

**CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING, VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT: A  
FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING APPLIED ETHICS BASED ON THE BENEDICTINE TRADITION OF  
CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AT BENEDICTINE COLLEGE**

**John F.S. Bunch**

**Benedictine College in Transition**

Benedictine College, founded in 1865, is a four-year Catholic, liberal arts, residential college located in Atchison, Kansas. In fulfilling its mission to educate men and women in “a community of faith and scholarship,” it leads students toward academic excellence in an atmosphere that welcomes them into a caring, supportive and familial environment inspired and shaped by 1500 years of the Benedictine religious tradition. The college's commitment to the development of the individual within community provides our students with the principles, knowledge and skills for a life of learning, leadership and service, "that in all things God may be glorified."

In the last 10 years college enrollment has grown from approximately 700 to over 1300 students. In the Fall of 2007, the college welcomed its largest Freshman class in the last 27 years. This represents a turnaround of major proportions for a college that was in danger of closing its doors at one point in the early 90s. What has made the difference?

The President of the College, Steve Minnis, answered that question in a speech to the Center for Spirit at Work, in Kansas City last Fall. He stated:

I believe that God has blessed our place. That he recognizes the wonderful things that happen on our blessed campus and He has deemed it a place that should continue. No, it is never a question of survival, but rather one of demand for excellence, about taking the next step, to build one of the great Catholic colleges in America.

The last ten years has created a foundation for this vision. In the last ten years our enrollment has increased 85 percent. The number of applications has more than doubled, we have built a Student Union, two residence halls — with another on the way — a football stadium, and a new exercise facility, and we have renovated almost all the student life space on campus. *U.S. News & World Report* has recognized us as one of America's Best Colleges. *The Cardinal Newman Society* in their recent publication: “How to Choose a Catholic College” has recognized us as one of the best Catholic colleges in America. We have had positive cash flow and balanced budgets for some time now, and we have the confidence to embark on a fundraising effort to build a new academic center. We moved from a situation of being desperate for students to having a waiting list because we simply can not accommodate all of the qualified students who want a Benedictine College education.

People often ask me what the secret is, what is going on in Atchison, Kansas that would cause such a comeback, and allow you to dream of building one of the Great Catholic Colleges in America. Well ten years ago, we didn't forge ahead with some new fangled way to educate, or move to an on-line way of education, or do things that, for the time, might have seen as edgy or modern or new wave. No, we went back to the fundamentals. We knew to survive and to create an environment that will sustain the college for years to come; we had to decide who we were. And we looked no further than our mission. From that point on, and through today, we decided to be a mission-driven institution. Every

decision we made, every thing we do we strive to have it be consistent with our mission. Our mission is a strong one for us.

The official mission of Benedictine College reads: *Heir to the 1,500 years of Benedictine dedication to learning, the mission of Benedictine College as a Catholic, Benedictine, liberal arts, residential college is the education of men and women within a community of faith and scholarship.*

We often refer to the four pillars of our mission. These four pillars are that we are a Catholic, Benedictine, Liberal Arts, and Residential colleges and these pillars support our mission of education men and women within a community of faith and scholarship.

The mission, vision, and values of the College are incorporated into the college's educational curriculum through current requirements that students who graduate from Benedictine College take nine credit hours of religious studies and nine credit hours of philosophy which emphasize the ideas of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. The general exposure of all Benedictine College students to ethical issues, therefore, reflects an emphasis on character and virtue ethics, as expressed by these two classical scholars and the traditions of Catholic social justice as presented by the Papal Encyclicals (e.g., Rerum Novarum - On the Condition of the Working Classes, Laborem Exercens - On Human Work, Centesimus annus - On The Hundredth Anniversary Of Rerum Novarum).

### **Leadership and Business Education at Benedictine College**

The approach to business education at Benedictine College directly reflects a strong commitment to the college mission and vision. It is expressed directly in three different program areas.

Catholic Social Teaching and Outreach: While not directly associated with the Business Department, Campus Ministry and Student Life are committed to service learning and outreach experiences. FOCUS – the Fellowship of Catholic University Students founded at Benedictine College in 1998 – is an active student organization. Campus Ministry has recently sponsored trips to New Orleans, and El Salvador as well as many local volunteer efforts throughout the Atchison and Kansas City area. The BC Hunger Coalition works to provide food to needy families through the distribution of meals that students have donated and sponsors a reading program in the local schools.

The Economics Department, with the sponsorship of IPEAR (see below) revised its curriculum to incorporate Catholic Social Teaching through its course offerings three years ago. One expression of this project is RS370 Catholic Social Teaching which is co-taught by a Economics Professor and a Theology Professor. Both review and provide their particular insights of the meaning and application of the encyclicals, particularly Rerum Novarum, Laborem Exercens, and Centesimus annus, to professional practice and economic life. There is also an annual Social Justice week on campus where speakers come to discuss social justice issues and Catholic Social Teaching.

The Leadership Program “Building Future Leaders of the World” The goal of this program is to provide every student who attends Benedictine College the opportunity to develop leadership

skills and a 'servant leadership' philosophy that is based on the Rule of St. Benedict and Catholic traditions. Two classes are incorporated into the program, Introduction to Leadership and Team Leadership where the Rule of St. Benedict is specifically presented and discussed. The major focus of this effort, however, is outside the academic curriculum. Examples of leadership training experiences that have been offered by the Leadership Program include: (1) the 21 day BC Leadership Seminar – an intensive leadership training offered by Student Life and the Athletic Leadership Seminar. Both of these programs are based on the Benedictine Rule.

The Institute for Professional Ethics and Responsibility – IPEAR: The Institute for Professional Ethics and Responsibility (IPEAR) was founded in 2004. At that time, while departments with close relationships to professional groups (e.g. Mass Communication, Education, Business) had courses that addressed disciplinary issues of compliance and ethics; a programmatic, college wide approach to teaching applied ethics did not exist. IPEAR was created to develop an integrated applied ethics program based on Catholic Social Teaching and the Benedictine tradition which would extend the examination of ethical issues beyond the theoretical models presented and discussed in the College's philosophy and theology courses.

While there are a growing number of academic articles examining the implications of the Catholic Tradition for the teaching of Business and/or managerial ethics, discussions of the Rule of St. Benedict and the Benedictine tradition in this context are relatively rare. A few books have been written about using the Rule as a source of inspiration and insight for Leadership and Management (see attached reference list) but these fail to explore how the Rule and the Benedictine Tradition have a unique position within Catholic Social Teaching and can form the basis for a bridge between virtue-as-character and ethical practices. In addition, the Benedictine emphasis on principles of worshipful work, discipline, obedience and subsidiarity, as well as human dignity/hospitality heighten aspects of CST that are directly relevant to applied ethics and professional practices.

These elements are incorporated into the IPEAR Teaching Framework which is outlined below. Examples of the use of this framework that will be discussed in the expanded paper include: an Ethical Decision Making course for high school students, (2) BA455 Business Ethics in the Business curriculum, and (3) a Continuing Education course for Insurance Industry professionals.

Finally, the expanded paper will conclude with a discussion of the BC experience implementing the IPEAR Teaching Framework across the curriculum. The most significant challenges, from our experience, have been gaining support from the college community, and lack of knowledge, acceptance, or a common interpretation of CST and/or the core ethical principles associated with virtue ethics in the Benedictine academic community.

## Key elements of the IPEAR Professional Ethics Teaching Framework

Catholic Social Teaching. – The tenants of Catholic Social Teaching that are emphasized in the teaching framework are Solidarity, Community and the Common Good, and the Dignity of the Human Person.

The Rule of St. Benedict. - This section will review how the Rule has been applied to work and professional practices as well as key aspects of the Benedictine tradition.

Work as Professional Practice

Virtue Ethics - the Aspirations approach to Applied Ethics will be presented here. This idea suggests that virtue ethics can be used to provide images of exemplary individuals and organizations which serve as the basis for guiding behavior.

### Sample course outline.

- Weeks 1-4 Foundations
  - What it means to be “moral”
  - What it means to be “professional”
  - Professional as a state of mind not a particular occupation
  - Catholic and Benedictine traditions
- Weeks 5-8 Virtue Ethics
  - Character and the concept of Virtue
  - The Cardinal (Aristotle) and Christian (Aquinas) Virtues
  - Presentation/Discussion of virtuous hero/heroine stories
  - Individual aspirational statements of virtuous living
  - The importance of habits and habit development
  - Self improvement project
- Weeks 9-12 Discipline Aspirations and Professional Virtues
  - Presentation/discussion of published lists of Discipline specific virtues
  - Institutional Virtues
  - Contributions of Discipline related institutions to the Common Good  
DERIVED from Foundation concepts
  - Discipline specific codes of ethics and conduct
  - Comparison of existing standards to the derived institutional virtues
- Weeks 12-15 Applications and Conclusions
  - Discipline Specific Issues
  - Project Presentations