

Benedict of Nursia

A Voice for Solidarity in America

A disrupted society

Twenty-first-century American culture has been challenged and disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since January 2020 the presence of this invisible virus has exacerbated political divisiveness, created an economic crisis, and at the same time given birth to thousands of grass roots systems of mutual care. In the midst of a staggering death toll, millions of health care workers risk their lives to care for infected persons. Other citizens take differing risks to deliver food and supplies to homebound persons who have difficulty caring for themselves. Most Americans have been isolated in their homes, many working from home and providing home-schooling for their children. The limitation of conventional interactions has placed stress on businesses, created mammoth unemployment, and caused personal psychological stress on all of us. Some businesses and jobs will never be restored. In the midst of illness, death, lack of income and restlessness to regain some form of normalcy, millions of people are offering thanks for caregivers, sharing resources and talents, and reminding us of the myriad life-giving aspects within our cultures and nature that will sustain and support us. What are your thoughts?

Hard questions

Even though we know all this, hard questions tug at us. Will society ever get back to “normal”? What will a “new normal” be like and will it benefit everyone? How will people without jobs survive? Can government and local initiative work together for the common good? With the possibility of a new surge of the virus, how will we regain personal and corporate activities and at the same time protect ourselves and the lives of people around us? Will the political divisiveness that has permeated American society and government for decades continue? Can the international community risk working together? Will our economy “recover” in a way that benefits all persons? Is it possible to live with courage in the midst of conflicting values, pressures to conform to legislative power controlled by ideology, terrorism, and major societal transition? Is mutual interdependence for the common good possible in the presence of greed, self-interest, and behaviors that disrespect human life? Will democratic “freedom” include awareness of the consequences of our actions on other persons and the environment? What other questions do you have?

What will we become once all our masks are off? Is there room for hope?

The hope-filled sixth-century voice of Benedict of Nursia (480-547)

Benedict exhorts us to remember who we are and to have courage to live in solidarity as we discern the path beyond the pandemic. Benedict, like us, lived in a period of major societal transition. The stability of the Roman Empire had crumbled and power struggles over land, wealth, and power were creating fear and uncertainty. Some leaders were vicious and unprincipled. Benedict was born in Nursia, in the mountains north of Rome. His parents sent him to Rome to learn the classics, but very soon he was repelled by the corrupt and degenerate society he encountered. He left conventional society to enter a life of prayer and eventually founded a monastic community at Monte Cassino with a rule of life that would have a lasting influence on Christian monastic life throughout the world. The Rule of Benedict, when not

romanticized or abused, is a vision of what it means to live authentic human lives in community. The Rule is unapologetically Christian, yet embodies core virtues present in other major world religious traditions.

In 1993 twenty-eight European nations accepted a challenge to form a coalition that removed national barriers to trade and individual societies. The European Union, while not perfect, became an alternative to self-serving nationalism. In 1992 Victor Dammertz, Abbot Primate of Missionary Benedictines encouraged the EU to consider Benedict of Nursia as a mentor whose Rule for monks could guide the new coalition of nations to authentic solidarity and mutual interdependence while maintaining the integrity of their separate national lives. Abbot Dammertz highlighted four dimensions of the Rule of Benedict that, while not easy, could promote solidarity and the common good. The four dimensions of the Rule he cited are:

- ❖ Peace
- ❖ Justice and Solidarity
- ❖ Attention to the dignity of each person
- ❖ Unity in diversity

Yet Benedict was not naïve. He knew that these and other roots of human community have their source in an indispensable tap root: *humility*. Like the early Christian desert mothers and fathers, Benedict declared that a humble heart is the key to human solidarity. In Chapter Seven of his Rule for monks he described twelve aspects of humility and warns that attitudes and behavior that place a person ahead of God and our neighbor will destroy the harmony between our inner prayer and our actions. In an earlier chapter Benedict proclaims the primacy of love of God and our neighbor, exhorting his monks, “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else.” In the last chapter of his Rule Benedict refers his monks to the teaching and experience of the desert elders.

*Amma Syncletica said, “Because humility is good and salutary, the Lord clothed himself in it... For he says, ‘Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart’ (Matt 11:9). Notice who it is who is speaking; learn his lesson perfectly. Let humility become for you the beginning and end of virtues. He means a humble heart; he refers not to appearance alone, but to the inner person, for the outer person will also follow after the inner.”*¹

*Abba Dorotheos of Gaza said, “Among the seniors it used to be told how a brother asked one of the elders, ‘What is humility?’ And the elder replied, ‘Humility is a great and divine work and the road to humility is labor, bodily labor, while seeking to know oneself and to put oneself below everyone else and praying to God about everything: this is the road to humility, but humility itself is something divine and incomprehensible.’”*²

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¹ Pseudo-Athanasius. *The Life of Blessed Syncletica*. Translated by Elizabeth Bryson. Toronto: Peregrina, 1999. Pp. 39-40

² Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*. Trans. and intro. by Eric P. Wheeler. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977. “Discourse 2: On Humility”, 101.