

Welcome to BENET 2023
11 October 2023

It is both my joy and my privilege to welcome each of you to these days of BENET. These days are much more than a meeting or a gathering of educators and administrators in schools associated with Benedictine monasteries. Rather, this is a moment when, under the light of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, that we come together to listen, to share our experiences, and to assist the growth of all of us who have come here from near and from far. Like most of you, I have been in the work of teaching. For me it has been the Sacred Scriptures at various levels of education, in a variety of places, and in diverse situations. I repeat to you what I said at our last BENET in Sydney, Australia, the work of teaching is one of the noblest of professions or vocations. That is because in our work, we give people gifts for life. Each and every day, I use the gifts which my first and my second grade teachers gave me – to work with numbers, to think through problems, to see the value of being and working together with others (teamwork), to learn respect of others, to learn about and to encounter God in prayer and in worship. There are so many wonderful things which we learn in our families. At the same time, it must be said that we learn so many different and valuable things in school.

In the context of Benedictine life, of which Saint Benedict speaks of the monastery as a “school of the Lord’s service (RB Prol 45),” we are blessed to share the 1,500 year experience of living a whole, balanced, and guided spiritual life. That is something more than education; it is formation. And formation is something that walks hand-in-hand with whatever we teach or convey to a group of students. The manner in which we teach a class in history enables us to also convey a sense of true justice in seeing the way people have been treated through the course of time. The kind of literature we present to students also allows us to present the values of pondering carefully what we have read, what it means for us today, and what impact it could have in the future. In teaching religious education, we can introduce the first and poignant point of listening carefully with the ear of the heart (RB Prol 1). In our society today, we are so eager to speak first and to examine what we say later; while in the context of a Benedictine education, the value of listening carefully and pondering before we speak can be a value that not only imparts a way of wisdom, but also social grace and respect. Yes, we need to help others to listen well and to ponder what they hear. And whatever we teach, there is an avenue to open our students to the great mystery of grace that comes to all of us in the celebration of the Eucharist, Mass. There we are grounded in the history of the Church, the Word of God as a source of wisdom and guidance, the depth of meaning that can be found in the Sacred Scriptures for living in peace and service of others.

One of the great charisms of Benedictine life and spirituality is the importance of hospitality. When we think of hospitality, it covers so many areas in education and formation. Today, we live in a world where so many people have an experience of alienation, division, and a lack of community or togetherness. The way that we welcome our students into the classroom, the way we treat them with respect and honor, the way we look them in the eye, the way we react when they give a wrong answer, the way we listen to their requests of us. Truly, the Benedictine spirit of hospitality touches our engagements in the classroom, the school

playground, and the school in general relates to this important aspect of hospitality. We need to remember that so many of the young today come from a variety of backgrounds where there is division in the family, where some are not the recipients of the kind of love that fosters growth in a person. We have a chance to show the great breath of Saint Benedict's treasure of the importance of hospitality. Just the other day, there was an experience brought to my attention of how one of the monks at Sant'Anselmo welcomed some guests with a smile on his face, a word of instruction about our rhythm of life, and an accompaniment to a meal. It made a great difference and strongly manifested Benedictine and Gospel hospitality.

In these days, we hear so very often of war, brutal aggression, natural disasters, and senseless loss of life. We feel so helpless in the midst of these situations in which there is so little that we can do. What we can do is to create environments of peace. And we so often think of peace as an absence of stress or anxiety; and that is an important part of it. Yet, if we read the Gospels carefully, when Jesus is giving his farewell discourse to his disciples, remember what he says: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world give do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid (Jn 14:27). The peace of Jesus certainly has the common understanding of absence of anxiety, but here Jesus also emphasizes that his peace is not the world's peace. Rather, his peace, if practiced consistently, will eventually lead us into his paschal mystery. To create an atmosphere of peace, something has to die, to change, to become different. At the heart of what Benedict teaches is that our daily conversion of life is what brings "his" peace, an authentic peace. When I was elected abbot of my community at Conception Abbey, I was told I needed to choose a motto. Without much genuine understanding of the biblical understanding of peace, I took the quote which comes twice in the Rule, "Let all the members be at peace" (RB 34:5 – On the Distribution of goods according to need). In the penultimate verse of Chapter 4 of the Rule, Saint Benedict says, "If you have a dispute with someone, make peace with him before the sun goes down" (RB 4:73). My point in bringing up this point is that peace is not always an easy virtue to achieve. But for each of us, in our little part of the world where we can make a difference, let us seek after peace. When we cannot think of universal ways to bring it about, let us think local – here in this place, in this community of teachers and students. It will often lead us into the paschal mystery of Jesus, and that is a place of change and conversion. But what better place to be.

Let me conclude as this intended simple word of Welcome has become more than I had intended, but I did not want to simply wish you well. I wanted to share with you some of my own strong beliefs of what you can do to bring Benedictine life and spirit into your academic communities. I am a great believer in BENET, and I want to see you grow and succeed in what you hope to do in these coming days. May God bless all our endeavors in the coming days.