

“Patrick Henry breaks open the essence of Benedictinism to the modern world. He provides the elements of a world imbedded in the basics of life when the rest of the world tilts toward its extremes. He gives us vectors to steer by—community, tradition, hospitality, productivity, and stewardship, as well as an immersion in the spiritual heart of life. He presents Benedictinism as a mirror to the world around it as it defines and redefines itself from age to age.”

—Joan Chittister, OSB

“At a time when so many societies are damaged by divisive ideology, naked greed, and lust for power, this book helps us to see there is another way. In these pages we find monastics—ordinary people living an extraordinary life of prayer and community—who make us realize that grounding oneself in love and hospitality is not ancient, but always new, and more relevant than ever.”

—Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and
Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life

“From a person deeply engaged in Benedictine communities comes this learned reflection on the charism of this Christian tradition. Patrick Henry has aptly described the ‘rootedness and far-ranging adventure’ of the Benedictines. Rather than withdrawing from the world, these vowed Christians engage it with humor, stability, interfaith curiosity, and their life of prayer, a pathway of generative living. Readers will be drawn to this vision of expressed faith, especially since the wisdom of the Benedictines is not relegated solely to cloistered life. It is for the world, truly.”

—Molly T. Marshall, PhD, Interim President
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

“Patrick Henry’s new book expands the growing literature on living the Rule of St. Benedict for ordinary people. He points out many options in the Rule that could apply to anyone: listening, hospitality, discipline, persistence, and reminds us that for Benedict the monastery was a lay community. Laypeople wanting to deepen their faith and Christian living will find much valuable guidance in this well-written book.”

—William O. Paulsell, author of *Longing for God:
An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*

“Here is a vigorous, optimistic exposition of the contemporary Benedictine charism. This is a book for which we should all be grateful. It makes for energizing and encouraging reading. Written equally for monastic and non-monastic, we are given a survey which shows the development and expansion of Benedictine options in today’s world.”

—Esther de Waal, author of *The Way of Simplicity*

“I am so grateful to Patrick Henry for writing this book as a reflection on and response to Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option*. Henry reads Dreher’s work with a deserved critical eye and ear, helping the reader to take the questions that concern Dreher seriously. However, he simultaneously challenges the monochromatic view of the ‘Benedict option’ that Dreyer insists on and shares his experiences of the many different ways to live a faithful Christian life following the Rule of Benedict. Henry’s is a generous, capacious view of human faithfulness to the Gospel in the midst of the real and actual world we find ourselves in.”

—Abbot John Klassen, OSB

Benedictine Options

*Learning to Live
from the Sons and Daughters
of Saints Benedict and Scholastica*

Patrick Henry



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To

Dolores Schuh, CHM

Wilfred Theisen, OSB

Valued colleagues at the Collegeville Institute
for Ecumenical and Cultural Research
and dear friends

and in memory of

Dietrich Reinhart, OSB

Shaun O'Meara, OSB

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Part One: Option or Options 1

Chapter One: *Where* the Benedictine Charism *Isn't* 7

Chapter Two: *How* the Benedictine Charism *Is* 23

Part Two: Tradition and Traditions 39

Chapter Three: Long Ago 43

Chapter Four: A Wagonload of Trouble 61

Part Three: Bungee Cord Theology 75

Chapter Five: Other Christians 80

Chapter Six: Other Religions 94

Part Four: The World of Many Colors 107

Chapter Seven: Sea Ebbs, Bell Clangs 115

Chapter Eight: Learning from Father Godfrey and
Sister Jeremy 131

Notes 146

Note on the Cover 160

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part one

Option or Options



Is it preposterous to prescribe Saint Benedict as the antidote to our cultural and social maladies? There's a case to be made for this. More than one, actually.

Rod Dreher, in *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*,¹ offers one. I, in *Benedictine Options: Learning to Live from the Sons and Daughters of Saints Benedict and Scholastica*, offer another. Neither of us is a monastic.

Our proposals are fundamentally, even antithetically, different, but they both relate to the current moment.

People are fascinated by Benedictines. Magazines have feature stories on monasteries. Books on monastic spirituality fly off the shelves. We are at a time of extraordinary possibility for interchange between monastic tradition and the larger culture.

Rod Dreher and I are poles apart in what we see happening at that junction.

Dreher takes his cue from the conclusion of Alasdair MacIntyre's 1981 book, *After Virtue*: the world awaits "another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."²

Dreher purports to introduce readers to people he calls "today's Benedicts." He credits traditionalists for still believing in "reason and virtue." Today's Benedicts are seeking "arks capable

2 *Option or Options*

of carrying them and the living faith across the sea of crisis—a Dark Age that could last centuries.”³

Throughout Dreher’s book there are declarations about what the Benedict option is and what it isn’t. Mostly he says that it’s enough just for the faithful remnant to make it through the Dark Age unscathed. He eschews both “an imagined golden age” and “communities of the pure, cut off from the real world.” But then he declares the Benedict option aims to reclaim “the real world from the artifice, alienation, and atomization of modern life.”⁴

I, like Dreher, was captivated by MacIntyre’s vision of a new Benedict. Like Dreher, I am all for “reason and virtue” and the flourishing of “the living faith.” However, I see these being demonstrated not by his Benedicts sailing “across the sea of crisis,” but by the Benedictines I have lived close to for almost half a century. Benedictine options are embodied in the *lives*—not just the life—of Benedictine men and women, who are not forsaking the world but are for the sake of the world.

The ark is a vivid and compelling picture for the Benedict option—the boat built by Noah to ride out the flood. My alternative image for Benedictine options is less precise, less circumscribed, but that is part of its point.

A participant in a 1989 conference I helped plan said that “we are in a saltwater marsh, where there is constant motion, teeming life, and an ever-shifting boundary between sea and land. Our task is . . . to notice what is going on all around us.”⁵ We are knee-deep in the marsh, not floating above it.

From Benedictines themselves I have learned to see the saltwater marsh world itself in many colors—indeed, into the spiritual infrared and ultraviolet. Dreher, on the contrary, sees the world as “growing cold, dead, and dark.”⁶

Both Dreher and I look to Benedict as a guide for living in these days. I believe Benedictine options are a more authentic, more life-giving, and, actually, more *traditional* instruction than the Benedict option.

Benedictine options do not carry us across a sea of crisis. They are both a clue to what sort of place the world is and a prescription for reason and virtue and living faith in that world. I invite you to join me and Benedictines I know in an adventure in the marsh—an exploration of how to live.

“Turning His Back” and “His Spirit’s Enlargement”

Pope Saint Gregory the Great’s biography of Benedict, written several decades after the fact and based on interviews with some of Benedict’s disciples, provides two stunningly disparate starting points for Dreher and me.

Here’s Dreher: “Gregory writes that young Benedict was so shocked and disgusted by the vice and corruption in the city that he turned his back on the life of privilege that awaited him there, as the son of a government official. He moved to the nearby forest and later to a cave forty miles to the east. There Benedict lived a life of prayer and contemplation as a hermit for three years.”⁷

Benedict’s move that gets Dreher’s attention is “turning his back.” (It should be noted that after three years in the cave, Benedict went up a mountain and founded his monastery there.)

I begin elsewhere in Gregory’s *Second Dialogue*: “According to [Benedict’s] own description, the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light. . . . Of course, in saying that the world was gathered up before his eyes I do not mean that heaven and earth grew small, but that his spirit was enlarged. Absorbed as he was in God, it was now easy for him to see all that lay beneath God.”⁸

Benedict’s move that gets my attention is “his spirit’s enlargement.” I think it unlikely that when he saw “all that lay beneath God,” Benedict spotted only vice and corruption.

So, Dreher and I have different sixth-century springboards—“turning his back” and “his spirit’s enlargement.”

Equally significant is the difference in where we look for evidence, especially contemporary evidence.

Dreher introduces us to some contemporary monks—sixteen of them—but they are all in one place, the Monastery of Saint Benedict in Norcia, Italy, Benedict’s hometown. The monastery there was founded four centuries after Benedict’s time, was suppressed by Napoleon in 1810, reopened in 2000, and is being reconstructed following a devastating earthquake in 2016. Its life today, with prayers in Latin and the pre-Vatican II Mass, is only one of many Benedictine options, and an uncommon one at that.

The independence of monasteries means that if you’ve seen one, you haven’t seen them all. Even if you had seen all the men’s monasteries, you’d have seen only half the evidence.

Among the 476 entries in the index to *The Benedict Option*, “monks” appear fourteen times, but there is no entry at all for “sisters (or nuns).” (The term “nun,” which Dreher uses periodically in his text to refer to female Benedictines, is technical—it means a cloistered female monastic, which nearly all female Benedictines aren’t. Throughout this book I will employ the term “sister,” which Dreher doesn’t use at all when referring to them.) There are about two dozen names of women, nearly all of them contemporary American evangelicals who are exemplars of life according to Dreher’s “Benedict option.”

There is no name of a living female Benedictine (and just one dead one: Benedict’s twin sister, Scholastica). “Nuns” in other than a generic sense appear once in the book, but only as accompanying monks in prayer following the earthquake.⁹ A book called *The Benedict Option* that includes in its index under “C” the archconservative archbishop emeritus of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, but has no reference to Joan Chittister, OSB, is missing some options.

In other words, apart from a few men in Norcia, actual Benedictines are quite AWOL from *The Benedict Option*. This leaves Dreher free to read the Rule pretty much as he wants to.

Benedictine Options looks to the sons and daughters of Benedict and Scholastica for signals of the life-enhancing and world-affirming possibilities in lives lived according to their reading

of the Rule. I have read a great deal about Benedictine monasticism, but my most important and formative research has been my more than four decades spent in the company of monastic people.

“How Does a Person Get To Be that Way?”

I had an “aha!” moment in 1989 when reading a *New Yorker* story by Jamaica Kincaid. The unnamed protagonist wonders about someone else, “How does a person get to be that way?”¹⁰ I realized instantly: this is what drives my curiosity and research. It’s the scholar’s fundamental question: How does the person, virus, cosmos, institution, society, poem, language, statue, statute—whatever it is I am studying—get to be the way it is?

One of my conclusions is that the question has to be asked about every Benedictine individually—there is no one “way” that they are. There are many options.

Dreher’s chapter 2, “A Rule for Living,” drawing exclusively on his interviews with the monks of Norcia, makes many points with which I agree. But he situates them in sharp opposition to his portrayal of the modern world: “There is no middle ground.”¹¹

When there’s no middle ground, there’s of course only one Benedict option.

I do not believe the modern world is outer darkness; there’s lots of middle ground. Benedictines have known many “modern worlds” during their millennium and a half. The unexpected doesn’t throw them off course. The Rule has guided them steadily through the rise and fall of cultures. Because they have seen the waxing and waning of “modern world” after “modern world,” they are skeptical both of Dr. Pangloss’s contention that this is the best of all possible worlds and of Chicken Little’s warning that the sky is falling. And some of them experience their entry into monastic life not as an escape, but as their chance to bring into the monastery the positive wisdom they have gained from their life in “the world.” It is both/and, not either/or.

I have another disagreement with Dreher that is equally fundamental. He writes of “the religious model of the human person.”¹² Just as I think there are many Benedictine options, so I think there are many religious *models* of the human person. This I have learned from, among others, Benedictines.

Dreher quotes, with evident approval, Father Cassian, prior of the Monastery of Saint Benedict in Norcia, talking about the reception of guests. “It’s both that we reject what is not life-giving, and that we build something new. And we spend a lot of time in the rebuilding, and people see that too, which is why people flock to the monastery. . . . We are rebuilding. That’s the *yes* that people have to hear about.”

Here is how Dreher interprets what he heard: They “saw themselves as working on the restoration of Christian belief and Christian culture. How very Benedictine.”¹³

There is a big difference between “restoration” and “rebuilding.” I’m reminded of aphorisms by two of the greatest historians of Christianity. Adolph Harnack wrote, inviting restoration, “No religion gains anything through time; it only loses.”¹⁴ Saint John Henry Newman wrote, inviting rebuilding, “In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”¹⁵

The Benedict Option is about restoration. *Benedictine Options* is about rebuilding. These are not the same thing.



chapter one

Where the Benedictine Charism Isn't

A leading feature of Benedict's Rule is its rootedness in the particular. The Rule is not some abstract theory devised by leisured academics in a seminar room. Benedict looks around him, says "Here we are," and asks, "What shall we do?"

The same question is posed to me as I start this book. Here we are, you and I. What shall we do?

And from the very beginning I need to put up "Danger" signs.

You, the reader, have every reason to expect me to say *what* the Benedictine charism is.

Charism is not an everyday word. In theology-speak, it's gift, a spiritual gift, even a gift of the Spirit. If you wonder what gift Benedictines are given by the Spirit, a gift they then in turn give to the rest of us, I have to tell you: It's much easier to say what it isn't than what it is.

To get even close to the *what*—close is the very most we can hope for—it's necessary to stake out the *what not*.

Danger Sign One: Definition Itself

If asked to define the Benedictine charism, I am in a position like that of Rabbi Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, who was challenged to teach the whole Torah while his listener stood on one foot. Hillel pronounced a form of what we know as the Golden

Rule, and said, “This is the whole of the Torah; the rest is the explanation of it. Go, learn it.”¹ Hillel could get away with this brevity because of the authority he had gathered to himself through a lifetime of total immersion in the study and living of Torah.

If I were a monk, which I’m not, and a fifty-year jubilarian besides—I’ve lived close to Benedictines and worked with them for a half century, but it’s not the same—I might venture a concise summary of the Benedictine charism. The summary would be complete and authentic, however, only if I added a warning: “Do not repeat what I said, for the charism resists all imposition by one on another.” T. S. Eliot’s lines suggest what it takes to be authentically succinct: “Quick now, here, now, always—/A condition of complete simplicity/(Costing not less than everything).”² Hillel made the same point: “Go, learn it.”

Danger Sign Two: Presentism

“Of all the prejudices of pundits, presentism is the strongest. It is the assumption that what is happening now is going to keep on happening, without anything happening to stop it.”³

You might think that these words of *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik have nothing to do with Benedictinism. Surely there is no group of people on Earth who are more attuned to the past. “Presentism” is the last prejudice they’d be guilty of.

But it’s not the Benedictines I’m worried about here. It’s us, those who are formed by the well-attested and much studied American historical amnesia.

It would be easy to conclude that monks and sisters are fossils from an ancient Yesterday. Today they are only a shadow. Tomorrow they will hardly be even a memory. They did us some good a long time ago, copying all those manuscripts and, more recently, teaching all those kids in parochial schools, tending all those patients in hospitals. Even now they can get a laugh on TV or the stage or in movies. But the world of microchips has no place for quill pens.

When I challenge presentism and futurism as the frame of reference, I do not mean that the Benedictine charism is the preserve of antiquarians. Quite the contrary: a concern for today and tomorrow is thoroughly Benedictine, but only when yesterday is given a voice.

G. K. Chesterton said it well: "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead."⁴ It's "votes," not "a vote"—our ancestors aren't a monolith broadcasting a monologue. Benedictines know that the past is full of wise teachers, not all of whom teach the same thing—and some teachers thought wise in their own time turn out not to be, and vice versa. We are not left to figure out everything for ourselves, from scratch. When Yesterday is seen in its full sweep, it widens the scope of Today and deepens the horizon of Tomorrow.

Danger Sign Three: Snapshot

The first danger sign is definition, the second presentism. The third is the attempt to stop the motion.

There is no way I can account, in advance, for the fact that between this chapter and the end of the book I, as writer, and you, as reader, will become different. The very understanding of the Benedictine charism changes the one who is attempting to understand it. As Benedict says in the Rule (73.8), we're all at the beginning—all the time.

Avoiding the Dangers

To avoid the first danger, of definition, I am not going to define, at least in the usual academic sense. The Benedictine charism, like God in the fine title of a book by Samuel Terrien, is an "elusive presence."⁵

If I sidestep the first danger, defining, by not defining, I evade the second danger, neglect of the past, by retrieving it—selectively,

of course—but not just the nearly two millennia that constitute the past of Christian monasticism.

Everyone reading this book has a past—some have more past than others. Part of the genius of the Benedictine charism is its linking our own pasts to our todays and tomorrows, and to the yesterday and today and tomorrow of the entire monastic community—indeed, of the whole world that Benedict saw gathered up into a single ray of light.

I do not know your past, you do not know mine. I will say a few things about mine. I hope this will inspire you to reflect on some features of your own past that might cast light, maybe from an unfamiliar or unexpected angle, on the Benedictine charism.

Finally, if I escape the trap of definition, and if I give voice to a past that gets drowned out in our American rush for “relevance” and “the latest thing,” how can I skirt the third mistake—the preempting by this book of the changes it works in me while writing and in you while reading?

There’s probably no way *around* this danger. *Through* it—that is, by my publishing the book and your opening it—is the only option. There is no sharp distinction between preliminaries and the real stuff. We are in the middle of things all the time.

My favorite book as a child—it is still my favorite book—Dr. Seuss’s *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, ends, “They only could say it just ‘happened to happen’ and was not very likely to happen again.”⁶ I think no poem has a better conclusion than the question of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”: “Do I wake or sleep?” My endings are not in the league of Keats and Seuss, but they have set the standard I strive for.

Now that I have told you about endings, I am ready to face the question: “How shall I begin?”

“Where” and “How”

There is an obvious answer: start with the Rule. I did start with it, at least with one of its characteristics: its rootedness in

part three

Bungee Cord Theology



When considering the “how” of the Benedictine charism in chapter 2, I named “ecumenism” as one of the distinguishing marks.

The term (or its adjectival form, ecumenical) appears seven times in *The Benedict Option*. Five occurrences are in a section called “Reach Across Church Boundaries to Build Relationships” of a chapter titled “The Idea of a Christian Village.” Of the remaining two instances, one is in the section “Start Classical Christian Schools” of a chapter called “Education as Christian Formation,” about which I will have much to say in Part Four.¹ The seventh occasion is the index.

For Rod Dreher, it’s “born in part out of pro-life activism, an ‘ecumenism of the trenches,’” involving conservative evangelicals and Catholics. A leader in the Russian Orthodox Church has proposed joining forces in “a ‘common front’ against atheism and secularism.”²

Dreher sees evidence of this “ecumenism of the trenches” primarily in the Eighth Day Institute, founded by Erin Doom, employee of a Christian bookstore in Wichita, Kansas. EDI’s signature events are the Hall of Men and a subsequently launched parallel women’s organization, the Sisters of Sophia. Doom has said, “Ultimately I want to provide tools and resources

for all Christian families to make their homes into little monasteries.”³

Ecumenism as Dreher portrays it is narrow, reactionary. It is a joint effort of defiance from “the trenches.” For the Benedictines I know, ecumenism makes of their monasteries something very different from Dreher and Doom’s paradigm.

The twentieth century saw a 180-degree turn in the Catholic Church, a reversal that affected Benedictines but that they were also instrumental in bringing about.

Pope Pius XI, in his 1928 encyclical, *Mortalium Animos*, codified a fortress mentality when he forbade dialogue and declared that Christian unity meant unequivocal submission to the papacy: “So, Venerable Brethren, it is clear why this Apostolic See has never allowed its subjects to take part in the assemblies of non-Catholics: for the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it, for in the past they have unhappily left it.”⁴

Pope Saint John Paul II, in a 1987 address to thirty representatives of other Christian communities at the University of South Carolina during his second pastoral visit to the United States, acknowledged that the fortress has been dismantled and said there is no going back: “We are definitively committed to treading the path which the Holy Spirit has opened before us: the path of repentance for our divisions and of working and praying for that perfect unity which the Lord himself wishes for his followers. . . . It is no small achievement of the ecumenical movement that after centuries of mistrust, we humbly and sincerely recognize in each other’s communities the presence and fruitfulness of Christ’s gifts at work.”⁵

The revolution marked by John Paul’s reversal of Pius’s interdict on dialogue is among the most dramatic transformations in church history. The distance from *Mortalium Animos* to the Joint Declaration on Justification issued by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation seventy-one years later, in 1999, defies measurement.

Benedictines have of course been affected by the tectonic shifts in the Catholic Church, especially after Pope Saint John XXIII opened the windows at the Second Vatican Council. However, Benedictines were not just responding to larger forces. They were coming to a fuller grasp of their own Benedictine nature, not unlike Saint John Henry Newman's analysis of the development of doctrine: it "required only the longer time and deeper thought for [its] full elucidation."⁶

Benedictines have taken the lead in ecumenical relationships. They are also in the forefront of interreligious dialogues.

The Benedict Option does not register this fact at all. Dreher makes three brief references to other religions.

- First is a glance at one "doctrinal" claim he sees in what he snidely calls "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism"; "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."
- Second is a generalized salute: "The sense that the material world discloses the workings of the transcendent order was present in ancient philosophy and in many world religions, even nontheistic ones like Taoism."
- Third is a purely pragmatic directive to Benedict option followers as they prepare to do battle: "Because Christians need all the friends we can get, form partnerships with leaders across denominations and from non-Christian religions."⁷

There are no references to Buddhism or Hinduism, two to radical Islam, and several to Orthodox Jews, whose manner of restricted communal life Dreher acknowledges as a model.

Benedictine options involve other religions in far more profound and formative ways than does the Benedict option; they resonate with the open, hospitable Orthodox Judaism exemplified by the late Lord Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to

2003, who wrote, “Those who are confident in their faith are not threatened but enlarged by the different faith of others.”⁸

Benedictine options’ engagement with other religions is formalized in Monastic Interreligious Dialogue,

an international monastic organization that promotes and supports dialogue, especially dialogue at the level of religious experience and practice, between Christian monastic men and women and followers of other religions.

It is a commission of the Benedictine Confederation with formal links to both branches of the Cistercian order. It acts in liaison with the Holy See’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and welcomes collaboration with other organizations that foster interreligious dialogue.

While the natural dialogue partners of Christian monastics are monastics of other religious traditions, Monastic Interreligious Dialogue also engages in spiritual dialogue with adherents of religions that do not have an institutionalized form of monasticism, for example—and in particular—with Muslims.⁹

It has been my privilege to be closely associated with Monastic Interreligious Dialogue for three decades. I have seen up close and personal the shifts, both seismic and subtle, that are prompted by encounters across religious lines. Benedictines become different. They report—universally in my experience—that in so doing they become more authentically Benedictine. It’s not at all a matter of strategic alliances, nor does it devolve into a least common denominator of “being good, nice, and fair to each other.” Because Benedictines know the melody of their own tradition so well, their ear is sensitive to the music in other traditions—their rhythms of practice, their scales of values, their tempo and dynamics of prayer, their dissonances and harmonies with the realities of community.

In the next two chapters I will examine how Benedictines have been especially venturesome in ecumenical and inter-

religious relations. In both arenas they have expressed what I consider the quintessence of Benedictine options, an image conjured by Father Kilian McDonnell, OSB, in one of his poems: “All our truths need bungee cords.”¹⁰ By contrast, the Benedict option prescribes grappling hooks.



chapter five

Other Christians¹

The ecumenical “how” of the Benedictine charism has sometimes lain dormant.

In the early church, monks were at least as notorious as ecclesiastical shock troops as they were famous as peacemakers. Some of the bitterest disputes between Eastern and Western Christianity have been ignited and fueled by monks. Echoes of Martin Luther’s revulsion at his own monastic identity can still be heard in lingering Protestant suspicion of a mode of life about which Luther prayed: “Would to God all monks and nuns would all forsake the cloisters, and thus all the cloisters in the world would cease to exist; this is what I would wish.”² Monasticism and ecumenism might be thought an unlikely pair.

But denominations matter less than they used to. People are much readier to take seriously the fact that monasticism antedates almost all the major splits in church history. Benedict can be claimed as Our Holy Father by far more than those who have OSB after their names, by even more than the increasing numbers of oblates. The monastery, additionally, has much wisdom to offer the still divided churches on what seeking God together both entails and promises.

Saint John’s, the world’s largest Benedictine monastery, established in 1967 the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research. In so doing, the monks of Saint John’s ac-

knowledged that the Rule of Benedict not only permits ecumenism—the Rule positively enjoins it. If the Rule makes the monks ecumenists, the monks in turn impart a special Benedictine spin to ecumenism. The Rule is a charter document of the ecumenical movement.

The Confluence of Traditions

Research during recent decades into the antecedents of the Rule of Benedict has raised a host of doubts about the originality of Benedict. The almost universal conviction now, that his Rule depends on the Rule of the Master, rather than the other way round, has led some scholars to suspect that Benedict, like Jesus in the acid of nineteenth-century historical skepticism, never even existed.

The quest of the historical Benedict is neither easy nor impossible, but as the scope of his originality has diminished, his significance for ecumenism has increased. We now recognize in Benedict a kind of originality rarer and more precious than the out-of-the-blue, bursting-unannounced-upon-the-scene individual inspiration that we prize so highly.

Benedict had two centuries of monastic tradition to draw on. Between Anthony's withdrawal to the desert at the beginning of the fourth century and Benedict's establishment of his community at Monte Cassino at the beginning of the sixth century, tens of thousands of men and women had adopted a dizzying variety of monastic manners of life, each variety a mixture of gospel and cultural influences, all of them appealing in one way or another to the life of the apostles as their model and warrant.

What the Rule of Benedict achieved was nothing less than the discovery of a central tradition in all the accumulated confusion. The crucial ecumenical point is this: the discovery was an act of historical imagination more than of historical research. Benedict knew the sources, to be sure; annotations to *RB1980* are irrefutable evidence of his familiarity with the past. But

Benedict knew that the central tradition was not a statistical mean or the majority opinion. The central tradition could be retrieved—indeed, known—only by persons covenanting together to create a school for the Lord’s service (Prol. 45). What the Rule did was to recover a central tradition that has survived and flourished through fifteen centuries. This central tradition is a many-splendored thing, constantly evolving.

We who long for a recovery of a central church tradition amid all the confusion dating back to the sixteenth and eleventh and even earlier centuries would do well to ponder the originality of Benedict’s Rule. Tradition will be truly accessible to us only as we commit ourselves to living it together. That “it” has more dimensions than Dreher’s Benedict option allows for.

Basis in the Bible

For Protestants, who tend to think of themselves as having a corner on due reverence for biblical authority, the lattice work of biblical citations in the Rule of Benedict is both reassuring and anomalous. Benedict was as fluent in biblical quotation as any proof-texting evangelical in our own day. While some of his scriptural references in support of this or that regulation are strained, he at least believed that Scripture is where you should look to find out what you ought to do.

But the Protestant who is comfortable when viewing a text italicized as often as Benedict’s Rule is nevertheless wonders how a form of life apparently so steeped in works-righteousness as Benedictine monasticism can honestly claim a biblical foundation.

It is this anomalous character of the Rule’s biblicism that makes Benedict’s “back to the Bible” call so significant ecumenically. Like the theological consensus statement of the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*,³ the Rule of Benedict goes beyond a catalogue of biblical passages to catch a biblical accent, a way

of speaking in which the life of faith can be characterized allusively, in images, rather than in rigid categories.

Moreover, Benedict's Rule is a timely reminder to Protestants that the Bible contains a great deal more than Paul's distinction between law and gospel. The Wisdom tradition, nearly always short shrifted in Protestant spirituality, is retrieved by the Rule and woven into the texture of the Christian life. Benedict reminds us that faith/works is not the only way to slice the gospel pie.

A Lay Community

It was probably no more than a century after the Rule of Benedict was written that most monks were becoming priests. As I noted earlier in chapter 1, this was the most significant transformation in the history of monasticism. Its fundamental importance is reaffirmed again and again as monks resolve and then unresolve not to seek ordination. The gravitational pull of the priesthood is almost irresistible, but there can be no doubt that Benedict conceived his monastery as a lay community.

Provision is made for priests to enter—"If any ordained priest asks to be received into the monastery, do not agree too quickly" (60.1)—and for laymen once entered to become priests (62), but it is clear that Benedict was legislating for the exception. The main point about the priests is that they are to get no special treatment; they are granted no honor in addition to the respect they, like all monks, are due in accordance to the date of entry into the monastery (60.5-7; 62.5, where "the goodness of his life" is the only criterion for advancement). "No one will be excused from kitchen service" (35.1).

If the recovery of serious Bible study provides much of the substance of ecumenical renewal in our time, the reassertion of the lay character of the church constitutes the form of that renewal. Clericalism bedevils all the churches, even those that originated historically in the cry that all believers are priests. The titanic battles over the location of the center of gravity in

Lumen Gentium, Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, can be seen as a macrocosmic expression of the struggle lived in microcosm every day in Benedictine monasteries: Is the church defined by the hierarchy of ordination or by God's election of a people? And the struggle is not limited to monasteries of men. Benedictine sisters are regularly reminded that it is only ordained men who can preside at their Eucharists.

No single action in the twentieth century is so laden with ecumenical potential as the Vatican Council fathers' decision to rest the church on the calling of the people of God. The theme of hierarchy is certainly sounded loud and clear in *Lumen Gentium*, and the persistent overt sexism in the Catholic Church is a sharp reminder of the gap between theory and practice, but in a wide historical perspective the change in theory is nothing short of revolutionary.

Conciliar sanction has been given to the suspicion that the church is in essence a lay community which, if proper precautions are taken, can tolerate priests.

A Family Affair

Benedict is at pains to make sure traveling monks and those who work at a distance will be praying at exactly the same time as the bulk of the community back home (50). He speaks of "the obligations of those who live there" (in the tent of the Lord) (Prol. 39). In many specific instances—for example, meal hours—he lays down regulations and then makes flexibility the overriding rule (37). When the monks are praying the Divine Office, a certain response is "to be said quite deliberately and slowly" to give stragglers time to enter the oratory before the moment at which tardiness obliges punishment (43.4).

In short, the Rule creates primarily a family, only secondarily an institution. The monastery is presented as a place where people dwell together in unity, not always in peace, but always in the conviction that they are in community together for the

long haul, for better or for worse, and that they need each other even when they cannot stand each other.

There can be no mistaking the Benedictine family for a modern pop-psychological discussion group in which the parents are nothing more than nondirective enablers. The abbot is in charge. Seldom if ever in the history of legislation has anyone been granted such awesome authority as the Rule of Benedict accords the abbot—but seldom also has any authority been so thoroughly hedged about as is the abbot's by the Rule.

The abbot represents Christ in the monastery (2.2). Benedict's outline of the abbot's role shows an uncanny grasp of the totality of the biblical portrait of Christ: ruler and servant, the one whose authority as ruler derives from identity and action as servant, the one who was made perfect through obedience, who emptied himself.

The tale of efforts to achieve ecumenical reunion by negotiating institutional concordats is a long one, on balance a dreary one. The problem with such enterprises is that they provide no context in which to recover a central tradition. Like arms control negotiations, they tend to deal in "bargaining chips" and are shot through with mutual suspicion. Each party focuses on what it will have to give up, lose, compromise. There is insufficient willingness to pay close attention when an idea emerges that nobody came into the conversation with—a requirement of genuine discernment, as noted in chapter 2.

Reconceiving the ecumenical challenge as the reestablishment of family relationships does not eliminate suspicion. It does, however, shift attention onto what everyone can gain. Families are certainly more than least common denominators—more even than the sum of their parts. The family is a mystery, as Benedict knew.

The recent practice of interim eucharistic fellowship (for example, in the Consultation on Church Union) may have done more than all the theological ink spilled over the last half century to bring real Christian unity closer—or rather, the practice of

life together is what finally makes the churches responsive to the theological convergence that says it is all right for Christians to dwell together and wrong for them not to.

Nothing Preferred to Prayer

“Nihil operi Dei praeponatur”—“Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (43.3). Prayer is the Work of God, according to Benedict. Prayer is a focal point of the faith of Christians today.

Faith and Ferment,⁴ the thorough study of the state of the churches in Minnesota undertaken by the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research and published in 1983, revealed that eighty-two percent of Minnesota Christians pray every day. Some observers of the cultural scene surmise that in this day of science, of cause and effect, of sociological, psychological, anthropological, historical explanation, prayer must surely be on the wane. The evidence is otherwise. It points to the fundamental ecumenical importance of prayer as a common commitment that knows no denominational fences.

Current historiography seeks to take us behind the front-page headlines of the past to the “people” and “lifestyle” sections, to the reconstruction of the textures, atmosphere, and folkways of individual and community life in generations that have preceded ours. Just as future historians of our time who fail to note the widespread practice of prayer among us will not be telling it like it was, so we distort what is past to us if we neglect the tenacious, persistent refusal of Benedictines century after century to prefer anything to the Work of God.

Luther saw the vow as the distinguishing mark of the monk. Because he judged vows to be antithetical to the gospel, he scorned monasticism. According to the Rule of Benedict, however—and in light of actual monastic practice—monastics are identified by what they prefer nothing to—prayer. The monk or sister thus becomes not an ecumenical stumbling block but an ecumenical pioneer.

If the centrality of prayer in the Rule is an ecumenical rallying point, the content of the Work of God further confirms the Rule as an ecumenical charter.

The psalms are at the heart of the whole enterprise. The parts of the Rule of Benedict that put the greatest strain on the patience of those who include the Rule in their programs of *lectio divina* (spiritual reading) are the chapters that go into minute detail about which psalms are to be said in which order on which occasions. Some of these chapters almost drive one into allegorical exegesis. But the spiritual benefit is right there on the surface, in all the boring detail: care must be taken to maintain the Psalter's integrity.

The Psalter of course carries the monk several times a day, every day, year in year out, back to the Bible. Even more, the Psalter in its range and depth charts the spiritual universe more completely than any collection of spontaneous prayers. The psalms remind those who pray them regularly of spiritual concerns far beyond the limits of their own experience and their own immediate worries.

Praying the psalms is precisely the Work of God, not a work we fashion with our own hands and our own intentions. In this Work of God all Christians can learn that just as there are varieties of religious experience, so are there varieties of religious obedience: the confident, the despairing, the joyful, the sorrowing, the content, the angry, the king, the commoner—all these and many more live side by side in the Psalter and acknowledge each other's place in the people of God. Surely one reason monks are ecumenists by instinct at least, maybe even by nature, is that the psalms have ground down the sharp edges of their ecclesiastical exclusivism.

Hospitality

I grew up in a part of the world—Texas—that has a well-deserved reputation for hospitality. When a Texan drawls “Y’all come see us now” to a brand-new acquaintance, the expression