

“The Work of Seeking God”
Presentation by Sister Kathryn Huber, OSB
Embracing Creation with Reverence and Hospitality:
Listening to Scripture and Rule Speak

North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors at St. Meinrad, July 2, 2011

Introduction

- Thank you for the invitation to be one of three presenters on the topic of *Embracing Creation with Reverence and Hospitality; Listening to Scripture and the Rule Speak*
- Adult Learning Theory says as adults we all know something about the topic at hand. Our understanding of the topic, *Embracing Creation with Reverence and Hospitality*, comes from our own lived experience as well from our study. I would like to begin this morning by having us reflect on our personal experiences that have shaped our understanding of the topic for this gathering. I will begin by sharing my experience of growing up on the family farm. As I share my learning, think of your experiences.

An Experience of Learning to Embrace Creation

I grew up in a farm family as the seventh of 11 children in Starlight, IN. Nine of us were born at home. My parents married in the late 1920's and raised their family during the 30s, 40s, and 50s. My parents were fruit and vegetable growers and were engaged in what was known in those days as “truck farming.” They were equal partners in this enterprise and we kids assisted in the farm labor. The produce was planted, picked, packed and taken to the Louisville Haymarket where it was sold to truckers and grocery stores. My dad had a reputation for bringing quality produce, and he would tell the buyers, “That is because it is a family endeavor.”

All of nature was sacred because the family lived in such close relationship with it. My parents knew their dependence on Divine Providence for the blessings of nature such as rain, sun, warmth, and even a good market. They knew as well the devastation brought about by drought, freezes, hailstorms, windstorms, relentless rains, insects and plant diseases. Farming methods advanced over the years, but always the keen awareness of dependence on Divine Providence and the interdependence with nature. The sacred was not something abstract, but something experienced.

The produce as well as the farm implements and tools were handled carefully, as Benedict says as “though they were sacred vessels of the altar.” (RB 31) Strawberries and tomatoes were carefully handled so as not to bruise them. My brother tells of walking with my dad to the cornfield and my dad helping him literally hear the corn growing. In addition to the produce of the farm my mother had a huge garden and the family raised animals for milk, beef, pork and chickens for eggs and eating. Most

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the food we ate was raised on this small farm. My mother cooked three meals each day and the family ate together at the table. No food went to waste as the peelings and table scraps went to the animals. The family prayed together and Sunday was observed as a day of rest as much as possible. My parents had a keen awareness that they were stewards of the land. Really, in many ways, stewardship was not an option it was a necessity.

Living on a fruit and vegetable farm was work to which we all contributed and all received. It was, as Benedict states, given to each according to need. (RB 34) In times of need neighbor helped neighbor too. Without it being spoken, I knew the survival of the family and local community required each of us doing our piece to contribute to the well-being of the family and neighbor. It was life in this setting that I learned the basics, not only of living in human community, but also living as a member of the earth community.

In more recent years I have grown in awareness that the same laws that govern life on this planet earth also appear to govern life in the universe. There is no distinction. The same dust that makes up the stars of our universe constitutes the substance of our human bodies. In fact we now know that all matter within our universe, from the farthest star to the content of your body and mind, is interconnected. Scientists tell us that we are literally connected to one another and to all things – part of one vast web of life in our universe. Brian Swimme says it so well: “Nothing is itself without everything else.” We are participants in one another’s lives at every level of being.

Group Activity: This is my experience. I invite you to take a moment of quiet and reflect on an experience that fostered your understanding of ***Embracing Creation with Reverence and Hospitality***. After a moment of quiet reflection, I will invite you to stand and share something of this experience with your neighbor.

Our Christian and Benedictine Tradition

Our Judaeo-Christian tradition at its best speaks of all created life as gift. There is a sense of wonder at the created world from the first pages of the Book of Genesis. The psalms celebrate the wonders of creation and Psalm 104 celebrates the interdependence of all nature. (*Close your eyes: see, feel, hear, touch, taste and smell these verses.*)

*You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,
¹¹ giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.*

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¹²*By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.*

¹³*From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.*

¹⁴*You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,*

¹⁵*and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. (NRSV)*

All life is interconnected. Our Christian and Benedictine tradition is characterized by a call to simplicity and moderation. Scriptures and the *Rule* call us to live in community with a spirit of discipline, self-sacrifice, and loving service. Over and over again, scripture teaches about the fragility of life, the sense that we are pilgrims on the earth.

In the gospels Jesus shows a wonderful attitude toward created things by using water, bread, fish, wine, light, flowers, vines, branches, soil, spittle, mud, seed, and creatures such as birds, foxes, and hens. Jesus assumed the worth of the created universe, the dependability of nature, the reoccurrence of the season, the normal pattern of sowing and harvesting of planting a vineyard and caring for it, of seeing the clouds and counting on the rain. The natural world is the stage where the reign of God is enacted, the place, where faith in God is lived out. (Abbot John Klassen, OSB Introduction to St. John's Conference on "Environmental Stewardship," 2004) We followers of Benedict need to pledge ourselves and our communities not to do violence against creation. In the Prologue Benedict states that we make this life journey with the gospel as our guide. When was the last time you read one of the gospels from beginning to end? Your time here might be a good time to begin reading a gospel noting Jesus attitude toward creation.

We are deeply connected to nature and the movement of the seasons in another way, namely, the liturgical cycle. Our liturgical life is richly interwoven with the natural cycles of the year, the ebb and flow of light, the definition of color and its patterns, the plants and flowers that grace our spaces as prayer and life move on each day. The liturgy roots us, grounds us in the earth and its cycles of birth, growth, maturation, death and regeneration. Liturgy triggers our awareness of the natural cycles that operate in our search for and response to God. (Abbot John Klassen, OSB, Introduction to St. John's Conference "On Environmental Stewardship," 2004)

The mystics are another source for reflecting on the sacredness of all nature. Have you noticed how many of the mystics celebrated the sacramental character of the universe? One of these mystics is Hildegard of Bingen, a Benedictine abbess, a counselor to kings and popes, a homeopathic healer, a composer, an author, and a renowned preacher. Hildegard challenged the people of her age to conform their lives to Jesus, who loved not only humankind but all of God's creation. Hildegard

understood that for those who live in Christ, all creation is God's work, and that the earth especially is waiting with eagerness to be saved. Hildegard and all the mystics understood that people, created in God's image and likeness share in God's work, they are co-creators. The power of the earth to reveal God's love stunned Hildegard. Hildegard held the earth as precious. A beautiful example of this is Hildegard hearing God say, "I am the breeze that nurtures all things green...I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life." Caring for the living and delicate earth became a sacred trust for Hildegard. Like most mystics Hildegard observed and believed God's spirit in all life. (*Praying with Hildegard of Bingen* by Gloria Durka, St. Mary's Press, Winona, MN, 1991)

Benedictine spirituality is really an intense and intentional living of Christian spirituality. Today the *Rule* is the cornerstone of spirituality lived by professed monastic women and men all over the world as well as lay men and women from all walks of life. Benedict was simply describing the essentials for Christian living normative for all. Its central themes lead one back inevitably to the central themes of being human: Commitment; Balance; Being in right relationship with God, others; Respect for materials possessions and for the world around us.

These are issues that directly affect each one of us. Hence St Benedict's practical wisdom becomes a rich source for ordinary men and women who are involved in relationships, careers, family, community, and parish life. "The Rule," Cardinal Basil Hume once wrote "makes it possible for ordinary men and women to live lives of extraordinary value." There are no heroics here, no spectacular feats of spiritual accomplishment – just a steady and committed focus on God through the vehicles of prayer, work, relationships, sacred leisure, and study. Through the development of attitudes about such ordinary things as money, possessions, time, authority and food the follower of Benedict's way is radically transformed by God's saving action.

A casual reading of the Rule of Benedict indicates little or nothing of ecological interest. In Benedict's Rule you will not find a chapter entitled "Stewardship" or "Ecology" but you will find the principles of good stewardship woven throughout the whole Rule. Benedictine tradition recognizes the presence of God everywhere. All our resources, especially the human, must be loved, respected and wisely used. Throughout the Rule Benedict speaks about the manner in which our natural and temporal resources must be used in developing the monastery, its care of the sick and poor, the guests, and all works of the monastery. Long before stewardship became a popular topic Benedict preached and lived it.

Benedict assumes the premise that a harmonious community of people, committed to living a life that is accountable and holy, will strive to do the right thing. At its core the Rule seeks to foster a fundamental reverence toward the creation that God has made. A spirit of reverence for all creation permeates the Rule, together with a sense of oneness with the land, the days, and the seasons. Benedictine monastics do not simply use up what has been given to them, nor do they aim to live in poverty.

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It is *RB 31* that St. Benedict exhorts his cellarer to regard *all* the tools and goods of the monastery as the sacred vessels of the altar (*RB 31.10*). A footnote in *RB 80* reminds us of the function of the cellarer, a distinctively monastic term derived from the Latin *cellarium* meaning “storeroom.” The responsibilities include, in secular terminology, those of ‘business manager,’ ‘treasurer,’ ‘bursar.’ (*RB 1980, footnote RB 31.1, page 227*) You will note that the tone of the chapter on the cellarer is very much like that of chapters 2 and 64 on the abbot. The same attributes desired in the cellarer are the same attributes desired in the abbot. And I add these same attributes are desired in all who live the Christian life with the Gospels and the Rule as their guide.

Stewardship is a value which, like hospitality, captures the essence of Benedictine life. On a most basic level, Benedict prescribed care and reverence of material things. For Benedictines the ideal that gardening tools were just as important as chalices has come to mean a total way of life which emphasizes wholeness and wholesomeness and connectedness. All created things are God-given, and a common-sense approach to resources should prevail. Thus, says our Sister Jane Michele, “Benedictine communities are ready to accept the most recent technology but will use the same bucket for thirty years. ‘Taking care of things’ has been elevated to a virtue of surpassing value in Benedictine monasteries.” (“About the Rule of St. Benedict” by Sister Jane Michele McClure, OSB, article published by Sisters of St. Benedict, Ferdinand, IN and on www.thedome.org)

Everything in creation is pure gift. We as creatures on this earth have the responsibility to guard and manage this vast wealth. This global perspective is reflected in the comment by astronaut Buzz Aldrin when he saw the planet earth from space. He said, “We are not one nation under God, we are one earth under God.” All of creation is in relationship – from the tiniest molecule to the largest and most powerful nation or multinational corporation to the entire universe.

In the Book of Genesis God gives human beings *dominion* over creation. Originally the word dominion meant “care.” We do not own creation but we are responsible for managing and caring for it. All is gift— the air we breathe, the sun, the rain, the soil, vegetation, animal life, our abilities/talents, relationships. For the person with a monastic heart, we use what we are and what we have for the transformation of culture because creation is the Lord’s and we are its keepers; we hold it in trust. We realize that the planet is unitary, the population interdependent and the possibility of human destruction real. Someone must steward the world.

Among the earlier voices of this century for the Earth, none resonate like Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry. Both men were members of religious communities and priests. This training provided them with the thoughtful stimulation to continue their devotion both to scientific investigation of the earth and to cultivation of a life of prayer. Their teaching and writings have inspired a generation's thinking about humankind's place in the Earth community and the universe. By applying their knowledge in science, cultural history, philosophy, science, and comparative religions, they forged a Presentation by Kathryn Huber, OSB, *Embracing Creation with Reverence and Hospitality: Listening to Scripture and Rule Speak*, North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors at St. Meinrad, IN, July 2011.

compelling narrative of creation and communion that reconciles modern evolutionary thinking and traditional religious insights. Both men, along with a growing number of today's voices, inspire us to reclaim our role as the consciousness of the universe and thereby begin to create a true partnership with the Earth community.

In The Rule, Saint Benedict did not call only leaders and scholars; he called upon everyone to practice responsible stewardship in caring for one another and the whole earth community. How we are in relationship determines whether entities thrive or die. All entities working together, contributing and supporting one another, give life and sustain life. Hoarding, discarding, abusing, domineering, and disrespecting results in chaos, violence and death. Today the ecosystem's disaster symbolizes a lack of care and reverence for all living things. We followers of Benedict need to pledge ourselves and our communities to hold creation in sacred trust.

Conclusion

It is time to bring this presentation to an end. Let's end where our scriptures begin, with the Book of Genesis. Creation began when God said, "BE" – "Let there be light" and creation began. All life, all created things carry that first impulse of Divine energy of "BE!" The great I AM continues to say, "BE!" Each day the universe is evolving into new creations, each day all that has been created continues to evolve. And to each of us this on-going creative Spirit says, "BE the person I created you to be."

As the human species and all of creation continues to evolve, we become more aware of the intricate connectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds. As we grow in awareness and consciousness it will change our view of the world to one of awe and wonderment. Try seeing the Living Presence of God flowing through and supporting everything. The next time you experience a thunderstorm try seeing the Living Presence of God. A rainfall becomes a miraculous event, the lightning a fascinating display of energy, the thunder a booming reminder of the invisible power of nature. Live the mystery by beginning to perceive what the average eyes fail to notice. You can then know that there's something great and enduring that animates and permeates all of creation.

The Gospels and the Rule of Benedict are about transformation. In the gospel of John 3:34b we read, "God does not ration the Spirit." The Spirit of God is at work in us this very moment, urging us to evolve, to become a new kind of human being such as the world has rarely seen before. But what has been rare must now become commonplace.

"Listen," Benedict instructs, "and attend with the ear of your heart."

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