

AFTER *THE BENEDICT OPTION*: BENEDICTINE APPROACHES TO
GRACE IN THE MODERN WORLD—SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Brendan McInerny, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
Moderator: Brendan McInerny, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
Presenters: Benjamin Durham, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
Brendan McInerny, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
Michael Rubbelke, University of Notre Dame

In his presentation “Salted Ground? Toward Newly Appropriating the Benedictine Fusion of Liturgy and Social Justice,” Benjamin Durham engaged a uniquely Benedictine contribution to theology: the strong emphasis on the connection between liturgy and social justice. Assessing the twin difficulties of hyper-technologization and popular individualism that are baked into the contemporary American psyche, Durham sketched the social challenge to the fertile communitarian ground upon which this theological emphasis had initially grown. Drawing from the work of Virgil Michel, OSB, Durham worked to till that ground in light of these new challenges, arguing that the Benedictine fusion of liturgy and social justice provides at least three enduringly relevant categories upon which American Christianity can find good soil to grow: humility in social engagement, vulnerability in the relationship of the institutions of the church to individual Christians, and hospitality marked both by a strong sense of identity and a commitment to welcome.

In his paper, “‘We ascend by Humility’: Humility in Benedict’s *Rule* and Diagnosing a Post-Christian Society,” Brendan McInerny argued that Rod Dreher’s diagnosis of the “post-Christian” character of contemporary American society was overly broad and lacked a positive counter-vision of Christian holiness. Turning to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, McInerny proposed that in structure and content Benedict offers humility as the quintessential Christian virtue. It is, says Benedict, through the lowering of self in humility that we rise to heavenly exaltation. This paradox reflects the Gospel’s habitual strange reversals of fortune and, paradigmatically, Christ’s own. McInerny argued that Benedictine humility is distinct and valuable by virtue of its practical and grounded character. Humility, for Benedict, is worked out in the day-to-day life of the monastic community, not in precipitous descent into abasement or dark nights. Drawing on the work of Romano Guardini, McInerny concluded by arguing that the absence of humility is the measure of “post-Christian” society and, if so, the Benedict Option must focus on inculcating this virtue above all other concerns.

In his presentation, “Strangers to the World: Fear, Community, and Benedictine Options in Post-Christian America,” Michael Rubbelke assessed Rod Dreher’s treatment of Benedictine stability in light of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the diaries of Fr. Christophe Lebreton, OCSO. As one of three promises which Benedict’s *Rule* enjoins upon monks, stability remedies the rootlessness of modernity, as Dreher correctly highlights. Yet its importance is not limited to enclosure, separation, or preservation. The *Rule* indicates how stability involves encounter with one’s sin, commitment to fellow monks, and trust in grace’s slow work within monastic life. As one of seven Trappist monks martyred in 1996 in Algeria, Fr. Christophe Lebreton describes stability differently from Dreher. Stability reveals the monk’s continuing solidarity in the world’s violence. It situates the monk beneath Christ’s cross to share His fate. It freely entwines the monk’s destiny with the unchosen fate of

Selected Session: After the Benedict Option

those around. Stability entails sharing Christ's suffering with and for others; this generates the hope of eschatological transformation. Lebreton's vision of Benedictine stability holds enormous potential for post-Christian America.

A wide-ranging and engaged discussion ensued until the session's time expired. While agreeing that his proposals tended toward extremes, several participants noted that Dreher's critique regarding the Churches' weakened social supports holds true. Some specific questions were raised regarding how liturgy enacts justice, the renewed importance of martyrs as examples and role models for young Christians, and the status of enclosures in other forms of Catholic monasticism (especially Franciscan nuns). Appropriately, the closing comment came from a Benedictine monk, who offered an account of humility from his own lived experience.

BRENDAN MCINERNEY
College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
St. Joseph, Minnesota