The Rule of Benedict and Environmental Sustainability

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Revised 8-5-13

Introduction

As a Benedictine it is quite natural to use the Rule of Benedict (RB) as a resource for thinking about environmental issues. In the not too distant past it seemed appropriate to frame the issues in terms of being 'good stewards.' However, many scholars have pointed to the difficulty with the word "stewardship."[1] Specifically, environmental scholars are uneasy with the use of the word 'stewardship' because of its association with the biblical creation story in which Adam and Eve are given 'dominion' over all animals and plants. Genesis 1:28 reads, "God blessed them, saying: 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.'"[2] If this text is put in the context of the entire Bible, human beings have an enormous accountability for use of the earth's resources and the trust of caring for the earth and all that it holds. For the sake of clarity at this time it seems appropriate to abandon the word 'stewardship' and replace it with a more helpful and vigorous descriptor. I have chosen 'sustainability' because it communicates the basic criterion of living in such a way on this earth that life is possible for both present and future generations. I believe that we in North America need to live differently if we want life on this planet to be sustainable for all of its creatures. Perhaps Dorothy Day summed it up best when she wrote: "I wanted life and I wanted abundant life. I wanted it for others too."[3]

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[1] Anne McCarthy, "A Humble Stance: Benedict's Gift to the Cosmos," *The American Benedictine Review* 56:1 (March 2005) 56-62 and references cited in this section.

[2] All biblical passages are from the New American Bible translation as presented in *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1990).

[3] Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 44.

The Rule of Benedict (RB)

As RB scholar Terrence Kardong has noted, "a casual reading of the Rule of Benedict indicates little or nothing of ecological interest."[4] However, no less a scholar than microbiologist Rene Dubos argues that Saint Benedict is a more apt patron saint of environmentalists than Saint Francis.[5] Indeed, an in-depth reading reveals three themes that can provide an ethical foundation for thinking about environmental stewardship. I will treat the themes of humility, stability, and frugality as they emerge in the Rule of Benedict and then attempt to extend these themes into the manner in which we try to live them out today, noting both what I consider to be successes and failures.

Humility: knowing ourselves as part of creation

Humility is probably the central virtue promoted by the Rule of Benedict. Chapter seven on humility is all of seventy verses long and comes as the conclusion of his spiritual teaching. If there is a ratio that exists between the amount of space given to something and its importance, Benedict is certainly of that mind here.

Humility for Benedict is grounded in the "fear of the Lord" tradition that emerges in the wisdom literature of Israel. RB 7:10-11 is difficult: "The first step of humility, then, is that a man keeps the fear of God always before his eyes and never forgets it. He must constantly remember everything God has commanded, keeping in mind that all who despise God will burn in hell for their sins and all who fear God have everlasting life awaiting them." The God-fearing person finds the holiness of God so awe-inspiring that it produces a strange mixture of

[4] Terrence G. Kardong, "Ecological Resources in the Benedictine Rule" in *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology*, edited by Albert J. LaChance and John E. Carroll (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 163.
[5] Rene Dubos, "Saint Francis versus Saint Benedict," *Psychology Today* **1973**, May 1973, 54-60.

simultaneous attraction and dread. Someone who has experienced the living God knows first hand that God is God and that he or she, a human being is not. In the scriptures the call of Moses in the book of Exodus (chapter three) or the call vision of Isaiah (chapter six), or any number of other texts describe this experience.

The Christian name for this new awareness, that God is God, and I am not, is humility. It shares deep roots with the word humus, or soil, human, and humor. It is humility that allows us to acknowledge that we are not the creators of the universe, but creatures. In humility we recognize that all life, human, botanical and zoological, comes *ha adamah*, "out of the ground." We are one with the soil, with the plants and animals, all of whom "fear God" by their very existence. The human choice is to live within the constraints of creature-hood.

Our anthropocentric posture toward the rest of the created world has motivated some theologians, such as James Nash, to introduce the idea of "ecological sin," defined in part as, "the arrogant denial of the creaturely limitations imposed on human ingenuity and technology, a defiant disrespect or a deficient respect for the interdependent relationships of all creatures and their environments established in the covenant of creation, and an anthropocentric abuse of what God has made for frugal use."[6]

A one-word equivalent to humility is the word 'truth': the truth of the human situation, the truth of human strengths and weaknesses, the truth of multiple motivations for any action, the truth of our relationships, to each other and to the earth. Here I am particularly interested in the truth of our relationship with creation. Ecologist David Abram writes: "Ecologically considered, it is not primarily our verbal statements that are 'true' or 'false,' but rather the kind of relations

[6] James Nash, *Loving Nature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 119.

that we sustain with the rest of nature. A human community that lives in a mutually beneficial relationship with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth."[7]

Humility means recognizing that we are completely dependent on the health of the planet for our physical lives. "If all human beings disappeared from the earth tomorrow, no plant or animal would miss us"[8] – not a single tear would be shed. On the contrary, the entire planet would be better off. We cannot live for a few minutes without air, a few days without water, and a few weeks without food from plants and animals. Comedian George Carlin does a brilliant critique of the arrogance of human beings who think they are the pinnacle of creation. He imagines a situation where we have done enough damage to do ourselves in as a species, and the planet shaking us off as a big dog shakes a flea off its back, a surface nuisance.[9]

Another important dimension of humility is to abandon our current understanding of economics that treats all of the earth and its resources, the entire global ecosystem as an externality. This kind of 'apartheid' conceptualization expresses the belief that somehow our lives and our economy exist apart from nature. Nature provides things that no money can buy: the maintenance and composition of the atmosphere, the stabilization and fine-tuning of climate, the renewal of the drinking water supply, the constant recycling of nutrients, the regeneration of soils, the natural pollination of crops, the creation and maintenance of the vast genetic library of species, and the aesthetic pleasures of landscape, light and darkness. Many of these gifts come to us barely visible or invisible: habitat, the forest canopy, insects and plants, ocean plankton,

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[7] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 264.
[8] Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 102.
[9] George Carlin, "The Planet is Fine" from *Jammin' in New York* video tape, Columbia Tristar video, 1993. I do not agree with Carlin's premise that human beings have little or no impact on the health of the planet. Scientific evidence argues convincingly to the contrary.

root systems, and climate control. We rely on these services for our life each day, but are barely aware of their contribution.[10]

Stability: staying in a place long enough that the spirits can speak to us

Benedictine stability has to include both a commitment to a specific place and a commitment to a specific group of people. If you go to a place and there is no there, there,[11] it's not a Benedictine place. I don't know what it is, but it is not Benedictine.

Secondly, I want to suggest that the vow of stability is an excellent foundation for reflecting on environmental stewardship. In Saint Benedict's Rule it is not the hermits who are contrasted to the cenobites (chapter 1). It is the gyrovagues and sarabaites who are drawn in sharp relief. "There are the monks called gyrovagues who spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or four days in different monasteries. Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites (RB 1:10-11)."

By analogy, exploring, studying, seeing the place where one lives as a monastic will lead to a deep knowledge and love for the local environment and will ground one in a place. Kardong has suggested the following axiom: "Those who live in a place have the biggest stake in it."[12] Of course, there are examples of communities who have destroyed their own local habitat. In the first seven thousand years of agriculture, over-grazing was one of the single most damaging

[10] Janet N. Abramovitz, "Nature's 'Free' Services" in *The World Watch Reader on Global Environmental Issues* edited by Lester R. Brown and Ed Ayres (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), 150-169.
[11] Gertrude Stein said this of Oakland: "When you get there, there isn't any there, there."
[12] Terrence G. Kardong, 168.

practices that caused large tracts of land to be badly eroded or converted into desert.[13] Human ignorance or the inability to change destructive practices can wreak havoc in any situation.

The earth teaches us about the cycle of life and death. As psychologist Ernest Becker[14] and a host of other writers have noted, acknowledging the reality of death re-orients the meaning of human life. Saint Benedict is specific about death. He urges the monastic to keep death daily before his or her eyes. These words of his merely serve to reinforce the message of psalms such as 39 or 90. These and other psalms are embedded with a haunting sense of the fragility and finitude of human living and striving. Life is a gift, a given span of days, seventy years or eighty for those who are strong. Analogously, monastic places are also gift, to be received with joy and care, to be a part of for a while, but then to be handed on to the next generation.

The earth can also teach us about our lives. All too often we think of other humans as our primary teachers. But the earth can teach us about change in a unique way because it has a four billion year resume in the field. The earth can teach us about loss and grief, about death and transformation. Gary Snyder has been writing poetry for almost forty years. Over the years he has articulated the need for bioregional approach to environmental stewardship. In a collection of essays in *The Practice of the Wild*, he records the words of a Crow elder: "You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough, the spirits will begin to speak to them."[15]

As Benedictine monastics we want to be people who "stay in a place long enough that the spirits can speak to us." By coming to know a place deeply, the set of overlapping ecosystems, the delicate balance which exists between the number of creatures and available nourishment, the

[13] W. C. Lowdermilk, "Conquest of the Land Through Seven Thousand Years," Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 99, U. S. Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service, Issued August 1953 and slightly revised in August 1975.
[14] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).
[15] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993), 39.

patterns that play themselves out year after year, monastic communities will make decisions with an understanding of their consequences. In the event of a serious mistake the community will be around long enough to recognize it as such.

This is not an argument against change but an argument for environmental knowledge. It is a knowledge that will lead us to recognize the habitats that are necessary for different kinds of wildlife. It will draw us to learn something about the forest that was originally in a place, to review topography and soil and climate conditions, and reforest if necessary. It is an argument for "wildness," for resisting the temptation to create places where there is not tall grass, fallen trees, and piles of leaves for animals to dwell. Finally, we will pray differently. The psalms and the scriptures are loaded with imagery from the natural world, which is activated in a fresh and powerful way by first-hand knowledge of the environment in which we live. We will come to know ourselves as part of the created world, and not in opposition to it.

Frugality and the consumption ethic

Early in the age of affluence that followed World War I, an American retailing analyst named Victor Lebow proclaimed, "Our enormously productive economy ...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate."[16] Americans have responded to Mr. Lebow's call and much of the world has followed. The United States is the largest consuming nation in the world. Our consumer culture has developed in

[16] Alan Thein Durning, *How Much is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 21-22.

lockstep with our consumer economy. Products that didn't exist so many years ago have become necessities in some households, inspiring workers to take on more hours to pay for them.[17]

In the face of this stark reality, the Benedictine virtue of frugality offers us an alternative vision of sustainable consumption--based not on want but on essential need.[18] Grounded in the ascetical practices of the monastic tradition, the Rule of Benedict is permeated with direct and indirect references to frugality. This is particularly true of the section of the Rule that governs the administration of the monastery and includes Benedict's teaching on private property, the distribution of goods according to need and the appropriate use of food and drink wherein Saint Benedict writes, "Frugality should be the rule on all occasions."

The fundamental principal of the community of goods is positively stated in chapter 34: "As it was written, 'It was distributed to each one according to need.'" Benedict continues further, "So the one who needs less should thank God and not be sad. And whoever needs more should be humble about his weaknesses and not gloat over the mercy shown him." (34:1, 3) Benedict establishes this system because he wants to fight against avarice,[19] that desire which can never get enough of the world's goods. When avarice is operating it is very difficult to distinguish 'needs' and 'wants.' Benedict is acutely aware that satisfying human 'wants' tends to create more 'wants.'

Benedict also writes a compelling chapter on a special official in the monastery, the cellarer. According to Benedict, this person should be wise, mature in conduct, temperate, not an excessive eater, not proud, excitable, offensive or wasteful (v.1) "He must show every care and

[17] See Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005) for an economic analysis of the experience of happiness and its relationship to wealth and consumption.
[18] Russell A. Butkus, "Sustainability and the Benedictine Way: An Eco-Theological Analysis," paper presented at Benedictine College, October 1997, 29-30.
[19] Kardong, 170.

concern for the sick, children, guests, and the poor, knowing for certain that he will be held accountable for all of them on the Day of Judgment. He will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected. He should not be prone to greed, nor be wasteful and extravagant with the goods of the monastery, but should do everything with moderation…" (vs. 9-12) One can tell from these verses that for Benedict the created world is sacred, that all goods, those from the earth and those created by human beings, are to be treated with care and respect. Nothing is to be handled carelessly, wastefully, or with contempt and casual disdain. This care for the goods of the monastery is not an end in itself but is directly tied to those who are vulnerable and needy: the sick, children, guests, and the poor.

In recent years frugality has received renewed attention by a number of theologians and ethicists concerned with our environmental condition. Eco-theologian James Nash, for example, names frugality as one of the nine "ecological virtues" of which sustainability is the first.[20] On frugality Nash writes: "Frugality connotes moderation, temperance, thrift, cost effectiveness, efficient usage, simplicity of life-style, and a satisfaction with material sufficiency… It thrives not only on restrained consumption, but also on conscientious conservation, optimal technical efficiency, comprehensive recycling, and an insistence on built-in durability and repairability."[21] It is the key to sustainability. It is having a 'sense of enough' and the willingness to live within material limitations so that others may also have enough. Frugality is the fundamental impulse that undergirds conservation.

> Frugality is an earth-affirming and enriching norm that delights in the non- and less-consumptive joys of the mind and flesh, especially the enhanced lives for

[20] James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 63-66. The nine ecological virtues are sustainability, adaptability, relationality, frugality, equity, solidarity, biodiversity, sufficiency, and humility.
[21] James A. Nash, "On the Subversive Virtue: Frugality" in *Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship* edited by David A. Crocker and Toby Linden (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 421.

> human communities and other creatures that only constrained consumption and production can make possible on a finite planet… Frugality minimizes harm to humans and other life-forms, enabling thereby a greater thriving of all life.[22]

Frugality is a fundamental contribution we can make to our wasteful, over-consuming society. We want to live simply so that others may simply live.

Ultimately, frugality is rooted in a spiritual, contemplative attitude towards life and the creation. There is not a whiff of an anti-material sensibility in the Rule, but Benedict is convinced that only the "things of God" will satisfy the longing in human hearts and these can never be bought or owned.

Conclusion

Even though the Rule of Benedict, written in the sixth century, has no chapter on "the environment," nevertheless, the way of life that the Rule inspires has tended to be sustainable. In writing this short essay, I have attempted to identify three fundamental practices that I believe provide the basis for a sustainable environment. The practice of humility puts us in right relationship to the planet and notes our radical dependence on unpolluted air, clean water, and nutritious food from plants and animals. The practice of stability creates the conditions for coming to greater awareness and understanding of the eco-systems in which every single one of us lives each day. The practice of frugality will undermine the dominant culture of consumerism, of using too many of the earth's resources for our lives. To really understand environmental sustainability requires a fundamental conversion: of thought, of the ordering of our values and desires, of our understanding, and of practice. "Surely a true change in our system of values…could only occur as a conversion experience, for it would necessitate a

[22] Ibid., 427.

fundamental change from deep within us. Not simply to alter *how* we do things but to change the value presupposition of *why* we do things is a conversion of the deepest kind."[23]

[23] John E. Carroll, *Sustainability and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 2.