

**Renewing the Benedictine Vision of Education:
Reflections on the Teachings of Pope Francis**
*Abbot Elias R. Lorenzo, O.S.B.*¹

Dear brothers and sisters in Benedictine Education, welcome to this symposium for those of us entrusted with the mission to serve in Benedictine secondary schools throughout the world! It is always a great blessing to come together from every corner of the globe and to strengthen the bonds among those of us working in the “School of the Lord’s Service.”² This international assembly of schools demonstrates that, while each sponsoring monastery and related education institutions are autonomous in every sense of that word, civilly, canonically, academically, structurally and so forth, it is not only possible, but truly beneficial to both associate and collaborate with each other. We have found a way to break through the tyranny of autonomy and your perseverance for the seventh international symposium is testimony to the value and blessing that comes from collaboration among those who share a similar mission and charism in the Church.

While we might be tempted to list the various initiatives and accomplishments over the past twenty years of our association, I have chosen instead to focus on the current context and subsequent challenges that we face in Benedictine education. One does not need to be a sociologist to conclude that the predominant characteristic of the current context in both society at large and the church in particular is polarization and its resulting relativism. While for decades in the twentieth century leaders have trumpeted the ideals of globalization (one diverse yet complementary human and economic family), the growing response around the world in the twenty-first century has been an increasing polarization. What an interesting contradiction: globalization has produced polarization!

Recent elections of political leaders indicate that one portion of the population in society is moving more to the ideological left while another portion of that same society is moving more to the ideological right and there seems to be no room or interest in common ground or compromise. Each side is convinced they are right. Is anyone in the middle? The same is true in the Church with both bishops, priests and people moving more to the left while other bishops, priests and people are moving more to the right. The poles are now much sharper and neither side is able or willing to listen to the other. Is anyone in the middle?

We would be naïve to think that this same polarization does not exist in our monasteries and schools, among our own students and teachers. It appears that we may have become like the Galatians where discord, jealousy, ambition, dissension and factions are clearly more obvious among us than the fruits of the Spirit which are always love, joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness and gentleness³. To this situation of polarization, I propose that both the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the teachings of Pope Francis offer a path we should follow! In this opening address, I wish to reflect on the “Francis effect” on some of the essential characteristics of Benedictine education, which we have developed and embraced.

¹ Abbot Elias R. Lorenzo, O.S.B. is a monk of St. Mary’s Abbey, Morristown, New Jersey and the President of the American Cassinese Congregation. He is also a founding member of the International Commission on Benedictine Education and currently serves as its president.

² *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict* (MN: The Liturgical Press, 1980), Prologue 44.

³ Galatians 5:20-23

Listen, my son, to the master's instructions and attend to them with the ear of your heart! With these words, St. Benedict begins his little rule for beginners.⁴ Why is "listen" the first word and the first admonition of St. Benedict? Perhaps it is because in his reading and studying of the scriptures, he noticed it to be the very first word in the first parable of the Lord Jesus in Mark's gospel: *Listen! A sower went out to sow some seeds...* The parable concludes, *let anyone who has ears, listen!*⁵ Like bookends, the first parable of Jesus to his disciples (and to us) is to listen. It is fundamental to Benedictine life because it is fundamental and essential to the life of every disciple.

The word *obsculta*, that is, "listen" or "to hear" is found 23 times in the *Rule of St. Benedict*.⁶ With such numerous references, the mind of St. Benedict is clear: Benedictine educators and leaders are first and foremost to be listeners... to God, to his Spirit, to his word, to the teachings of our elders, to the needs of the young and always to one another. That this admonition to listen is set out right at the very beginning of the Prologue itself highlights this constitutive element of Benedictine life in our schools. But if we only listen to news bytes or in circles of mutual admiration, we are not listening to others or another point of view. We are captives in an echo chamber listening only to ourselves. We are not listening with the ear of the heart.

If we truly desire to be good listeners, then St. Benedict admonishes us to also love silence. He considers silence such an essential element to Benedictine life that he devotes a whole chapter to it and punctuates his *Rule* with numerous additional references to the importance of silence.⁷ It is interesting to note that the words "listen" and "silent" are spelled with the exact same letters. That indicates to us that in order to truly listen, we have to be silent. It's a basic principle of communication. But the biggest communication problem is that we do not listen to understand. Rather, we listen to reply. Even as the other is speaking, we are already forming ideas so that we can respond. In that process we are not listening clearly to the other, nor clearly understanding the other.

How often have we said, you're not hearing me! Have we been as quick to listen to someone who disagrees with us or who holds a position so different from our own? Here the admonition of the apostle James rings true: *Let us be slow to speak but quick to listen.*⁸ That requires real humility⁹ to recognize that I don't have all the answers... that you have something to offer me... her ideas challenge me... his position makes me rethink mine. Only in silence and humility can we truly listen. Then there can be true dialogue to break through the polarization we find in society and church today.

⁴ Education within the Benedictine Tradition, revised August 27, 2007.
https://www.abcu.info/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={94EFD1ED-B758-49CE-A3EA-1688AFFC9AC7}&DE={47641124-0236-45D2-9FD4-2B0617CC3C1A}

⁵ Mark 4:3-9

⁶ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op. cit., Prologue 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 24, 33, 39; 3:2; 4:55,75; 5:6, 15; 6:6; 3:12; 38:5,12; 42:3,4; 43:1; 47:3; 64:21; 67:5

⁷ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op cit, chapter 6 on silence; see also 7:35, 56-57, 60-61; 38:5-8; 42:1, 8, 9; 48:5; 53:23;

⁸ James 1:19

⁹ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op cit, chapter 7 on humility; see also Education within the Benedictine Tradition, op cit. on humility.

In an address to the plenary assembly of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Pope Francis has stressed the need to develop a culture of dialogue in our Catholic schools.¹⁰ “Within this context,” says the pontiff, “Catholic educational institutions are called to be on the front line in practicing a grammar of dialogue” which he said is the basis of encounter and of enrichment of culture and religious diversity. Dialogue, the pope said, is constructive when it takes place in an authentic atmosphere of respect, esteem, and sincere listening. That Jesuit sounds like a Benedictine!

As educational leaders in Benedictine schools, we foster in every classroom and office, in every department and program, that desire to listen with the ear of the heart,¹¹ to those who agree with us as well as to those who disagree with us. It is encouraging to realize that new generations of our students, who are taught to know how to engage in dialogue, will leave our schools with the motivation to build bridges and find new answers to the challenges of our time because they too have learned how to listen to the ear of the heart!

In his address to Italian educators and parents, Pope Francis noted that “education cannot be neutral. It is either positive or negative; either it enriches or it impoverishes; either it enables a person to grow or it lessens, even corrupts it.”¹² In our Benedictine schools, we strive to develop in our students that “love of learning and desire for God.”¹³ Pope Francis puts this desire in the context of the search for all that is true, good and beautiful. This occurs in a rich path made up of many ingredients, various academic subjects and disciplines, numerous (and sometimes competing) programs and initiatives, because “development”, says the pope, “is the result of different elements that act together to stimulate intelligence, knowledge, the emotions, the body and so forth.”¹⁴ And so if something is true, says the pope, then it must also be good and beautiful. And if it is truly beautiful, then it must also be good and true. And if it is really good, then it must be beautiful and true as well.

This sounds much like the admonition of St. Benedict that the tools of the monastery are to be treated like the vessels of the altar.¹⁵ Therefore, what happens in a chemistry lab or a calculus classroom, what happens in the gymnasium and on the playing fields, what happens in faculty offices as well as in the cafeteria is holy because we believe that the Divine Presence is everywhere.¹⁶ We are all seekers of truth, students and teachers, administrators and staff alike. We believe there is only one way, one truth, one life: the Lord Jesus Christ. This is highlighted in

¹⁰ Pope Francis, Plenary address to the Congregation for Catholic Education, February 9, 2017 in the Sala Clementina. The pontiff first proposed a culture of dialogue in Catholic education during his plenary address to the same dicastery on February 13, 2014.

https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco_20170209_plenaria-educazione-cattolica.html

¹¹ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op cit. Prologue 1

¹² Pope Francis’ address to Italian educators and parents on May 10, 2014;

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140510_mondo-della-scuola.html

¹³ Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (NY: Fordham University Press, 1982).

¹⁴ Pope Francis’ address to Italian educators and parents on May 10, 2014; Op cit

¹⁵ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op cit. chapter 31

¹⁶ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op cit. chapter 19

the penultimate chapter of the Rule: *let them prefer nothing whatsoever to the love of Christ*.¹⁷ But not all our students and our colleagues have come to the knowledge of that truth.¹⁸ Dialogue, that is both charitably conducted and faithful to our Catholic and Benedictine tradition, is the best way to pursue and articulate the quest for truth and knowledge. That dialectic form of teaching depends on a respectful encounter with the other person engaged in their own quest for truth and understanding. Pope Francis embraces dialogue as the best way to understand and articulate truth, not only as an antidote to the undesirable condition of polarization and its consequential disunity and relativism nor as a simple recipe for respect but because the intended end of such a dialectic form of teaching is *to come to knowledge of the truth... the truth that will set us free*.¹⁹

One way we progress in the “love of learning and the desire for God” is through prayer, which St. Benedict considers so important that he dedicates thirteen consecutive chapters to prayer in his Rule.²⁰ In addition to punctuating our day with prayer, the uniquely Benedictine way of praying is through *lectio divina*, which is the “meditative reading of scripture and other sacred texts with the intention of discerning how God is at work right now in the world.”²¹ Some of you may recall that one professor of a distinguished Benedictine university, Father Columba Stewart, OSB, challenged us at our international symposium at Colegio San Benito in Santiago de Chile in 2007 with this provocative question: “With what life skills do students leave our schools?” They surely will not remember their history or biology classes. We pray they will not remember our own personal foibles and idiosyncrasies. But if they remember and practice *lectio divina* in their lives, then we can say we have fulfilled our mission. More than ten years have passed since this meeting in Santiago and this has, in fact, been happening in Benedictine secondary schools with increasing success and popularity throughout North America and Western Europe, throughout South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Since imitation is the best form of flattery, I would like to pose the same question to you: what life skills have students graduating from your Benedictine school developed? If it is not *lectio divina*, then perhaps we are not fulfilling our mission. This cannot be relegated only to those students who may or may not trickle into our campus ministry / chaplaincy offices. No, *lectio divina* is how we do the love of learning and the desire for God. So it’s *lectio divina* among teachers and students, administrators and staff and trustees as well. *Lectio divina* for everyone! Then we can claim to be true to our Benedictine identity and our Benedictine mission.

To be clear: when I propose daily prayer and *lectio divina* this does not mean we proselytize students and teachers in our schools. In fact, this very point was addressed by Pope Francis himself in an interview with *La Repubblica* regarding his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*: “proselytism,” says the pope, “is solemn nonsense, it makes no sense. We need to get to know each other, listen to each other and improve our knowledge of the world around us.” He continues, “sometimes after a meeting I want to arrange another one because new ideas are born and I discover new needs. This is important: to get to know people, listen, expand the circle of

¹⁷ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op. cit. chapter 72; see also chapter 5:10, 7:67-69; 4:1-2)

¹⁸ See 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Timothy 3:7.

¹⁹ John 8:32

²⁰ See *Rule of St. Benedict*, op cit. chapters 8-20

²¹ Education within the Benedictine Tradition, revised August 27, 2007; op cit.

ideas. The world is crisscrossed by roads that come closer together and move apart, but the important thing is that they all lead towards the Good.”²²

Moreover, in his address to the plenary session of the Congregation of Catholic Education on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council’s declaration on Catholic education, *Gravissimum educationis*, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the apostolic constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Pope Francis noted that it is our mission “to offer to all the Christian message, respecting fully the freedom of all and the proper methods of each specific scholastic environment, namely, that Jesus Christ is the meaning of life, of the cosmos and of history.”²³ “The work of schools,” continues the pope, “requires involvement in educational programs of exchange and dialogue, with a bold and innovative fidelity able to bring together the Catholic identity to meet the different souls existing in a multicultural society...marked by religious pluralism.”²⁴

In the first apostolic exhortation of his papacy, *Evangelii gaudium*,²⁵ Pope Francis frames the mission of evangelization, specifically in academic settings, as a type of dialogue. Catholic schools, according to the pope, are excellent environments for an interdisciplinary and dialogic approach to evangelization.²⁶ What makes schools ideal for this activity is their nature and identity as schools, places of interdisciplinary academic inquiry, places where theology and pastoral disciplines can be in true dialogue with the sciences and the human experience. Pope Francis describes teaching and learning as an open-ended process in which conversation partners engage in a dialectic pursuit of the truth. Therefore, the Catholic and Benedictine school is intrinsic to the Church’s mission of evangelization precisely as a school.

In the second apostolic exhortation of his papacy, *Amoris Laetitia*,²⁷ the longest such document in his papacy, Pope Francis models the type of dialogue that he expects from us in our schools: namely, engaging numerous and sometimes opposing positions on difficult and divisive issues. The Extraordinary Synod on the Family itself signaled Pope Francis’ willingness to tolerate public debate and disagreement in a free and open conversation on issues important today. The apostolic exhortation, while focused on families, is applicable to us as educators. It is no overstatement that the topic of education plays a central role in this apostolic exhortation. Not only is the entire seventh chapter dedicated to Catholic education, it is a theme that permeates the whole document and one that the media seems to have overlooked. Here the

²² Eugenio Scalfari, “How the Church will Change,” *La Repubblica*, October 1, 2013; http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/10/01/news/pope_s_conversation_with_scalfari_english-67643118/

²³ Pope Francis address in the Clementine hall on February 13, 2014; https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140213_congregazione-educazione-cattolica.html

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, issued on November 24, 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

²⁶ Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, issued on November 24, 2013; n. 134.

²⁷ Pope Francis’ post synodal apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* issued on March 19, 2014. https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

pontiff reiterates the church's position that choice in education is a fundamental right of parents who are "called to defend and of which no one may claim to deprive."²⁸

Prior to the publication of this apostolic exhortation and during a symposium in Rome marking the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's declaration on Catholic Education, *Gravissimum educationis*, the pope commented that Catholic schools may have "become too selective and elitist... there is always the ghost of money – always. It seems that only those people or persons who are at a certain economic level or have a certain capacity have the right to an education."²⁹

This is wholly consistent with the Church's preferential option for the poor as well as the teaching of St. Benedict himself, where he clearly states that the goods of the monastery are to be sold at a price lower than market value.³⁰ Moreover, the Rule highlights that Christ is present in the guest, but especially in the poor and the stranger.³¹ We recognize Christ present among us in many and varied ways: in scripture, in the sacraments, in the abbot, in the sick, in guests, but especially in the poor. Our Benedictine schools have a strong tradition for many years of providing financial aid and scholarships for deserving students. This is indispensable to our mission and those who work to raise such funds are to be commended. Moreover, our schools have strong programs of outreach and service to the poor at home and abroad. All of this is to be commended and celebrated in this assembly. Yet the question remains: how high is tuition or fees going to go... have we become elitist... have we begun the discussion with our governing boards and stakeholders on tuition reduction strategies in order to be true to our mission as Catholic and Benedictine educational leaders?

We believe Christ is present to us in others.³² The "other" means someone different from ourselves, those who are especially vulnerable, and those who may not share our faith or values because they too are made in the image and likeness to God (whether they know / acknowledge it or not). We acknowledge the Divine Presence in them and we listen with the ear of the heart to the call of Christ to serve also those outside ordinary circles of ecclesial and school life.

In this regard, Pope Francis himself sets the example. When asked challenging questions by journalists while traveling on a plane for his apostolic visits, he has been asked about gay lobbies, divorced and remarried couples, possible schism in the Church among so many other volatile topics. The reply of the pope to these difficult questions is instructive in many ways. First, he often answers the question with his own question. Educators can affirm that teachers who ask questions rather than giving answers are nonetheless teaching. But teaching that comes from questions is quite different from statements that are intended to guarantee certainty.

Second, the pope shows he is not afraid of engaging in difficult issues and in frank conversations with those who seem "outside" the ordinary circles of ecclesial life. He puts into practice his own admonition that teaching through the grammar of dialogue, that those who are on the periphery of society and the church demand our care and attention as well.

²⁸ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 84

²⁹ Pope Francis to educators on November 21, 2015 at symposium on the 50th Anniversary of *Gravissimum educationis*

³⁰ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op. cit. chapter 57:9

³¹ Education within the Benedictine Tradition, revised August 27, 2007; op. cit. See also *Rule of Benedict*, op. cit. chapter 53 and Matt 25.

³² This Benedictine value permeates the *Rule of St. Benedict*, op. cit. For example, see chapter 2:2; 36:1; 53:1; 61:4; 63:10; 71:1; and 72:4.

There are many and complex challenges that polarize both our contemporary culture and the Church in the modern world. Reading the signs of the times in our own respective countries and the increasing ideological, political and religious polarization is evidence of an absence of dialogue. Therefore, Pope Francis has identified “dialogue” as the only way to address and heal this polemic. Being the first pope to be ordained after Vatican II, Pope Francis values engagement with “the other” in encouraging dialogue as the antidote to discord and division. The opening words of the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*³³ illustrates how we should engage the modern world, not be retreating from it or avoiding divisive or challenging issues, but by our search for communion with others in a quest for mutual understanding.³⁴

In conclusion, polarization is very real and a challenge to take up and education that champions the “grammar of dialogue” at every level is the antidote. Therefore, this is also a challenge for educational leaders in Benedictine schools to take up. There can be no doubt that education is the key to the renewal desired by Pope Francis in society and in the Church. And we are so blessed that St. Benedict has given us a road map for dialogue and communion which you have embraced in your own hallmarks. In particular, the penultimate chapter of the *Rule* provides the following 5-point program for genuine dialogue and fruitful communion:

1. be the first to show respect for the other
2. support each other's weaknesses with patience
3. compete in listening, really listening to “the other”
4. pursue what is best for others and not for yourself
5. show pure love to others, no strings attached³⁵

When our Benedictine schools practice in all our activities and programs the “grammar of dialogue” with this good zeal, then many will run along the path of the commandments with hearts overflowing with the sweetness of love.³⁶ Thank you for your commitment to Benedictine education. May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment.³⁷

³³ Paul VI, Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965; see paragraphs n. 3, 7, 10, 23, 27-28. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

³⁴ John O'Malley, SJ. What happened at Vatican II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2008), p. 297.

³⁵ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op. cit. chapter 72

³⁶ *Rule of St. Benedict*, op. cit. Prologue 48

³⁷ Philippians 1:6