

# **THE BENEDICTINE TRADITION, CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE MISSION OF BUSINESS EDUCATION IN THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY**

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## ***Purpose:***

Benedictine University summarizes its identity as ‘a Catholic university in the Benedictine tradition that provides a value centered liberal arts education enriched by our excellence in science’. This paper will examine how the Benedictine charism is related to Catholic Social Teaching (CST), and how that charism forms the university community and initiatives to integrate Benedictine values and CST into the curriculum of the College of Business’s MBA program.

## ***Context***

### **The Benedictine Charism and CST**

*The Rule of St. Benedict*, Scripture, and the lived experience of Benedictine monastics and those who interact with them as students, guests, worshippers or neighbors ‘has been a source of social, economic and cultural grounding for entire civilizations’ (Association). The vitality and relevance of the Benedictine vision has been demonstrated in recent times by television programs on both sides of the Atlantic, and management literature which draws on the Rule of St. Benedict (Dollard, Galbraith).

The Benedictine tradition developed in a pre-industrial world; CST, which we interpret as the social encyclicals, developed as a response to industrial society. The Benedictine tradition is a pre-capitalist tradition, but is also applicable to business in industrial and post-industrial society. The Rule of St. Benedict presents a vision of a good, rich, and balanced life for modern people and organizations. The Rule embodies the theological anthropology of person as relational, and its teaching on stewardship and hospitality is based on a Scriptural understanding of the common good. Benedict’s insight of work as a worthwhile part of Christian living (in a social environment which denigrated manual labor) has given a solid foundation to the CST tradition exemplified in encyclicals such as *Laborem exercens*. His rule serves as a guide to individuals seeking a balanced life, and to organizations that seek a culture of respect, openness and common purpose.

### **Integrating Benedictine values and CST across the curriculum**

Seven core values of the Benedictine rule characterize our university: love, prayer, stability, conversation, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality, and community.

Benedictine University has approached strengthening its identity as a Catholic and particularly Benedictine university in several initiatives over the last decade. The freshman seminar, 'Person in Community', introduces the new Benedictine student to academic community, to religious community, to Catholic and Benedictine community. Taught by faculty members from across the university, it challenges the student to understand what it means to be a responsible member of these communities.

The Center for Mission and Identity (CMI) was formed as the university worked to create a vision appropriate for this place and this time. CMI, co-chaired by faculty members from the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Science, includes members from all colleges in the university. CMI hosts monthly *Conversatio* where interested faculty members meet to discuss issues related to the theme of the year: Faith and Reason in 2006-7 and Globalization in 2007-8, and the Environment in 2008-9. CMI also organizes faculty workshops in the summer which focus on the study of the sources related to the year's theme, for example, *Veritatis Splendor* in 2007. The work of the CMI is primarily among the faculty to ensure that the Benedictine values inform our teaching and interactions with students.

To highlight the particular Catholic and Benedictine values in the College of Business, we are developing a module for the initial course in the MBA program: "Leadership & Ethics in a Global Environment" (MBA 520). This class "reviews paradigms of leadership in global environment. Introduces and applies principles for ethical decision-making in business situations. Assesses student's leadership capacities and responsibilities in challenging situations." (Benedictine) and is a required course. Its primary intent is to give the student an appreciation for the very complex environment in which business managers and leaders function as well as to link ethics with the concept of leadership as the foundation for further study. Business ethics is not taught as a separate course; it is highlighted in this course as a defining factor in leadership, and then integrated into the teaching across the MBA curriculum.

Since it is the intended first course for our students, and since almost no students transfer in a comparable course when they join our program, we also use this course to introduce the students to our MBA program. For example, there is a one hour orientation by a librarian on using the library facilities from off-campus. There is a one hour talk from the MBA department chair on the logistics of our MBA program – transfer courses, electives, concentrations, applying for graduation, etc. The course exposes the student to graduate level teaching and learning techniques such as case analysis, team and group work, and class discussion, debate and experience sharing.

Our module within 'Leadership and Ethics in the Global Environment' emphasizes two Benedictine values in business: discipline and humility. Our initial target audience are the students in the face to face MBA classroom, but we wish to adapt this for students in our distance education MBA. We think this strengthens the Benedictine identity of the university, and adds value to the business education they receive here. The keystone of Benedictine values and life is the Rule of St. Benedict. The strength of the Rule is Benedict's understanding of human nature and the problems which arise when humans live in community and seek a common purpose.

We could have chosen many aspects of the Rule, for example its brilliant understanding of the leader's need to define a goal, but recognize that there are many ways of achieving the goal.

Benedict spends Chapters 8 through Chapter 18 laying out the order of the psalms for the hours, and feasts and concludes, ‘Above all else we urge that if anyone finds this distribution of the psalms unsatisfactory, he should arrange whatever he judges better, provided that the full complement of one hundred and fifty psalms is by all means carefully maintained every week, and that the series begins anew each Sunday at Vigils’ (RSB Ch 18:22-24). Benedict has identified the goal, and directed his successors to use their own initiative and creativity to meet the goal. The ingrained flexibility of the Rule is one of the reasons Benedictine monasticism has survived while the world has changed (Doyle).

We focus on discipline and humility because we see these as the core of the Rule, and the aspects that are critical to a leader’s and an organization’s success. We place a high value on an organization’s survival, indicating that an organization is not just a profit-driven conglomeration of people, but a purpose-driven institution which can foster virtue (Fletcher).

### **The Pre-Module Assignment**

The students are asked to read the Collins “Level 5 Leadership” article, and two Hartwick Humanities in Management cases, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” (which includes a short case on Sam Walton and Walmart) and “The Rule of St. Benedict” (which includes a short case on Jimmy Treybig and Tandem Computers). There are two assignments:

1. Discuss and list the complexities of environments in which [St. Benedict and Malcolm X] functioned, and evaluate the endurance of their legacies and comment on the impact the 1,500 years of time may have had on their management leadership models. The students submit a short (five double-spaced pages) on this topic.
2. Discuss the points of similarity between the leaders Collins studied and the leadership described in the Rule of St. Benedict. What are the conflicts between them? What specific insights into leadership have you gained from the Rule of St. Benedict? What makes sense to you that you will carry into your professional life?

This latter assignment leads into the discussion module led by the present authors.

### **Collins on leadership**

Collins was studying companies that transformed from good to great, and he states:

The executives at companies that went from good to great and sustained that performance for 15 years or more were all cut from the same cloth – one remarkably different from that which produced the executives at the comparison companies in our study. (139)

He identifies five levels of leadership: Level 1 Highly Capable Individual; Level 2 Contributing Team Member, Level 3 Competent Manager, Level 4 Effective Leader, and Level 5 Executive. We were particularly interested in the contrast between Level 4 leadership which Collins describes as ‘catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision; stimulates the group to high performance standards’ and Level 5 leadership which ‘Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical combination of personal humility plus professional will’ (140).

Collins uses the image of the window and the mirror to explain the difference in personal humility between the Level 4 and Level 5 leaders. Level 4 leaders look out the window that is they attribute successes to others, and look into the mirror, that is they take responsibility for

failures or problems themselves. Level 4 leaders, on the other hand, look out the window to blame others for failure and look in the mirror to credit themselves for successes (142).

Collins details the need for discipline in organizations:

When you look across the good-to-great transformations, they consistently display three forms of discipline: disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action.

When you have disciplined people, you don't need hierarchy. When you have disciplined thought, you don't need bureaucracy. When you have disciplined action, you don't need excessive controls. When you combine a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship, you get the magical alchemy of great performance. (141)

Collins identifies personal humility as a key characteristic of Level 5 leaders and their success. He remarks, “The great irony is that the animus and personal ambition that often drives people to become a Level 4 leader stands at odds with the humility required to rise to Level 5” (145). Because the Rule of St. Benedict focuses on humility as the key of personal transformation for each monk, we thought that the Collins article would shed light on the Rule and the Rule on Collins’ findings.

## **Our Expectation**

Our goal was to have the students identify humility and discipline as the key features of the Rule of St. Benedict and note the conformance with Collins’ findings. We expected that the students would find the “personal humility and professional will” (or, in terms closer to Benedict’s Rule, humility and discipline) which Collins discusses to be represented in both Malcolm X and St. Benedict, and that this might lead them to consider these somewhat counter-cultural values personally. We hoped that the students would see in this discussion a differentiation between our business programs and those in peer institutions, and begin to realize that there are differences between what we view as values-driven leadership and general profit-driven leadership.

## **The Discussion Experience**

To date, we have met with two different sections of “Leadership & Ethics in a Global Environment” to lead discussions of this material. In the first instance, there were 16 students, including 9 for whom English was a second language. In the second instance, there were 10 students.

### ***The first session***

In our first experience with the module, the students appeared overwhelmed with the volume of reading we had asked them to do—Collins, Benedict, Malcolm X, Treybig, Walton—and clearly had spent little time integrating the material.

The students found (to our surprise) that humility was not valued or visible in the Malcolm X case. The students’ perception of the Rule of St. Benedict is that the Rule prescribes an all-powerful Abbot who tells monks what to do—the opposite of a humble Abbot. The students identified with the down-trodden monks, rather than with the Abbot or St. Benedict.

Much of the discussion centered on the contrast between Malcolm X and Benedict as he is known through reading excerpts from his Rule. The students did identify a similarity between Malcolm X and Benedict in that their lives exemplified order and discipline. Both were radicals in their respective ages, charismatic figures, and religious leaders. Both were involved in cultures undergoing major upheavals and both had a vision for survival in those perilous times. They observed that both Malcolm X and St. Benedict were driven by poverty, needed order in their lives, created or found this for themselves, and then began to share it with others. Both were radicals in their periods.

Students also concluded that leaders can be groomed differently, that leadership depends on the situation in which the leader is put, that leaders must have passion, and that a leader must provide hope for those whom he wishes to lead.

The two readings were difficult to compare, as the purpose and style of each was so different. The students picked up on the Abbot as the leader of the monastic community and the Rule's stipulation that he consult the members of the community, particularly the youngest, before making decisions.

We tried to guide the discussion by suggesting sustainability as a measure of success. This factor showed that Malcolm X's organization didn't last, but Benedict's rule is still guiding communities. The question of longevity in companies came up, but in the brief time available we couldn't discuss the implications of this other than superficially. The students didn't contribute any substantive comments on the Collins article; and so we never really discussed humility and discipline directly.

### ***The second session***

For the second session, therefore, we highlighted the Collins article by assigning the questions "What are the points of similarity between the leaders Collins studied and the leadership described in the Rule of St. Benedict?", "What are the conflicts between them?", "What specific insights into leadership have you gained from the Rule of St. Benedict?" and "What makes sense to you that you will carry into your professional life?"

One student noted that both St. Benedict and Malcolm X ruled by fear; in Benedict's case, the fears of losing heaven and of being expelled from the monastery. Another noted that both St. Benedict and Malcolm X found the limits of their respect for their leaders (most visibly Malcolm X's final experiences with Elijah Mohammed). One noted that Malcolm X's ability to attract others to his movement was more impressive, for the monks of St. Benedict's time had no other opportunities.

The students reported that both St. Benedict and Malcolm X had to relate to people to lead, were personally humble (simple clothes, few possessions) and were effective leaders. One student claimed that "humility and professional will" would be effective for their organization, and other agreed.

Other comments included that the readings showed that we shouldn't idolize leaders, and that leaders never have total power. We pointed out the difference in ego between the level 4 and level 5 leadership that Collins identified. The students described a humble leader as one who

expected discipline, had empathy for people, a vision for the future and belief that that the people could achieve it. They described humble behavior as dressing simply, relating to people, being approachable, not being pretentious, and gave examples of leaders and managers they knew in the workplace. One student, a sales manager, related that the most effective sales people were the introverts whom he described as down to earth and able to get into the head of customers.

We proposed counter examples, such as football coaches and superstar CEO's whose leadership style was not humble. In response a student said that the test of humility in leadership is when the mission is above the man. Students would accept that theoretically humble, disciplined leadership existed, but their workplace experience told them that it was very rare. One commented that most managers cannot afford to be humble since that is perceived as 'losing face', and therefore their power. So although the qualities of humility and discipline are good, as Collins showed, the students did not give us any concrete ways they would take this into their own professional lives.

## **Conclusion**

Although we have not yet achieved our goal with the discussions, we recognize that we were pushing the students to do an additional assignment, from people who were not their instructor, and hence would not be giving them a grade. The participation in the discussions was good, but the limited time meant that substantive points were brought up, but not adequately addressed.

The students have chosen Benedictine University, and pay a premium to attend here, giving prima facie evidence that they perceive our values as worthwhile. The structure of the program, with the case studies chosen for this course, demonstrate clearly that Benedictine, Catholic values are considered integral to business education at this school. We see leadership as grounded in values, and think that the values in the Rule of St. Benedict are particularly appropriate to organizations.

After two experiences of good but somewhat unfocused discussion, we are adapting the assignment further for a session in the summer school. This time we will construct the assignment asking the students to read the case on The Rule of St. Benedict and the Collins article. We will ask the students to focus to humility and discipline by asking them to pay particular attention to the first sections of the Rule as excerpted in their case study, i.e., The Qualities of the Abbot (Chapter 2), The counsel of the brothers (Chapter 3), Obedience (Chapter 5), and Humility (Chapter 7). The question for our part of the discussion will be "Compare and contrast Collins' Level 5 leaders' personal humility and professional will and the Rule of St. Benedict's humility and obedience. Will these values affect your managing style?"

We hope that by assigning shorter readings and a clear question we will have a discussion that focuses on the qualities of humility and discipline in organizations. We hope that they will be able to offer behaviors that are signs of discipline and humility, and see that these values will serve them well in their own lives as managers and leaders.

We are planning, too, to make explicit Collins' assumption that a great organization is a lasting organization. Collins admits that it takes time to move from a good to great organization. The time pressure for performance by executives is shorter than ever, "about 40 percent of CEOs seem to last less than two years on average." (Gottfredson 279) They are expected to make visible progress toward the organization's goals within the first year or two, or they may find themselves looking for another job (Gottfredson 4).

Gottfredson, like Drucker and many other management writers, identifies a key trait for organizational success, succession planning: "A CEO can do a great job during his tenure, but if he fails at setting his successor up to succeed, he won't leave much of a legacy" (Gottfredson 278). We believe that examining this area will highlight the value of humility and how it enhances the leader's ability to fulfill this vital task.

The values of humility and discipline are not foreign to the temperaments of entrepreneurs. Dollard shows us that Benedict expects monks to be 'rebels', strong-minded individuals, so there will be problems, and that is where the discipline of the monastery comes in: 'the Abbot offers the word of scripture, temporary expulsion from community prayer and meals and finally, if none of this works, permanent exclusion from the monastery.' This means the Abbot must get the balance right between being present at moments of crisis and yet not being on the monk's back (Dollard 136-7). This requires humility in the Abbot, just as business leaders who want to foster innovation must have the same ability to get this balance right.

We will continue to offer the module and refine the question and assignment as we receive feedback from the students. We hope to develop a course from this work with a research component to further refine the ideas of ethical, value-driven leadership and organizational success.

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