

## Christian Presence in the World

### I. St. Benedict and The Rule

- A. On this Sunday nearest to June 11, The Feast Day for St. Benedict we take the opportunity to celebrate our patron Saint.
1. Our parish this year marks its 30<sup>th</sup> year and both the vestry and congregation have made efforts to recognize where we've come from and where we are going.
  2. I don't know the history of how this congregation came to choose *St. Benedict* as our name, but it is distinctive.
    - a. In the Catholic and Anglican traditions most churches are named after a biblical saint.
    - b. But the name *St. Benedict*, refers not so much to the man himself but to the Rule of Life that we trace back to him (with other influences) nearly 1500 years ago, all the way back to 540.
  3. Joan Chittister, who was the abbess of a Benedictine House for 50 years and is a well known teacher today wrote a book (2010) entitled,
    - a. The Rule of St. Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
    - b. How could something so long ago and far away be a viable spirituality for our time?
  4. She writes,
    - a. "the Rule is not concerned with a single time and place, a single view of the church, a single set of devotions, or a single ministry.
    - b. The Rule of St. Benedict is concerned with **life**: what it is about, what it demands, how to live it. And it has not failed a single generation."
    - c. "Benedict's sixth-century text" she says, ... "directly touches contemporary issues facing the human community— (1. stewardship, conversion, communication, reflection, contemplation, humility, and equality."
- B. The story of the Rule is quite an inspiring wide arc of history.
1. Benedict was born in 480, in Nursia Italy, and educated at Rome.

- a. At the age of 20 he decided to join an emerging trend in his time which had been growing for the past 100 years.
  - (1. Wanting to be able to live a more faithful Christian life, individuals were withdrawing to live as hermits in the Egyptian desert.
- b. At a time when the Church was emerging as a state institution from its past of being a persecuted minority,
  - (1. Benedict withdrew from Church life at Rome to live as a hermit in a cave at Subiaco.
  - (2. How else could one follow such sayings of Jesus, “*none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions*” (Luke 14:33) ----
2. His time was one of immense political chaos, beyond anything we have seen in our own past generations.
  - a. The gradual demise of the Roman Empire from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, both in its outer borders and in Rome itself, gave rise to a general breakdown of order and society.
3. In the midst of this world, the Rule he composed for monastic communities became the primary monastic rule in the Latin West from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.
  - a. The Rule is essentially a practical document, a discipline and order for work and prayer in a communal framework.
    - (1. It is a good example of what St. Paul admonished the congregation at Philippi to do:
    - (2. “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you...*” (Phil. 2:12b-13a).
  - b. B’s Rule had a profound effect on Church and society that struggled to rebuild order in a world that had disintegrated.
  - c. Diarmaid MacCulloch in his recent work, *Christianity: The First 3000 Years*, (2009, p. 358) writes,
    - (1. “*the survival of European civilization would have been inconceivable without the [Benedictine] monasteries and nunaries.*”

## II. The Benefit of Hindsight

- A. In hindsight we can see that the positive influence of the Rule extended far beyond the monastic enclosures of those centuries into general society.
  1. But, also in hindsight, we see how the general conception of Christian life in the world became one of withdrawal. ---

- a. Maybe this was inevitable in a church which was now attempting to align itself with worldly power.
  - b. Within the Church itself, spirituality became “*other-worldly*,” with a deep seated alienation from nature, world and cosmos.
  - c. Spiritually, the world was a dangerous place.
  - d. God created human beings, not for this vale of tears, but for *his* kingdom in the next world.
  - e. The salvation of ‘*souls*’ and the world hereafter trumped all other concerns.
2. Coupled with this was a frequent conception of God, as external from our world and as a moral judge offended by human sin.
- a. And this was put forward as the reason for Christ’s Incarnation, to provide a sacrifice that would satisfy the infinite debt of our original sin against God.
3. Summarizing centuries of theology so briefly sounds incredible and hard to believe.
- a. But these perspectives have been a drive shaft of both Catholic and Protestant theology up to very recent times, and still very prevalent in many places today. (See ‘Teilhard de Chardin and the New Spirituality,’ William D. Dinges and Ilia Delio, in *From Teilhard to Omega: Co-creating an Unfinished Universe*, ed. by Ilia Delio, 2014, p. 170f)

B. Maybe we can give our Christian ancestors the benefit of a doubt if we try to imagine the lived experience of the human race for most of our history.

1. The fact is that probably more than 90% of the world’s population has lived in extreme poverty till very recent times.
  - a. In that perspective, is it any wonder that we’ve said, ‘*Life is a vale of tears.*’
  - b. To explain their suffering humans first projected its cause onto a God who needed to be placated, and later onto ourselves, for our sin.
  - c. Still today, the problem of suffering is one of the greatest obstacles for people in coming to an acceptance of a God who is good.
2. In our own times it was the first two World Wars that practically decimated Christian faith in Europe, -- out of sheer numbness.

- a. What is the Christian answer to this kind of crisis?
3. As WWI spread across Europe, a German theologian, Eberhard Arnold, gave his response in the form of a short book entitled, *Innerland: A Guide into the Heart of the Gospel*.
- a. He reworked the text in the 34 months between Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and his own death in 1935.
  - b. There he wrote that German Christian's shocking openness to Nazism resulted, he believed, from a loss of reverence for the life of the soul.
  - c. The most effective way to resist evil, starts with becoming quiet before God.
  - d. "*Do you wish to improve the world?*" he asks, "*Good, but first seek silence of the soul.*"
    - (1. He writes, "God wants to give our inward life an indestructible harmony that will work outward in mighty melodies of love.
    - (2. The power that comes from gathering our inner energy is a power for taking action. When our individual hearts are gathered in this way, we will join together as a gathered people –
    - (3. a people whose active work makes God's reign manifest as justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17) ....
    - (4. Like people dying of thirst, today's overburdened souls long for a quickening of their inner life, sensing that without it they will come to ruin." (Ps. 42:2-3).

[<http://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/devotional-reading/inwardness-in-a-distracted-age>]
4. Another extraordinary story of Christian experience in the midst of suffering comes again from this time, WWI, when a French paleontologist and priest, Teilhard de Chardin, decided to serve in the ranks of the infantry on the war's front lines as a 'stretcher bearer.'
- a. It was in the front, in the mud and blood of the trenches, that he first discovered what he called a rich, diverse '*human milieu*' not encountered before during his sheltered family life and religious upbringing.
  - b. Almost daily encounters with death gave him an extraordinary sense of urgency to communicate a vision of the world, with all its struggle and becoming, as animated by and drawn up toward God.

- c. In a series of deeply stirring essays, his *Writings in Time of War*, published only after his death, we find the seeds for all his later ideas.
- d. Seeing the unity of all things in Christ, he expressed the desire to be an apostle and evangelist of Christ in the Universe. (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: *Writings Selected With an Introduction*, Ursula King, 2015, p. 15).

### III. Do the Crises of our time call for a Benedict Option Today?

- A. Conservative author, Rod Dreher recently published, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. (Reviewed in *The Christian Century*, May 24, 2017, pp. 22-25).
  - 1. A self professed pessimist, writing to conservative Christians, he claims that church and culture have colluded in their own mutual, steady decline.
    - b. His solution is not about saving the world, but rebuilding the church for its own sake 1<sup>st</sup>,\ and 2<sup>nd</sup> for the sake of the world.
  - 2. One critic, Richard Beck, says Rod's *BenOp* (Benedict Option) is inspired by Medieval Monasticism, a kind of 'circling the wagons.'
    - a. "Dreher emphasizes Christian culture – institutions, orthodoxy, piety, liturgy."
  - 3. But a true opportunity today for Christians is to see beyond the old pattern of reducing religion to "*ethno-centricity*," or even "*sacred vs. secular*."
    - a. Certainly the Gospel calls us to go beyond "*identity politics*," powerful in the Middle East, and on the rise in the US and Europe today, "*us vs. them*."
    - b. The way forward for followers of Jesus is a new affirmation of Christ in nature, the world, and the cosmos.
      - (1. This is neither a liberal nor a conservative path.
    - c. We need to ask how could Christians instead prioritize formation in the cross for the care of others?
- B. The prospect before us really is about our own transformation.
  - 1. Jesus in the Gospels offers us a model for our imagination; he tries to move us from one state to another,\ aptly described by one writer:
    - a. We are asleep, and he tries to wake us;
    - b. We are deaf, and he tries to open our ears;

- c. We are dumb, and he tries to open our mouths to speech and praise;
- d. We are narrow, and he tries to widen our perspective;
- e. We are blind, and he tries to open our eyes;
- f. We are lost, and he tries to find us;
- g. and we are dead, and he tries to resurrect us.
- h. This must be our model in a secularized world. (Secularity and the Gospel, Ronald Rolheiser, 2005, p. 10)