

ST. BENEDICT -- March 21, 2014

For many centuries, March 21 was the feast day of St. Benedict throughout the entire Church, but with the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council about fifty years ago the feast was transferred in the Church's universal calendar to July 11, the traditional date when relics of the saint were transferred from Italy to a monastery in northern France. This had the advantage of moving the feast out of Lent, a solemn season not usually associated with much festivity. Happily, the Church authorities allowed us Benedictines to retain the traditional date of March 21, which enables us to celebrate it with our entire school community, something that would not be possible in July. This year, that date happens to fall on a Friday, the very end of our school's Benedictine Heritage Week, which makes it appropriate for me to say something about Benedictine life in general as well as how it relates to what we try to do in our school.

If you were paying close attention to the readings, you will have noticed that in one way or another they all have something to say about teaching, about knowledge, about wisdom. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as the teacher *par excellence*, even suggesting that the term "teacher" might best be applied to him alone, although we know from other passages in the New Testament that various early followers of Jesus were also--and rightly--called teachers. (Among other things, this shows that we ought never single out any one verse as though it were the last word on a subject.) Indeed, in our second reading St. Paul tells his disciple Timothy: "What you heard from me through many witnesses, entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well" (2 Tim. 2:2). But the reading this afternoon that in some ways has the most relevance for Benedictine life is the first reading, from the book of Sirach, which says that "whoever fears the Lord ... will come to wisdom" and that this wisdom, like a mother, will "nourish him with the bread of understanding, and give him the water of learning to drink" (Sir. 15:1,3).

The reason I find this so relevant to Benedictine life is that monasticism has often, and with the rest of reasons, been called "a wisdom tradition." Now words can be defined in various ways, and some people probably don't make a sharp distinction between wisdom and knowledge. Careful users of the language, however, will point out that wisdom is really a matter of what one does with the knowledge at one's disposal. It's akin to good sense, a sense of judgment, a preeminent ability to reach intelligent conclusions on the sound foundation of experience, training, and maturity. In short, it allows us to lead lives in such a way as to reach a desired and worthy goal. If you read St. Benedict's Rule carefully, you will see that for him--and I hope for us as well--that goal is often referred to in terms of service: service of God and service to all those persons among whom we live. But if wisdom is not simply identical with knowledge, there is nevertheless a relationship, for without the kinds of knowledge that are imparted in a school like ours, you will not have the ability to serve your community, your nation, your fellow human beings in an effective way.

It is surely an instinctive sense of this that leads young men and women all over the world to crave a good education, above all in societies where this is not something you can take for granted. One of the most touching movies I've ever seen was directed by an Iranian woman who was then still in her late teens. Called *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*, the movie was about a young Afghan girl, only six or seven years old, who lived in a part of that country where the Taliban had blown up some ancient Buddhist statues. Her one, all-consuming desire was to learn to read, even though her family was so poor that they didn't have a single printed book, and when the little girl finally obtained a simple notebook, the only writing instrument she could find was her mother's lipstick. The obstacles she met with as she walked to a fairly distant school and

tried to get accepted into an outdoor class were terrible, leaving one with a keen sense of how much getting a good education can mean to a person.

That story was fictional, and I have no way of knowing if children in that part of Afghanistan still have so hard a time getting an education, but the continued existence of the Taliban may well make it so. It certainly has been a huge problem in neighboring Pakistan, where hundreds of schools have actually been blown up in recent years. We recently had as table reading at the monastery the book *I Am Malala*, written by the young woman who was nearly killed by a Taliban sympathizer because of her advocacy of education for girls. What's significant is that she has been campaigning for this not merely as something good in itself, though she would surely agree that we all have an innate desire to learn. No, Malala knows that it is only through education that we will be able to serve others in a noble and effective way. Once she recovered from her nearly fatal wound, she was invited to address the United Nations, and there in New York, before hundreds of representatives of most of the nations on earth, her speech included these words: "Let us pick up our books and pens. They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world."¹

Someone like that can rightly get any of us thinking about how we are leading our own lives and to what extent we are taking advantage of the educational opportunities available to us. St. Benedict speaks of a monastery as being "a school for the Lord's service." He does, to be sure, begin the Prologue to his Rule in words that seem to imply that everyone in the monastery except the abbot is only a learner, but there are other parts of the Rule that clearly indicate that all the monks, including the abbot, are to learn from one another, since, as he says in chapter three, it may well be the youngest member of the community who has some special insight or recommendation to contribute on a given subject. I trust that those of us who teach in our school

are willing to keep learning, both from our own ongoing study and from our students, but it is surely especially incumbent on you students to really be attentive and desirous of learning from your teachers. I know I do not speak only for myself in saying that we on the faculty work hard to present a solid foundation in whatever field we give instruction, and I hope that if perhaps some of you students are not always as attentive or respectful or docile as you might be, these reflections of mine will help you ponder what it is you are here for and how many huge advantages you have over children in many parts of the world who may not have even an indoor classroom or reliable electrical equipment of any sort, not even proper lighting.

Yes, wisdom--the ability to lead your life in a way that will enable you intelligently to reach worthwhile and noble goals--may be judged superior to knowledge alone, for knowledge by itself can be used for nefarious ends. But the wisdom of which we heard in the reading from the Book of Sirach will not be very productive without the solid foundation that you gain from the study of the natural and social sciences, mathematics and computer science, English and foreign languages, fine arts, and theology. I am well aware that there is more to a school than the academic program, and as I look back on my own high-school days I have fond memories of my participation in its sports program, the school newspaper, and the debate team. But at the heart of it all was what went on in the classroom, as well as in my own room at home as I prepared lessons for the next day's class. If you faithfully and perseveringly apply yourselves to the opportunities open to you here, you will unquestionably be laying the foundation for a fulfilled and fulfilling life. May we all strive together toward that end.

1" Malala Yousafzai, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 2013), 310.