**BENEDICTINE EDUCATION: TWO WORDS**

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It is my privilege to address you today on the “Benedictine” part of “Benedictine Education”. By conjoining “Benedictine” and “Education” I am led to believe that you are envisaging a process in which what is distinctive is not primarily the material content of the educational process, but the mood and the manner in which this is communicated. The suggestion is that this formal element of education is fundamentally influenced by the tradition which stems from the lived experience of the Rule of Saint Benedict.

Obviously, I have nothing to say about curricula. The objective content of education is largely determined by external governing, accrediting and examining bodies and, in a broad sense, is common to all schools. I will focus my remarks on the shaping or context in which matter is communicated. Its formal component. You will remember that Lord Halifax (1881-1958) ironically defined “education” as that which remains when you have forgotten all that you ever learned in school. He explained further that “the aim of education should be to convert the mind into a living fountain, and not a reservoir. That which is filled by merely pumping in, will be emptied by pumping out.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What I am talking about is communicating a love of learning that will long outlast the necessity of remembering details or sitting exams.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So, I have the task of talking about something that is real but largely intangible. I shall eventually outline my thoughts under two headings; two words drawn from the tradition. One evokes the attitude appropriate in educators, the other the formative matrix in which education takes place in the lives of students. But first, let me say something about tradition itself.

**1. Benedictine Tradition**

When we say that we belong to the Benedictine tradition, what do we mean? Too often the term “tradition” is interpreted as being something unchanging and even stodgy. Some see it as quaint in its own way because it seems to come from another more cultured age, and so has less to do with brash, contemporary reality. Certainly, it seems to many as more conservative than progressive. Whether that is a good thing depends on your viewpoint.

However, this is completely to misunderstand the nature of tradition. The term itself is more like a verb than a noun; it refers to the **act** of handing something on, not to whatever it is that is transmitted. Inevitably, as whatever is passed from one person to another, from one generation to the next and to each new culture, it is re-formed, taking its new specificity not from the past but from the situation in which it now finds itself. Benedictine tradition has kept itself alive by relentless inculturation, forming coalitions wherever it arrived with whatever was there. It was as much at home in the High Middle Ages as it was in the missionary expansion of the nineteenth century, in the citadels of high culture as in the newborn colonies of Australia. Tradition is, fundamentally, the transmission of life. Its precise form is dictated by its target. In each of its incarnations it is unique, even though there is continuity stretching back more than a millennium.

Spiritual tradition is more than a sociological phenomenon – ultimately its energy derives from the self-revelation of God. In fact, “energy” is a near synonym for such tradition. It is the act of passing on something of transcendent value, allowing it to mutate to suit the condition of those who receive it. Ultimately a spiritual tradition, in the Christian sense, is handing on the Good News. The “news” is “good” not only because it contains valuable information about morality or metaphysics, but because it communicates the capacity and the energy to re-incarnate what has been received, and to do this in a new conformation.

The Benedictine tradition is more than a specialised vocabulary or a code of conduct – however admirable. It is the transmission of life. While continuity is of its essence, its mission is incomplete unless it becomes an agent of change – unless it makes a difference to those who receive it. It is an ongoing history of a complex of beliefs, values and practices that crystallised in the sixth-century text known as “the Rule of Saint Benedict”. Beyond its objective content there is a person-to-person element that is at the heart of its power to begin a process of transformation. The tradition does not exist apart from persons. It cannot be bottled and preserved. It is electric; the spark leaps from one person to the other. This is probably what was meant by the catechetical mantra of the 1960s: “Religion is caught, not taught”.

In practical terms this means that we are receivers before we become transmitters. *Nemo dat quod non habet.* We can communicate to others the Benedictine “something” only to the extent that we ourselves have received it. We have been formed by the tradition and so it becomes possible for us to contribute to the “Benedictine” formation of others, mostly by what we are, much more than by anything we do.

I have plucked from the tradition two words that will colour our interaction with those in our care. Each englobes a universe within its boundaries, but allow me to sketch out some of the implications they involve.

**2. The First Word: Honour**

Sir Larry Siedentop, an erstwhile professor of political philosophy at Oxford, initiated a search for the origins of certain important themes in contemporary Western culture such as human dignity, human equality, human rights. Tracking back through the centuries of the European Enlightenment to the world of classical antiquity, he came to the conclusion that the roots of contemporary liberal secularism are to be found in … the New Testament. That is to say, in the teaching of Jesus, particularly as propounded by Saint Paul.[[3]](#footnote-3) “The equality of souls in search of Salvation was at the heart of Christian belief.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He expounds this thesis in some detail. What is relevant to our purpose is the substantial role he assigns to Benedictine monasticism in elaborating his thesis, seeing the monastic institution as embodying and transmitting this tradition of Christian humanism.

The image of social order that monasticism preserved was not that of the ancient world. Rather it suggested a new foundation for social order. For, despite its many failings and compromises, monasticism associated the ideas of law and obedience not with unthinking custom or external force, but with individual consent and the role of conscience. Monasticism offered the glimpse of “another world”, a world that at least approximated to Christian moral intuitions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And:

The gradual organization of monasticism reveals more about the moral thrust of Christianity than what had become the “state” religion of the Roman empire by the late fourth century could do. As hermits or anchorites became cenobites – that is, as asceticism became communal – Christian beliefs began to generate a new conception of “community”, an utterly new form of social organization.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The qualities he praises in Benedictine monasteries include voluntary association (we would say that they are “intentional communities”), the emphasis on individual conscience and its role in conditioning social relationships, and the recognition of the dignity of work in a world where slavery still existed. “The form of community consistent with equality of souls was essentially a community of shared values.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Common values, transmitted through teaching, once internalised could replace the need for constant vertical intervention.

Benedict’s Rule reinforced the democratizing of authority, insisting that monastic leaders temper their government with a “listening” culture and respect the different needs of individual monks. The object was “to work towards the fellow citizenship of the heavenly kingdom”. To promote such moral equality, Benedict sought to eliminate social distinctions within the monastery.[[8]](#footnote-8)

And:

The ideal was self-regulation, often summarized as the monks being of “one heart and one mind”. Such self-regulation was meant to minimize the need for sanctions…. However difficult to achieve, there was in theory “no distinction” between persons on the grounds of social status, whether of higher or lower class, slave or free-born.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We who have been formed in the shadow of the Counter-Reformation and under the ongoing influence of the Prince-Abbots of the nineteenth century have, perhaps, been subjected to a not-disinterested barrage in favour of Saint Benedict’s supposed preference for strong vertical hierarchy. The question is a little more complex than a rapid reading reveals. It is true that Benedict’s approach to obedience was initially sterner than that of the source he was adapting.[[10]](#footnote-10) This may have been because he himself had never lived as a cenobite, *sub regula et abbate*. He spent some three years as a hermit and, thereafter, was the superior of whatever community he was in – not always successfully.[[11]](#footnote-11) There is evidence in the Rule, however, that his approach evolved in the course of a lifetime. This is why it is sound hermeneutics to do as Terrence Kardong suggests, and read the Rule of Saint Benedict from back to front.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Rule is a complex document and it is delusional to think that a simplistic reading of the text will yield sound insights.

It seems likely that the dynamic powering Saint Benedict’s own development was his appreciation of the dignity of persons. Examples of this concern, I am sure, are very familiar to you, but I presume on your forbearance to survey some of the more importance examples of his attitude in this matter.

Early on, in his global sweep of appropriate good works, Saint Benedict includes the injunction “to honour all people” (RB 4:8). It is easily missed in the long list of laudable acts. The honour enjoined by the Decalogue to be shown to parents he expands to include all people, supplementing it with a form of the Golden Rule: “not to do to another what he does not wish to be done to himself”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Honour involves more than treating people well. Civility and courtesy are recognised as important in lubricating the functioning of any group. They can be practised with a minimum of skill and without too much personal investment. Respect goes deeper: it acknowledges and appreciates the other’s rank or achievement. Honour transcends even that. It accepts other persons gratefully for what they are. It does not wish to change them. It communicates an unconditional positive regard.

To honour another means being prepared to take second place in their presence. It means giving them room to occupy the available space, stepping back to allow them to abound. To decrease so that they may increase. Honour involves a high degree of self-restraint. It involves being reluctant to impose one’s will or one’s style or one’s methodology on others. It means not being overly infallible in the opinions expressed, lest others be discouraged from proposing a contrary viewpoint. In a sense, honour gives to the other permission to exist, or to continue to exist, as they are. It encourages the emergence of what is deepest, providing a nurturing environment in which the inner self may become ever more visible and more active

Honour must be truthful; it cannot be feigned. Flunkies of all kinds are trained to manufacture the appearance of honour for the gratification of the rich and powerful, but such professional “humility” switches off when they gather out of sight to dissect the delusional grandeur of their customers. The key to genuine honour is that it perceives – sometimes under unlikely appearances – a dignity that is both unique and worthy of spontaneous admiration. Persons who show honour are high-quality persons because they see more than others but, instead of claiming high value for themselves, they project it onto those whom they encounter.

We instinctively give honour to those whose outstanding qualities we admire. Saint Benedict advises more. We are to give honour to all persons, irrespective of their visible worthiness. This indiscriminate honour is demonstrated in the attitude embodied in his chapter on welcoming strangers. Note that when he is talking about hospitality, he understands this as receiving strangers, rather than merely entertaining friends or being nice to benefactors. Notice the supercharged attentiveness to which he exhorts his monks. They are to welcome all strangers as a matter of policy, but to be especially mindful of the dignity of the poor, which is not so apparent to casual observation.

This universal honouring of others is given explicit expression in Saint Benedict’s instructions to the abbot on how he is to serve the community.[[14]](#footnote-14) Listen to this passage.

Let him make no distinction of persons in the monastery. Let him not love one more than another – unless he be found better in good deeds or observance [*oboedientia*]. One who is freeborn is not to be given precedence over a former slave, unless there is a reasonable cause. … We are all one in Christ, whether slave or free, and we undertake an equal struggle to serve under one Lord, and there is no favouritism in God. … Therefore, let there be from [the abbot] an equal charity in everything and let one discipline prevail for all according to merit (RB 2:16-22).[[15]](#footnote-15)

On the one hand there is equality, on the other, there is sensitivity to the differences to be found among persons. If there is favouritism it is to be extended to the weak and the undeserving (RB 34:1). A preferential option for the poor, as it were. The abbot’s task is to take care of sickly souls and not to exercise some form of tyranny over the strong (RB 27:6).

Accepting people as they are and treating them differently is a key component of the abbot’s pastoral service. “Let the abbot know that he has received a difficult and arduous task: to govern souls and to be at the service of many lifestyles (*mores*)” (RB 2:31). Notice the verb in the final clause; he is to be at the service of different personalities, attitudes, ways of acting. Even different vocations within in the community. Not just accepting of them or responding to them, but giving them precedence over his own preferences. He is, after all, the representative of Christ (RB 2:2, 63:13) who came not to be served but to serve. The abbot also is bound by the precept that “no one should follow what he judges useful to himself but rather [what is useful] for another” (RB 72:7). And this not only in the abbot’s personal life, but also in his pastoral ministry. He takes his cue from others and not from his own inclinations. The abbot is to accord due honour to the reality of what is outside himself.

This is not to say that the ideal abbot is indecisive. Saint Benedict gives a fourfold path to decision-making: consultation, listening, reflection, judgement; and only then is it considered prudent to decide and to act. Consultation means more than “asking around”, it is a matter of formally convoking the whole community (or, in matters of less importance, the seniors), and asking what he should do (RB 3:1). Consultation is not a pretext for advocacy, it gives the abbot the possibility of hearing views which are different from those which he himself may hold. This is why the younger and less socialised monks are to be heard with special attention since it is to them, and others on the margins, that God often reveals what is better (RB 3:3; 61:4). The interesting word is “often”. What is the point of consulting if one is seeking only to have one’s own views confirmed? Sincere listening to others is followed by serious reflection. In reaching his decision the abbot is to take into consideration that he will have to render an account of his administration at the Last Judgement (RB 2:6, 2:37-39, 3:11, 27:5-7, 55:22, 64:7, 65:22). Only after these preliminaries does he weigh the options and move into action. Saint Benedict means the abbot to give due honour to the viewpoints of others in the community rather than administer his flock by a sequence of “captain’s calls” based on what he believes to be his own insights.

In executing his decisions, the abbot is not to be a micro-manager. In contrast to his immediate source, Benedict recognises the value of delegation and the subsidiarity that follows it. This means that the abbot is not the only one who makes administrative decisions in the monastery. He provides the deans (RB 21), the cellarer (RB 31), the prior (RB 65) – if the community desires one – and others who serve in particular capacities, with a mandate and a policy. It is left to them to operate within these parameters. These officials are chosen for their suitability for the task, not as an expression of favouritism (RB 21;1, 21:3-4, 31:1-2, 38:12, 47:1, 53:21, 58:6). Saint Benedict recognises that the abbot may not have the skills to deal with a particularly difficult situation – or a particularly difficult person – in which case he should make use of wise senior brothers to do for him what he cannot do himself (RB 27: 2-3).

Saint Benedict’s instructions to the cellarer reflect the abbot’s own basic attitude towards the monks. First of all there must be a concern for the quality of his own life (RB 31:8) so that he is not acting out of his dark side, or projecting his vices onto others. Then, he is to take special care of those who are less able to fend for themselves (RB 31:9). He is to make sure that he does not grieve (RB 31:6) or scandalise the brothers (RB 31:16). He is to respond to an unreasonable request reasonably and with humility and not upset the one who made it (RB 31:7).

Treating all with equal honour means treating everyone differently. Honour takes its qualitative differentiation from the one to whom it is directed. Benedict seems aware of the New Testament vision of the Christian community as the body of Christ. He uses the word *corpus* (RB 61:6) for the community and *membra* (RB 34:1) for the monks. Notwithstanding the obvious pluriformity of the community, he affirms its fundamental unity in Christ (RB 2:20). This means that the monastic community is one body, but its members have different and complementary functions. Nobody who has ever visited a monastery would conclude that monks are clones. Monks are not interchangeable. Unity and equal dignity are not the same as an imposed uniformity which does not acknowledge and celebrate the uniqueness of each. Talented individuals are permitted to use their gifts, provided such employment does not subvert the underlying purpose of their coming to the monastery (57:1).

The monastic community described in the *Rule of the Master* – if a community ever existed – seems to have been something of a one-man band. In fact the author names the abbot as a “Spiritual Caesar” (RM 93:63). But Saint Benedict, by encouraging his monks to share responsibilities, was making provision to build up a pool of potential candidates to succeed whoever happened to be abbot at the moment. And he was prepared to entrust to the community the task of election, rather than nominating a new superior from on high.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Not only is the abbot expected to take measures to ensure the continuity of the community after his departure from the scene (that usually meant after his death) but, in large measure, it was anticipated that he would be almost invisible in the everyday administration of the community. The three verbs used by Saint Benedict to describe the abbot’s function are: *docere*, *constituere*, and *iubere*: to teach, to establish as policy and to give orders (RB 2:4). His fundamental task is to establish a climate of meaning in the community through his instruction – and Saint Benedict expects the delegated officials to do likewise. This is, I think, a crucial element in the Benedictine notion of authority: it is not primarily a command structure, but something more subtle. It involves giving overt and frequent expression to the beliefs and values which embody the community’s identity so that they may be absorbed and assimilated by the monks. Once the beliefs and values are internalised, the monks will conduct themselves accordingly. To ensure that this happens practice will need to be defined and codified; so, the abbot also formulates policy. This is the *regula* component of the formula *sub regula vel abbate*.Historically, policy has been codified in customaries (books of customs) and these have played a significant role in the preservation of the Benedictine lifestyle. If there are gaps not covered by teaching or custom, then the abbot is to intervene personally; but this is not his primary task.

What the abbot teaches is not of his own devising. He simply hands on the tradition of evangelical life that he has received and lived. “Nothing **outside** what the Lord has enjoined’ (*nihil* ***extra*** *praeceptum Domini*) is Saint Benedict’s formula. This formative teaching is not merely verbal. It is, above all, by example.

Therefore, when someone assumes the name of abbot, he ought to lead his disciples through a twofold teaching. That is, he ought to manifest all that is good and holy more by deeds than by words. In this way, to receptive disciples he will propound what the Lord enjoins by words, but to the hardhearted and untrained he will demonstrate the divine precepts by his own actions. Everything that he teaches his disciples to be unacceptable, he must show by his actions as not to be done… (RB 2:11-13)

The abbot is expected to model his own teaching by his behaviour and so initiate a process of education by exposure. Benedict condemns superiors who do not practise what they preach (RB 4:61). Borrowing a clause from the *Rule of Saint Augustine*, Benedict insists that the abbot’s task is not simply claiming precedence, but to serve a purpose: *prodesse magis quam præesse* (RB 64:8). He serves this purpose by being one with his monks – the commendatory abbots of the Middle Ages and the Prince-Abbots of later times who constructed gorgeous mansions for their own use and lived apart from the monks, had a disastrous impact on their communities.[[17]](#footnote-17) Perhaps this is easier to avoid nowadays because the abbot is mostly chosen from among the members of the community and not parachuted in from outside. That his personal history, with whatever idiocies it contains, is known to the community, and his own formators may still be alive and well, means that it is unlikely that any pretentious airs he tries to assume will be taken seriously.

This modelling by the abbot should not be understood as merely a professional performance to be left aside when not under observation. It needs to stem from deeply personal attitudes that have been formed by long exposure to both the texts and the living exemplars of the tradition he is seeking to transmit. The abbot should embody in his own attitudes and behaviour the qualities he wishes to see flourishing in his monks. The fundamental stance of a Benedictine abbot should be to treat those in his care with honour – I am almost inclined to say “with extravagant honour”, because it should be more expansive than the individual monk seems to deserve.

It is incumbent on persons in authority to be assiduous in exchanging those common civilities on which Pope Francis insists: Please. Thank you. Sorry.[[18]](#footnote-18) Beyond this first step, always to treat those in their care with unfailing courtesy, and beyond that with sincere respect, and beyond that with honour. All of this demands a great deal of self-restraint. Not being impetuous and over-reactive, limiting the scope of one’s self-assertion, and refraining from making judgements until all the evidence is examined. It means stepping back to make room for others while, at the same time, not allowing the erosion of whatever is necessary for the service that authority renders. Giving honour to others flows from competence and confidence; it is not a sign of timidity or weakness. It recalls Samson’s riddle in the Book of Judges (14:14), “Out of strength comes sweetness.”

Leaders who take Saint Benedict as their guide will likely impart a beneficent character to their administration and set an example not only for their staff but for students who come within their sphere of influence and, so, serve as models of attitudes and behaviours that are greatly to be desired.

There is a word in the monastic tradition that describes the subjective state of leaders who sincerely honour those around them. The word is “humility” A familiar term, but one sorely abused. So, let me look a little more closely at what it means.

**2. The Second Word: Humility**

So much nonsense has been written about humility over the years that I feel a certain reluctance in using the term. Too often humility has a connotation of undervaluing oneself or making a pretence of doing so for some ulterior purpose. People in a position of dominance often preach humility to those under them to reinforce their own power and to pre-empt any thought of rebellion in the pews. Roget’s *Thesaurus* includes “mouselike” among the synonyms. In the list of antonyms words like “arrogance” and “pomposity” figure, and we notice that those in power are often publicly condemned for these vices. It appears that humility is a quality we notice lacking in others but prefer not to embrace for ourselves.

Mostly, in careless everyday usage, humility is seen as a social virtue; it concerns the quality of our favoured mode of self-presentation to others. In contrast, I would like to propose that, firstly, humility is not a virtue and, secondly, its primary field of operation is not social interchange. It is a quality that is essentially interior and only secondarily open to observation by others.

Of course, the Rule of Saint Benedict has a great deal about humility and the ladder with its twelve steps is well-known to you. It is often interpreted as a program of virtue. Yet it is clear from reading John Cassian, Saint Benedict’s source for this chapter, that the “steps” are not programmatic but phenomenological. They are indications (*indicia*) of what is manifested in the life of one who is growing spiritually.[[19]](#footnote-19) Humility is not a triumph of will power and effort,[[20]](#footnote-20) but an easing into a more human, more natural, less toxic form of existence. It is not driven by a desire to conform to external standards of behaviour, but is the natural consequence of a person growing in self-truth through responsiveness to the grace of God. What I am saying is that humility is the outcome of living a spiritual life. If you want to be humble, you have to live a more spiritual life; if you want others to be humble, it is a matter of providing them with the theory and the means to practise spiritual living.

But there is more. Real humility derives from being exposed to a reality that is infinitely higher and greater than ourselves. I begin to see myself in relation to something that is larger and nobler. As Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote: “Humility is born of a first encounter of the reason with the [divine] Word.”[[21]](#footnote-21) It is this grace-given exposure to the self-revelation of God – in whatever form it assumes – that begins the person on the pathway of authentic humility. Because it is the fruit of an activation and enlightenment of the mind and heart, humility is also a journey to the truth about oneself, about one’s relations with others, about one’s relation with God. Humility is thus viewed as an advance in self-knowledge in all its aspects, positive and negative. That is why the first sign for which Saint Benedict looks is “fear of the Lord” – not so much being terrorised by God but by being overawed by the wonder of God: the “mystery that is both fearsome and fascinating”.[[22]](#footnote-22) This results in our being serious and sober in self-assessment, putting aside all repression and denial and confronting our total reality, good and not-so-good. Fleeing all repression and unmindfulness: *oblivionem omnino fugiat* (RB 7:10).

If we are talking about inculcating humility in those in our care, our first concern must be to put them where they may encounter this transcendent reality, so “touched by God”,[[23]](#footnote-23) that their lives preserve a permanent imprint of the experience.

To get into contact with ultimate reality is not always easy in an era in which escapist entertainment is a paramount concern. Spiritual experience cannot be manufactured by techniques from a manual; it is a gift of grace which comes – more often than not – when the rational faculties are disengaged. It involves the right-brain rather than the left brain. The most we can do as educators is to draw on our own experience to explain, to motivate and to create opportunities for others to cross the threshold into the spiritual world – aware of the fact that children are often better at this than adults. This means exposure to such counter-cultural states as solitude and silence to allow what is already in the heart to come to the surface of consciousness.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is to activate the grace of baptism. Fundamentally, this is an appropriate target for real *e-ducatio* which is, at root, a process of *e-ductio*, a leading or bringing forth of what was hitherto latent or dormant

If we want to initiate others into a process of humility, then we have to make opportunities for them to make contact with spiritual reality. Of course, it takes both foresight and courage to be instrumental in starting a lifelong process whose effects are certainly not quantifiable and, in fact, may not become visible for some time. Yet, if we are interested in intensifying the “Benedictine” character of our schools, it would seem that this means working so that our graduates would leave us more committed to their faith or, in Saint Benedict’s terms, to “seeking God”, than they were when they first came under our care. This means that, in the interim, they had been wisely guided and encouraged in this pursuit.

Saint Benedict described what humility looked like in the lives of sixth-century Italian monks. The differences between our situation and theirs are too many to count. This means that the way humility was expressed in that culture may not be relevant to us; it may even be somewhat repugnant. We need to go behind the picture that St Benedict paints, and look to the reality, asking ourselves what are contemporary indications that a person possesses this quality.

There is a bevy of experts in various disciplines who latterly have taken an interest in humility and who offer insights from complementary viewpoints. I will confine myself to outlining the views of three witnesses from different backgrounds. These three point to humility as a quality which leads us into solidarity, which teaches us to admire and which allows us to recognise giftedness.

a) Humility as Solidarity

The first witness is Hugh Mackay who is as close to being a public intellectual as is possible in Australia. In a short article, themed about Christmas, he proposes that humility is a matter of realistic self-acceptance which makes possible a sense of solidarity with others.[[25]](#footnote-25) “Once we strip away our self-delusions, humility is simply the natural response of the human heart to the experience of being part of the human herd.” This is not so easy. Most of us cherish delusions about our unique value too deeply to want to part with them. As long as we deny our negativities we cannot fully know and love the truth of what we are. The only way that profound self-knowledge can occur is for us to come into contact with the unconditional positive regard that makes irrelevant the labelling of positive and negative features of our lives. If we experience ourselves as fully known, accepted and loved as we are, we are not afraid to own up to the spottiness of our lives and the precariousness of our virtues.

When we accept the truth about ourselves and stop defending our indefensible claim to integrity we will begin to show forth some of the most desirable of human traits – the capacity to cooperate and collaborate on common projects, the willingness to step back and allow room for others both in conversation and in activity, the willingness to enter into non-contentious dialogue with those with whom we disagree and, as Saint Bernard frequently points out, a felt compassion for the weaknesses of others that supplants our tendency instantly to condemn.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Mackay concludes his article thus. “Perhaps, in the process of accepting that we are the sort of people we truly are – messy, inconsistent, neurotic, as well as noble, earnest and endearing – we can find a new, more realistic level of respect for ourselves and each other.”

b) Humility as Admiration

My second witness is the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Lord Jonathan Sacks.[[27]](#footnote-27) He speaks about the greater part of humility being “the capacity to admire … to be open to something greater than oneself. False humility is the pretence that one is small. True humility is the consciousness of standing in the presence of greatness.” Living in the presence of God is a guarantee that one will develop a realistic appreciation of one’s relative standing in the universe. To admire is to go out from oneself, it is a form of *exstasis*, to be lost in wonder at another. “Humility, then, is more than just a virtue: it is a form of perception, a language in which the ‘I’ is silent so that it can hear the ‘Thou’ … Humility is what opens us to the world.”

Humility, true humility, is one of the most expansive and life-enhancing of all the virtues. It does not mean undervaluing yourself. It means valuing other people. It signals a certain openness to life’s grandeur and a willingness to be surprised, uplifted by goodness wherever one finds it.

The “silence of the ego” enables us to negotiate our true place in the world, to establish us in truth. Those who reach this state become witnesses and points of access to the spiritual world. Being with them leaves us with a kind of “afterglow”.

“We know when we have been in the presence of someone in whom the Divine presence breathes. We feel affirmed, enlarged, and with good reason. For we have met someone who, not taking himself or herself seriously at all, has shown us what it is to take with utmost seriousness that which is not-I.”

c) Humility as Appreciating Giftedness

My third witness is Martin Seligman, the founder of the movement of “positive psychology”.[[28]](#footnote-28) His understanding of fulfilment revolves around the notion of recognising one’s highest gifts and using them in the service of something greater than oneself. The spirit of service springs out of a grateful recognition of gifts received – in nature and nurture – and an understanding that receiving a gift somehow involves an obligation of repayment.

His conclusion is that humility is most likely to occur in the context of a community that gives a message of unconditional positive regard and in which person feels secure and valued. Integral participation in such a community involves the recognition of one’s signature talents in the context of others and of reality, and the unselfconscious willingness to use them for the common good, without seeking to elevate one’s own status.[[29]](#footnote-29)

These more contemporary approaches allow us to see *humilitas* as being a close neighbour of *humanitas*.[[30]](#footnote-30) After all they have a common root: *humus*. To lack humility is to veer away from genuine humanity, because it locks us in the chamber of self-appreciation and, thus, inhibits our appreciative and creative interaction with ambient reality. We are diminished thereby, whether we realise it or not.

Humble people have some awareness of a reality greater than themselves. They acknowledge their solidarity with others and eschew any sense of entitlement. They are cooperative rather than competitive. They make space for others and experience a genuine empathy with them. They have the capacity to recognise and admire the gifts of others, as well their own and they are willing to be at the service of the community and beyond.

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Whether in monastic life or in the context of educating the young, those who carry the responsibility of helping others grow – that is to say, those in authority – can do no better than to attend to Saint Benedict’s injunction to show honour to all, especially the seemingly undeserving. Nothing has a more stimulating effect than to take people seriously as they are, affirming their talents, helping them to live in harmony and encouraging them to appreciate everything that is good and true and beautiful. In other words, helping them to grow into genuine humanity. While we humble ourselves to honour others, we encourage them to honour themselves and live in the truth of who they are and who they might become. In this way, the Benedictine tradition is brought into the present, given new and vibrant expression, and passed on to the upcoming generation. We may yet witness a new flourishing of “the love of learning and the desire for God”. And that happy outcome, it seems to me, is in your hands.

1. Downloaded from ForbesQuotes on forbes.com, 5 August 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am borrowing from the title of Jean Lecercq’s landmark study of medieval monastic culture, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 3rd edition 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This view seems to be endorsed by John Gray in *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Allen Lane, 2018). He postulates that the key values of most forms of contemporary humanistic atheism are no more than residual Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 88. Support for this position is found in Robert Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2019). The author argues that freedom of religion was first claimed for religious groups. This was in the time of Tertullian when Christian communities were vulnerable to persecution on the grounds of “atheism”. Later a similar freedom was seen also as belonging to the individual. This development was driven, at least in part, by Saint Paul’s notion of conscience not only as the judge of past actions but as a guide to future behaviour. The conclusion was that people had the right and the duty to follow the dictates of conscience, even when this involved dissenting from common norms. See also Terrence Kardong, “Respect for Persons in the Holy Rule: Benedict’s Contribution to Human Rights,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 27.3 (1992), pp. 199-207. Reprinted in *Commentaries on Benedict’s Rule II* (Richardton: Assumption Abbey Press, 1995), pp. 91-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Siedentop, *Inventing the individual*, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Siedentop, *Inventing the individual*, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is clear from a comparison with his source RM 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. That the monks of Vicovaro tried to poison him is scarcely a tribute to his managerial skills. See Pope Gregory’s *Dialogues* II; 3:2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict Backwards: Reading the Rule in the 21st Century* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See M. Casey, *Seventy-Four Tools for Good Living* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), pp. 24-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a comprehensive, if a little dated, survey see M. Casey, “Leadership in a Benedictine Context,” *Tjurunga* 22 (1982), pp. 5-103. See also Margaret Malone, “Authority as a Service of Love” and “Benedict’s Abbot and Saint Augustine,” in *Living in the House of God: Monastic Essays* (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 2014), pp. 45-52 and 53-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Terrence Kardong notes that the addition of the last phrase “according to merit” represents “a slight slippage” from the principle being enunciated; it is not included in the parallel text of the *Rule of the Master*. See *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), p.57. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Though it seems that he did not always follow his own prescription. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the fraternity of the abbot see Casey, “Leadership,” pp. 89-90. Saint Benedict does not refer to the monks as “sons” of the abbot, but as “brothers”. See Ambrose Wathen, “Fraternity as an Aspect of the Experience of God in the Cenobium,” *Monastic Studies* 9 (1972), pp. 123-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, for example the catechesis of 13 May 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thus, Inst IV 39,2: *Humilitas uero his* ***indiciis*** *conprobatur.* IV 39,3: *Talibus namque* ***indiciis*** *et his similibus humiltas vera dinoscitur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As Pope Francis has observed, the opposite of humility is the heresy of Pelagianism by which ultimate trust in placed in human willing and accomplishing. *Gaudete et exultate* §49. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hum 21; SBOp 3, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Mysterium tremendum et fascinosum:* according to the terminology of Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. To evoke the titles of two collections of autobiographical writings by members of the English Benedictine Congregation. Maria Boulding [Ed.], *A Touch of God: Eight Monastic Journeys* (London: SPCK, 1982). Laurentia Johns [Ed.], *touched by God: Ten Monastic Journeys*, (London Burns & Oates, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A growing interest in experiencing silence is evidenced, for example, by the following works. Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Wichita: Eighth Day Books, 2002). Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks* (Sydney: Hodder, 2003). Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of* Noise (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (London: Granta Publications, 2008). Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013) Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User’s Guide* [Two volumes], (London: Cascade, 2014 and 2017). Erling Kagge, *Silence in the Age of Noise* (London: Penguin Books, 2018). Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the present day* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Hugh Mackay, “A time for the great gift of humility,” *The Age*, 21 December 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. His dynamic triad is humility or self-knowledge leading to compassion leading to contemplation. See, for example, Hum 19, SBOp 3, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ABC Religion & Ethics, Program of 14 June 2018. Downloaded from abc.net.au, 5 July 2019. See also *The Tablet*,1 April 2000, p. 451*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004). Chapter 20: Humility and Modesty, pp. 461-475. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Beyond noting that humility involves the absence of narcissism, self-enhancement or defensiveness, he makes six points that may help us understand his approach: 1) Humility does not require self-disparagement, negativity or a contemptuous attitude toward the self; it is a nondefensive willingness to see the self accurately, including both strengths and weaknesses. 2) Humility carries potent benefits for the individual, both in terms of emotional well-being and self-regulation. 3) Humble people welcome accurate information about themselves and thus should be teachable. 4) Humility grows through reality-based feedback about strengths and weaknesses conveyed in an atmosphere of caring and respect. 5) Humble self-views may curb conflict escalation and facilitate a move towards forgiveness. 6) Self-transcendent beliefs are not essential components of humility, but these beliefs can greatly contribute to the growth of humility. Paraphrased from pp. 462-464. According to Seligman, humility would be unlikely to stem from educational styles that involve a) an extreme emphasis on performance, appearance, popularity or other external sources of self-evaluation, b) inaccurate or excessive praise or criticism, c) frequent comparisons, especially when accompanied by competitive messages. Paraphrased from p. 471. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See M. Casey, “The ‘Humanitas’ of the Benedictine Tradition,” in John Stanley Martin [Ed.], *St Benedict: A Man with an Idea* (Melbourne: Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, 1981), pp. 27-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)