benedict’s Refuge in Nature,” Torvend, exploring the stories and information in Pope Gregory’s *Dialogues II: The Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict*, brings to light rich details about the natural world in which Benedict lived as a hermit for three years. Benedict’s dwelling was a cave provided by nature. He lived high above the Anio river surrounded by a rich variety of trees, shrubs and other fruit and seed-bearing plants. These provided his water and food.. He clothed himself in animal skins. Many biblical references and allusions in *Dialogues II* show that Benedict’s life mirrored the life of the prophets and holy men.

Chapter 4: “Praying the Seasons of Life on God’s Earth” describes how in his Rule, Benedict organizes the day’s community prayer according to the rhythms of nature. The timing of the Liturgy of Hours (Divine Office) and its biblical texts, the liturgical feasts and seasons celebrating the mysteries of Christ’s life—all are arranged in sync with the rising and setting of the sun, the annual cycle of seasons, and their shorter and longer days. The prayer is filled with the “ecophilic poetry” of the psalms, especially the creation psalms.

Chapter 5: “An Environmental Rule” addresses the way Benedict’s monastic communities related to the natural environment. The architecture of the monastery fit into that environment. Monks’ work—such as routing water to the monastery, moving rocks and making the lumber necessary to build, cultivating olive and other orchards, planting vineyards, and fields of grain as well as vegetable and herb gardens for food and medicine—kept them in intimate relationship with the local ecology. Their commitment to stability required their concern for self-sufficiency and sustainability. This was a lifestyle inspired and supported by the scriptural revelation that the earth itself and all creatures manifest the Divine presence.

In the introductory section of Chapter 6: “Monastic Ecological Values” Torvend addresses the notion that the influence of the Judeo-Christian culture drove the ecological crisis by interpreting the first creation story in Genesis as declaring that all creatures were subject to human beings and meant for their use. Torvend clarifies how scripture actually contradicts that view and how the liturgy of the Christian and monastic tradition reverently incorporates the gifts of the earth. Gregory the Great’s stories about Benedict in *Dialogues II* provide a model and inspiration for learning to know and love the gifts of nature in one’s surrounding terrain.. Efforts to live harmoniously in one’s local habitat are part of Benedict’s wisdom. Humility and simplicity are two

key virtues in the Rule which engender that harmony. The Monastery of Christ in New Mexico is described in a way that shows how a contemporary monastery used local materials and resources, and oriented the monastery so that it fits 'hand in glove' into its natural environment.

Chapter 7 is entitled "The Land is in the Church." In it the author describes how a friend pointed out that Saint John's Abbey Church in Collegeville, Minnesota is literally a "concrete" illustration of the truth of that title. For example, in addition to the locally made concrete poured into wooden frames made from lumber harvested from the abbey forest, the church contains "granite from [nearby] Cold Spring," and "dark wood from Chatfield." The enormous stained-glass window was designed by a Saint John's University art professor, Bronislaw Bak, and assembled by local volunteers he directed.

The final three pages are a recapitulation of Torvend's theme. In his words, "...there is a good measure of ecological wisdom expressed in liturgical, sacramental and monastic values and practices" (p. 142). These are a connatural expression of love of God and love of neighbor. Love of neighbor, expressed in Benedictine hospitality, includes the earth itself, and all those affected by ecological deterioration and global warming. Concern for the natural world including humanity is continually renewed by the monastic sacramental world view, and by the continual return to chanting and meditating on the biblical texts that the Divine Mystery is at home in the earth where God's intends a clean river to flow and trees to bear fruit "for ...the healing of the earth and its many creatures." (p. 144. See footnote 5 "Revelation 21:3,7; 22:1-2")

Personal Response

I appreciate this book very much. It has enriched my understanding of the way Benedictine life nurtures love of the earth and care for the environment and has done so for over a thousand years. The fruits of Samuel Torvend's careful research of sources from many disciplines along with his enlightening interpretation of scripture and the *Rule of Benedict* provide a clear and helpful overview of Church, Roman and Benedictine historical development through the lens of ecology. He includes many rich details that flesh out that history. The book highlights and explores the ways ecological values and practices are built into the structure and ethos of Benedictine life and spirituality.

Today's ecological crisis is complex. It affects the whole earth and all its inhabitants. The crisis includes air and water pollution, light and noise pollution, plastic waste, deforestation, soil erosion, soil depletion due to large scale industrial agriculture, exhaustion of seafood resources and extinction of species resulting from over-fishing, depletion of fossil fuel resources, warming oceans and rising sea levels, melting ice caps, more frequent and long-lasting disastrous storms, and many other problems. Global warming is the primary and central concern, and it is integrally connected to many of the other issues as either cause or effect. People living in poverty in developing countries suffer the most from its effects.

Addressing these problems requires the talent and input of many: scientists, Christian theologians, leaders, scholars and members of all the world's religions, indigenous peoples, engineers, economists, financial institutions, policy makers, politicians, government leaders, manufacturers, builders, architects, teachers, lawyers, health care workers, artists, writers, liturgists and hymn writers, experts in technology, journalists and media specialists, and many other kinds of

professionals. Effective action to solve these problems also takes the cooperation of individuals, families, local, regional, national and international organizations and communities. And there are thousands of such experts, organizations and individuals working to alleviate this crisis. Their motivations are diverse. Many now are extremely concerned especially about global warming and its disastrous effects—the increasing number and intensity of natural disasters such as gigantic and long-lasting wildfires, the flooding and wind destruction from an increasing number of torrential rains and hurricanes over the past several years. All this is forcing us to face the reality that we as a human community need to make some radical shifts in our values and lifestyle. We need to turn away from our blind drives for profit and power, for immediate advantage and comfort for my/our family, my/our group, my/our nation at any cost to others, including the earth itself. We need what Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* “calls an ‘ecological conversion’” (#217).

Reading Samuel Torvend’s book deepened my conviction that contemporary Benedictine communities can be and are an inspiration and guide for such a conversion. Though the post-industrial world is no longer based in an agricultural economy and culture such as was the milieu of medieval monastic communities, still most Benedictine communities are located on substantial plots of land—ranging from one or two acres to thousands of acres. No matter the size, they love and nurture the land and intentionally engage in ecologically sound practices. They take seriously their dedication to stability and sustainability, simplicity and stewardship, frugality and equity. They are continually inspired by a biblical-liturgical spirituality rooted in the conviction that “the earth and its creatures belong to God” (Psalm 24:1) and that all things are created in Christ, exist in Christ and will reach their fulfillment in Christ (see Colossians 1:15-17). They are motivated to live in ways that quite naturally can be a model for their local and regional neighbors and are a support for all efforts to promote a healthy ecology.

The following are some of the ecologically healthy practices of our monastery, many of which apply to other monasteries too:

- using local food vendors whenever possible e.g. eggs, dairy, meat and produce.
- cultivating vegetable and flower gardens and provide garden space for neighbors-extended monastery community;
- tending the monasteries wooded acres in such a way that native species flourish and invasive species such as buckthorn are eliminated;
- regularly planting trees and nurturing the trees we have;
- caring for several acres of wooded land that we placed into a Minnesota Land Trust—land near our retirement center located some 12 miles away from the monastery itself;
- purchasing energy saving equipment and furnishings such as LED lamps and light bulbs, motion activated lights, hybrid cars, electrical on-campus vehicles;
- reducing the use of plastics, especially non-recyclable plastics—no water in soft plastic bottles, using compostable disposable tableware when disposable is needed;
- wearing recycled clothes and recycling wearable clothes that are no longer needed;
- reducing water use through personal actions and community installed equipment and fixtures, e.g. water-saving toilets and shower heads;
- purchasing as much electricity generated from renewable sources as possible and planning for a future in which the monastery will use energy from renewable sources only: solar energy and geo-thermal heating/cooling;
- decluttering and downsizing the amount of material goods for personal use;

- implementing investment policies that favor “green” companies and institutions.

Torvend’s book elucidates how monastic values and practices provide a good guide for our lifestyle as a human family. Imagine, for example, that we would see the earth and the natural world as our “monastery,” our common home. We would see that the earth’s resources are our common possession. We would work out economic, social and political systems that would ensure that each person and region of the earth would have what is needed to flourish physically, mentally, emotionally. Equity and justice would be our guide. Stewardship of land and buildings would make them sustainable for decades, even centuries. Being converted to this view of the earth would motivate a cultural shift away from individualism and a destructive pursuit of wealth and power toward a pervasive concern for the common good. There would be a united effort to stop global warming.

Some of the specific things I like about this book include the following:

- the careful research and use of primary and secondary sources from a variety of disciplines including, but not limited to, Church and monastic history, liturgy, scripture, art history, paleoecology;
- the author’s insightful reading of scripture, liturgy, the *Rule of Benedict*, Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues II: The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict*, and church and monastic history;
- the inclusion of many interesting and helpful details—e.g. historical, scriptural, ecological (specific landscapes, vegetation, geology)—while keeping all in the context of the big picture;
- the consistent relating of historical monastic values and practices to contemporary ecological circumstances and the factors which control them, e.g. uncontrolled capitalism and the drive for profit and wealth;
- the author’s obvious knowledge and appreciation of both a scientific and sacramental view of the earth, his deep concern about the ecological crisis, and his understanding and commitment to the eco-friendly Christian monastic values expressed in Benedictine life and liturgy.

This book would be a valuable read for environmental groups of all kinds—both religious and secular. It is a book that could profitably be included in Benedictine initial and ongoing formation programs. Benedictine Oblates—people who associate themselves closely with a Benedictine community in order to integrate Benedictine values and practices into their way of life. (Samuel Torvend himself is an Oblate!)—would find it informative as well as an inspirational and formative guide for their lives. Oblate book groups could make it one of their texts. Some monasteries share a campus with flourishing high schools, colleges, and universities which they established and continue to sponsor. With enthusiasm I recommend this book to teachers at these institutions. They could incorporate it as a required text or supplemental reading in a variety of courses, especially those in their environmental studies majors and minors. Administrators and all in leadership positions could include it in their orientation and mission effectiveness programs.

Though, of course, I cannot speak for other readers, I cannot say there is anything I do not like about the book.

Review of Monastic Ecological Wisdom: A Living Tradition

Katherine Howard, OSB, has been a member of Saint Benedict's Monastery, Saint Joseph, Minnesota for over 60 years. Coming from the Mississippi Valley—a place of river, bluffs and coulees—she has learned to love the monastery's prairieland with its underground aquifers, sandy soil, gardens, fields, woods and all its inhabitants—plant, animal and human.

The monastery is located with the campus of the College of St. Benedict.