

BEING REAL, PART FOUR

SPIRITUAL TOOLS FOR AUTHENTIC LIVING

A Series of Excerpts for Further Study and Reflection

BEING REAL WITH OTHERS

All the speakers at Trinity Institute national conference on Benedictine spirituality agreed that the pathway to an authentic spiritual life was not a solitary journey. We all need the support and discipline of community life.

Unavoidable Otherness

Rowan Williams

The [spiritual authenticity/holiness] envisaged by the *Rule* is entirely inseparable from the common life. The tools of the work are bound up with the proximity of other people, and the same other people, which is the catch. As Benedict says at the end of chapter four, the workshop, God's workshop, is itself the stability of the community. Or, to pick up an earlier language, it's the unavoidable nearness of these other people that becomes an extension of ourselves. One of the things we have to grow into unself-consciousness about is the steady environment of the same others. To put it a bit differently, the promise to live in stability is the most drastic way imaginable of recognizing the otherness of other people, just as in marriage, really. If the other person is there ultimately on sufferance or on condition, if there is a time expiry dimension to our relations with particular other people, we put a limit on the amount of otherness we can manage. Beyond a certain point, we reserve the right to say that our terms must prevail after all. Stability, or marital fidelity or any seriously covenanted relation to person or community, resigns that [self-centered] possibility, which is why it feels so dangerous.

At the very start, then, of thinking about Benedictine [authenticity/holiness], there stands a principle well worth applying to other settings, other relationships, not least to the church itself. How often do we think about the [authenticity] of the church, the *holiness* of the church, as bound up with her

habitual acceptance of the otherness of others who have made the same commitment? And what does it feel like to imagine authenticity/holiness as an unselfconscious getting used to others? The presence of the other, like a tool worn smooth and gray in the hand. The prosaic settledness of some marriages. The ease of an old priest celebrating the Eucharist. The musician's relation to a familiar instrument playing a familiar piece. These belong to the same family of experience as the kind of sanctity that Benedict evokes here. ...

Well, the tools of good works, in the *Rule*, include the Golden Rule, several of the Ten Commandments, and the corporal works of mercy: clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead and so on. But the bulk of them have to do with virtues that can be seen as necessary for the maintenance of stability as a context for growth in holiness/authenticity. It's as though Benedict were asking, "What does it take to develop people who can live stably together?" He doesn't begin, you see, by commending stability--"Stability is good for you"--but by mapping out an environment where the long-term sameness of my company will not breed bitterness, cynicism, or fear of openness with each other. If you have to spend a lifetime with the same people, it's easy to create a carapace of habitual response, which belongs at the surface level, a set of standard reactions which don't leave you vulnerable. And that's the exact opposite of the habitual acceptance of otherness which we were speaking about a little while back, though it can sometimes dangerously resemble it.

--Rowan Williams, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 8-10.

Holy Realism Welcomes Others

Kathleen Norris

Holy realism is ... really the opposite of narcissism. It welcomes the presence of others, not as intruders on our own personal stage play but as gifts from God. The great Easter story about St. Benedict comes to mind. He says to someone who has come to his hermitage to tell him it is Easter ... he may have interrupted St. Benedict at an inconvenient time, but Benedict looked at him and said, "I know that it is Easter for I have been granted the grace of seeing you." That's Holy Realism, which seeks the balance, the true proportion in all things. ...

... Mortality not only connects but unites us, and I can't help but think, of course, of the World Trade Center as I say that. I lived in New York until 1974, and I watched the Towers go up. One of the few pieces of gratitude I can muster for

that day is before they were coming down, all of the messages that came out from these people who knew they were going to die: "I love you, take care of yourself, take care of the children." I think one of my favorites was "You've been a good friend." These wonderful messages coming out from people who suddenly were faced with their common mortality in a way that none of them had expected. It seemed an ordinary day and it was anything but that. Remember, every day that you're going to die.

--Kathleen Norris, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 16-21.

Kathleen Norris goes on to argue that it is easy to use the differences between us and others to distance ourselves from them. But Christ asks us to 'embrace' something radically different: to love others as if they were ourselves.

One Against All Polarities

Kathleen Norris

Holy Realism ... rejects polarization. And of course, we're so comfortable with polarization in our lives, in our churches, and in the world. It's so easy to think in terms of "us" and "them," and you can put any label you want: liberal/conservative, gay or straight, secular or theocratic. But for the Christian, Christ blazes through our comfort zones and asks us to embrace something radically different.

Just one example of what I mean. I have been living in Hawaii for a time, and there's a huge military presence there. Every armed service has at least one base on the island of Oahu alone. When troops were beginning to be deployed to the Persian Gulf, some women of our church who had been making Anglican prayer beads were asked to make some for the troops. They got, like, fifty volunteers. Whole families would come. They ended up making and distributing over 1200. Some of them were literally given to troops as they boarded the plane. They were given out by the military chaplains. With each set of beads was a little note from St. Clements's Church with information on how to pray the beads, but also saying one could simply touch them and remember someone back home is praying for you.

Well, this little project made the newspapers and of course we got a few calls from people accusing us of aiding and abetting murderers. But I found it interesting in a church that some of the same people who were marching on

every peace march in town were also making beads. One man told me that in the process of stringing the beads and making the knots and thinking of the young men and women who would carry them made him meditate on what it means to be one in Christ. It's not necessarily comfortable and it's beyond what we're capable for ourselves, but it is a truth that Christ does make us one against all polarities.

Well, like most Episcopal churches and like every monastery I've encountered, St. Clements's Church in Honolulu is not a congregation of the like-minded. Every variety of theological and political persuasion is to be found there, and somehow Christ works with and through us. The Rule of St. Benedict comes from the 6th century, which was a time at least as unsettled and violent and fractious as our own. But Benedict had faith in the ability of people with strikingly different backgrounds, social classes, aptitudes, interests, political beliefs, to come together and live at peace. People who could easily be enemies. I think looking outside the Christian faith, Christ's opening up to the world that notion that everyone is our neighbor and if we are to love, we're to love our neighbor as ourselves.

--Kathleen Norris 27-29.

The Function Of Community

Joan Chittister

Benedictine spirituality is intent on our realizing that the presence of the other is also essential to my own development as well. Community is a Benedictine value. Do we need it now? We exist to be miracle workers for one another, and it is in community that we are called to grow. It's in community that we come to see God in the other. It's in community that we see our own emptiness filled up by the other. It's community that calls me beyond the pinched horizons of my own life, my own country, my own race, and gives me the gifts I do not of myself have within me. ...

... A Benedictine spirituality of community calls for more than togetherness. Togetherness is very cheap community. Benedictine community calls for the open mind and the open heart. Benedict called always for minds opened to the shattering implications of the Scriptures. The fact is that Jesus was an assault on every closed mind in Israel. To those who thought that illness was a punishment for sin, Jesus called for openness. To those who considered tax collectors

incapable of salvation, Jesus called for openness. To those who believed that the Messiah to be real had to be a military figure, Jesus was the nonviolent call to openness. And so Benedict also calls us to open-heartedness. The Benedictine heart, the heart that saved Europe before us, is a place without boundaries. [It is] a place where the truth of the oneness of the human community shatters all barriers, opens all doors, refuses all prejudices, welcomes all strangers, listens to all voices, black and white, Arab and Jew, male and female. The data are in. The world is an electronic, commercial, political village. We cannot, you and I, go on much longer simply nodding to the neighbors in the parking lot after church in the name of hospitality and community. We must begin to see the immorality of being socially, globally, unconscious. Socially, globally, narcissistic, and calling it the free market, democracy, and unipolarism. Individualism has not saved us. We need the wisdom of community now.

--Joan Chittister, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 24-26.

This urgent appeal for global consciousness was picked up and extended by Brother Laurence Freeman in his address.

The New Holiness: Universal Consciousness

Laurence Freeman

The eternal principles of the *Rule* are very easily translated into other ways of life. I was struck by this just in the past week, when on two continents I received two oblates of our Benedictine oblate community. One of them was a 24-year-old Italian engineering student, and the other an 84-year-old French Canadian retired businessman. When I asked both of them on different occasions what made them want to take this step, which was for them clearly a profound personal commitment on their spiritual journey, they gave surprisingly similar answers: simplicity of life, spiritual friendship, the need for a framework of values in their lives. [They were looking for a] *Rule of life* and the sense of being part of a community that itself is an expression of a living tradition.

The Benedictine oblate community that they entered is part of the World Community for Christian Meditation, 25 or so years old. It's a global network of mostly lay contemplatives extending through a hundred countries, inspired by the work and vision of John Main and his teaching on Christian meditation, the Christian contemplative tradition which he himself drew from the desert

tradition. I often think I have two monasteries that sort of flow into each other, one with walls in London and the other without walls. Not all the meditators in this monastery without walls choose to be Benedictine oblates, but some do. And they exemplify what I think the others are doing, just as the monk in the cloister exemplifies not a higher calling than a married couple in the world, but they exemplify the monastic archetype that is in each human psyche. There is a monk within each of us. And some of us express this in the monastic state and way of life, usually because we're not too good at doing other things. ...

If Benedict's contribution to Western culture and the survival of it through the Dark Ages was the God and person-centered local community, today his *Rule* can also inspire a God and person-centered global community. ... This new global dimension of community, as St. Benedict [might have] envisioned it, is directly related, I would suggest, to a new kind of holiness. If we've got a new kind of community in the world, maybe it's not so surprising that we have a new kind of holiness as well. Simone Weil in 1943, looking into the darkness of that time, said this: "Today it is not nearly enough to be a saint, but we must have a saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself without precedent. A new type of sanctity is indeed a fresh spring for invention. If all is kept in proportion and if the order of each thing is preserved, it is almost equivalent to a new revelation of the universe and of human destiny. It is the exposure of a large portion of truth and beauty hitherto concealed under a thick layer of dust, the new holiness." This amazing statement, this spiritual vision, is just what we need when we look into the black hole of our present predicament. It's the hope we need for our own dark age. And there is Benedict for us, right in the middle of it. Interestingly, Simone Weil had her turning point during Holy Week at [a] Benedictine monastery. That passage I've just read is pure Benedict. "If all is kept in proportion and if the order of each thing is preserved, it is almost equivalent to a new revelation of the universe and of human destiny." Proportion and order: that's what Benedict is so good at, especially in times of crisis.

So what about this new holiness? What is it? What's new about it? Surely holiness is holiness, saints are saints. Not quite. For Simone Weil the specific characteristic of this new holiness is an explicit sense of universality. In the saints of the past, there was a sense of universality. It's almost part of holiness to have this sense of interconnection, interdependence. But it was largely implicit. Even St. Francis, one of the most universally minded of saints, was bound by his culture, his time, his politics, his religion. Modern holiness, however, according to Simone Weil, knows that the universe is a country, and that for the truly

spiritual man or woman it is our only country here below. And it's this vision of holiness with the explicit universality of the global consciousness that surely is our way towards peace, our way to a love of country that is not nationalistic, patriotism without nationalism, local identity without aggressive behavior towards your neighbor, and religious belief without intolerance or prejudice.

One sign and, I think, a requirement of this new holiness and global consciousness is inter-religious dialogue. And Benedict has a great deal to teach us in his quiet, modest way about the nature of dialogue. We're not very good at dialogue. We have lots of meetings. Maybe some of you are relieved that you don't have any today. We have meetings coming out of our ears. But dialogue is not so easy to achieve. This may be one of the great contributions of the monastic life, to developing models of dialogue, discovering the common ground between all peoples. Monks, when they meet each other, whether they're Buddhist or Christian or Hindu or whatever, recognize each other as being very similar. When they do that, they begin to develop the possibility of friendship, and out of that friendship can come the miraculous experience of seeing reality from the other person's point of view.

... The real signs of global consciousness are things like the meeting of the world religious leaders in Assisi. The Pope told them that their work for peace transcends religious differences. Or the photo in every student dorm of "Earth Rise" taken from the moon. Or closer to home, that universal surge of compassion, of empathy that followed the World Trade Center attack. I think the Benedict of today, who is here, incidentally, would be very attuned to this global consciousness, the sense of ecological responsibility, universal human rights, the equality of men and women, religious freedom. But he wouldn't have gotten ideological or politically correct about it. That's not his style. So it's interesting to think how he would have added this global consciousness to his *Rule* with his typical pragmatism. So global community is the new holiness.

-- Laurence Freeman, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 14-20.

During the final panel discussion the speakers were asked if they could think of a practice or ritual that could reinforce for churchgoers the sense of belonging to a community.

Oblation

Rowan Williams

I think it's been very important in the history of Methodism that the covenant service is the main form of new year liturgy for Methodists. And it is, of course, a colossally moving and heavily freighted service. To have that used not too frequently ... you can't go through that process too often because it is too weighty, I think. But to have that on a regular basis, something a little bit more than just the renewal of baptismal vows but a bit of spelling out what baptismal vows entail, yes, I would love to see that. And I think it would also meet the need of a good many people who, perhaps having come to faith in Christ as adults when they've been baptized as infants, feel there isn't a sufficiently visible reentry. That's why some people press for rebaptism on occasions, and I don't think that's the answer by any means. I've got all sorts of theological problems about that. But people do need to mark this, and I think covenant renewal is the basis for it.

Laurence Freeman

The monastic profession is traditionally seen as a kind of second baptism. I see that as a very beautiful moment in a community when a profession is made. But I also see it very strongly in oblation. The Benedictine oblation follows the general idea of the monastic progress through the [approval of the] bishop and a novitiate, then, up to a final oblation, which could be after one year or it could be after several years. But I've never received a final oblation on behalf of a community from someone without feeling that that person is making a very deep renewal and an expression of their spiritual journey. I think we need to make [this kind of commitment] because once you [make] a [conscious] expression of something that's already [part of your life], you change. You're actually moving along through the very act of making the expression or the profession. I think we need more opportunities for people in the Christian life and different forms of Christian life to make those [commitments]. Oblation is a very powerful one.

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