WHAT ARE THE MARKERS/SIGNPOSTS OF BENEDICTINE EDUCATION IN A CONTEMPORARY WORLD?

Introduction

I want to share with you a few key-points that we think are important to respond to the challenges we are facing in our mission as Benedictine Educators, in today’s context, taken specially from the life of Saint Benedict on which we have been reflecting and praying, during the last years, that are:

1. Returning to our interior to dwell with oneself
2. Awakening to a true view of all things
3. Developing a knowledge marked through and through by the love of God.

Today´s context

I truly believe that we are living in a time in history which is, certain differences apart, in many ways similar to the one in which Saint Benedict lived. We find ourselves faced with a world suffering a deep crisis of meaning; a crisis which springs, in my opinion, from a mistaken view of the human person, in which the spiritual dimension has been cut off, losing with that not only the deepest answers to life’s questions, but also, the questions themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, what did Saint Benedict do when faced with his historical context, not to be lost in the noise and confusion of Rome? He left for the desert, to embrace silence, in order to be able to take root in God from his own interior, “*dwelling alone with himself, in the sight of his Creator”*

Hence, I think that Saint Benedict’s first lesson to us is to restore to our education its dimension of inner life.

1. Returning to our interior to dwell with oneself

The verb to educate- from the latin *educere*- means to bring out what is within. This means for us, that as educators, we have a calling to bring out the Christ who lives within each person, as Abbot Basil Hume OSB used to say, that in each person there is a ‘hidden Christian’ and that our mission is to help that life of Christ to be progressively developed and unfold within each one of us.

It is in the interior life of a person where education should be rooted, if it is to be truly Christian and Benedictine. Hence we need to seek to open up spaces in which our young people may return to their own interior, experience silence, discover within themselves a certain spiritual intuition, which is so often sleeping, but which gives us an inkling that there exists something beyond what our senses are capable of detecting[[2]](#footnote-2).

I have seen many young peoples’ thirst for the opportunity of experiences which permit them to disconnect from the media, which so often enslave them, in order to discover anew in nature[[3]](#footnote-3) and in their own being, those marks, traces and tracks which can set them on the path of return to God[[4]](#footnote-4).

From this starting-point, we have gradually learned and share with our students, how to cultivate by means of prayer, that sacred and intimate space within our own selves, which is our ‘inner cloister’, where God dwells and where we can listen to His voice that talks to each one of us personally in His Word, conscious that becoming a Christian is not so much an ethical decision or some great idea, but rather a result of encountering a person.

When the Word of God is welcomed into this inner cloister, in the silence of the heart, it awakens us and allows us to see in a whole new way. This brings us to the second key point:

1. Awakening to a true view of all things

Saint Benedict in the Prologue of his Rule invites us to *rouse ourselves from sleep.”[[5]](#footnote-5)* that is to say, from living as if God did not exist, and let the Word of God to illuminate our spiritual eyes in order to “*return to a true view of all things*.”[[6]](#footnote-6) – quoting chapter ten of Saint Benedict´s life - so we can discover the presence of God in Whom we live, move and exist.[[7]](#footnote-7)

We are called to widen and deepen the horizons of our own vision if we are to live, and educate, with the faith as our starting point, open to the spiritual dimension of life and reality.[[8]](#footnote-8) We believe that within each one of us there is a spiritual sense of sight and listening which needs to be awakened and educated[[9]](#footnote-9)

We want to teach our students to see the contrasting nature of a view which is human, transient, worldly[[10]](#footnote-10) with God’s view, which places before us another perspective: that of Eternal Life[[11]](#footnote-11) . We are called to help them to discover the manifestations of God and His love acting in our day-to-day lives. This is an exercise which we have carried out with our students and which, little by little, had change their approach to faith and life.

When we place ourselves, like Saint Benedict, under the gaze of *“he who sees the hearts of all men”* [[12]](#footnote-12)and from the light of His sight[[13]](#footnote-13) - full of love and mercy - we are able to look around, we open the space so that the Life of God may be reveal, unfold, awaken where it seemed to be sleeping[[14]](#footnote-14). That transforms the way we see and relate to others, to everything around us and with our own selves, from where an alternative society can emerge[[15]](#footnote-15).

The challenge is therefore to educate our students to begin to have this contemplative view, inviting them to recognise gradually in everyone and everything they live and learn, a manifestation of God: of His power, His beauty, His infinite intelligence[[16]](#footnote-16).

In this way they may become open to the challenging and fascinating discovery of a truth which goes beyond their own selves.

This search will lead us to a personal encounter with the love of God, which transcends the limits of knowledge and reason, casting abundant light on the whole of life and filling it with meaning.[[17]](#footnote-17) This has always been the aim of learning as understood by the monastic tradition and is precisely what differentiates monastic knowledge from other approaches to learning, and is what should continue to distinguish us today.

This gives us the third key point with which I would like to close this part:

1. A knowledge marked through and through by the love of God.

The ultimate aim of our education cannot be reduced to that of preparing people to be capable of joining the work-force or market-place. It should be that of educating men and women capable of a love born of true liberty, and also of being the people they are called to be, from the perspective of the love of God, and not according to what others want or hope for them. We think therefore that our vocation is to educate “in the world, without being of the world.”

Pope Benedict said: *“We have come to believe in God´s love. In these words, the Christian can express the fundamental option of his life”[[18]](#footnote-18)* A form of knowledge capable of being illuminated and marked through and through by this option will be opened to mystery[[19]](#footnote-19), able to integrate faith and reason. In it, all disciplines, as if joined together in a single ray of sunlight,[[20]](#footnote-20) will rediscover their unity[[21]](#footnote-21).

To open up our student´s minds and hearts to mystery, is to help them to develop a new capacity for awe and wonder when faced with Creation. From there will spring praise, admiration, joy and thanksgiving, because everything speaks of, and becomes, the manifestation of a gift.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Saint Anselm, from his experience, said that “*If he did not believe, he would not be able to understand”*,[[23]](#footnote-23) since it is only within the landscape of faith in a Creator God, that reality finds its meaning and significance, and hence its rationality. We are equipped to comprehend the world and ourselves within it, because, as Pope Benedict XVI said: “*We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”[[24]](#footnote-24)*

If our young people are able to root themselves in the experience of knowing they are loved by God and, from there, construct their lives, we shall know that we have placed the foundations upon rock.

Conclusion

I see a fascinating path ahead of us, and we believe that our main challenge is to give back to our education that spiritual dimension. Pope Benedict XVI, in Brazil, asked the question: “*What is reality? Is reality only material possessions, or social and political problems? Whoever excludes God from their horizon falsifies the concept of reality.”[[25]](#footnote-25)*

Which leads me to ask myself: From which perspective am I looking at my students, my work, my vocation, my own life, the contradictions which I face? From my worldly projects, from my apparent successes or failures? Or am I looking from God’s perspective on reality, illuminated by the realness of his love, of his presence, of his powerful intervention?

At the end of the day, I am convinced that the challenge of education is not a question of method, but of conversion, of our own conversion. It is about returning, like Saint Benedict, to the *true* view of all things, by means of prayer within our inner cloister.

Following his example, I sincerely believe that the answer to the challenges we face today as Benedictine educators, is neither in the future nor in the past, it is within our own selves, where God dwells[[26]](#footnote-26) and where we will be able to lay the foundations for a new civilization, just as Benedict did in his time.

CLOSING WORDS (5 minutes at the end)

* We all know that we cannot live all this on our own, and that we need a **community** that can help us to be aware of the presence of God in our lives.
  + In this sense for us: community, Lectio Divina and Tutoría - that is the relationship of listening and welcoming through which we had learned how to listen to God in the Scriptures - are the pillars by which we want to build our schools so they can truly become *“schools of the Lord´s service”.*
* For that, we want our schools communities to become places, not only of work and study, but also of prayer, where all may feel invited - in this spirit of Tutoria - to live and share the experience of returning to one’s interior and allowing God to speak to us through Lectio Divina, in the midst of our work and daily round.
* This is part of a process of constant evangelization and formation, especially for our educators, so they can truly come to know the love of God for them, in such a way that all what the teach and how they teach it, becomes somehow transfigured by the experience of his love, and offer to our students by their own testimony[[27]](#footnote-27). In this way our educational mission will be truly evangelising, not just because it speaks of Christ, but because it is steeped in the reality and love of God.
* Schools communities that may be joyously Benedictine and constantly renewing their own identity, so that from this sold base, we may be open to welcome all those who come alongside our community[[28]](#footnote-28), to a sincere dialogue.
* To build up communities within our schools, fully convinced and enthusiastic about their mission, being aware that education is not about instructing or imposing any mould, as also evangelization is not about teaching values or doctrine, but rather about collaborating so that gradually God´s life may be awaken in each one, and may emerge in each person the man or woman created in God, and from there, discover their true identity and vocation.
* For this, in Manquehue, we had discovered the need for renewing also our ways of proclaiming and transmitting the Gospel. Saint Benedict teaches us that the voice of the Lord calls to us saying: “*Who is there with a love of true life and a longing for days of happiness?”.[[29]](#footnote-29)* Young people long for that life and happiness. However, often, instead of offering them the Life which we receive from the Gospel, we tend to offer them a set of rules and values, very commendable, but by themselves lacking the strength or ability to transform their hearts or to respond to their deepest concerns. We, in Manquehue, think that we need to go back to proclaiming and teach how to approach the Gospel, by means of Lectio Divina, for what it really is: Good News.
* Jesus says: “*If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples; you will come to know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8: 31 – 32)[[30]](#footnote-30)* I believe that today it is a matter of great urgency that we should really nail our colours to the mast, in terms of trusting in a transcendent truth[[31]](#footnote-31). We must do this, not of course like possessors of such truth, but rather like someone inviting others to search together along this path, in which we may be able to ask again those all-important questions about the meaning of our lives and of reality, which run the risk of being harried out of existence, or into silence[[32]](#footnote-32).
* In my own experience of encountering Christ in Lectio Divina while being a student of our school; I discover not only the meaning of my life, but also that safe anchoring-point, the experience that nothing can take me apart from God´s love, from which the security of which reason can go out, adventuring across the vast ocean of learning and knowledge, without any fear of getting lost.
* In the monastic tradition learning is wholly integrated into the life of prayer and worship, when it is developed with the same interior dispositions with which we approach to Lectio Divina. I think we have here a great challenge!!
* As we are sure that much around us will continue to change: technology, the market, social and political structures, but the boys and girls we educate *“remains the same, their fundamental questions remain the same, and their answer, available to them in the Gospel, continues to be the only one that can fill a person’s life to the full with its true meaning.”[[33]](#footnote-33)* We have reasons to hope then, because we believe we have answers for a world that is without them

1. We have answers, but young people often have not asked themselves the questions which lead to these answers. We need to seek to re-open these fundamental questions by the answering of which the Word and our proclamation of Jesus Christ can again find fertile soil, and constitute a meaningful answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The awe we feel in presence of Nature, beauty or goodness is a reasonable intuition… tell us that something or someone is there. The yearning for meaning and truth that all humans have is simply a manifestation of the metaphysical structure of all reality” (The Benedict option). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this same line, young peoples’ growing concern about the environment, which we have sought to take very much on board, has also been a great opportunity to help them to see that the real problem is not outside of, but rather within, themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “In our public life we move further and further away from God, and yet, in the hearts of men and women I believe that the yearning for God is becoming more and more intense” (B. Hume OSB – to be a pilgrim) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. RB Prol 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Book II Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great (DSG), Bk. II Chap. X. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf Acts 17:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Eph 3:17-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. If it is not educated, it will remain stunted (Spiritual intelligence: if not educated, remains latent but undeveloped, much like other types of intelligence). The stunting of Spiritual Intelligence. In the words of Francesc Torralba we may see the basis of this chapter: “Stunting is the consequence of a lack of education, of not being cultivated in the context of formal education. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. cf. RB 2:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Thus will they come to recognise: that for God there are no such things as failures, or paths that lead to an absolute dead end with no way forward; that in Him death does not exist; and that what defines us are not our achievements or failures but rather the love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. In this sense, what we hope for is that our pupils will ask themselves: “who am I, really?” so that they can then have this question illuminated for them by the Word of God and find its answer, discovering their true identity as sons and daughters of God.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. DSG Bk. II Chap. III [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *“God saw all he had made, and indeed it was vey good” (Gn 1:31)* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Cf “The mand of God lifted up his eyes from reading, and turning his eyes to his bands, very strangely, they fell from his armas, and that so quickly as no man with any haste could have undone them” /DSG Bk II Chap. XXXI)* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *“Catholic Education is born of men and women who know how to see boys, girls and young people as God sees them. From this extraordinary experience sprang the foundations of Catholic Education.* Final Summary World Congress for Catholic Education 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *“Let our ears to be alert to the stirring call of His voice crying to us (Rb Prol 9)…*through sciences, maths, art, history, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. To quote from Pope Benedict XVI, this is the encounter with “the light of a personal Face, which, just as it illuminates us, it also calls us and would wish to be reflected in our faces in order to shine within us.” Cf. Lumen Fidei 33, *(our translation).* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Pope Benedict XVI Deus Caritas Est 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *“Science is incapable of resolving the final mysteries of nature, because, in ultimate analysis, we ourselves are part of nature, which is to say, we are part of the mystery which we are attempting to resolve*” (Max Planck, Nobel prize- winner for Physics in 1918) Some years ago I read “*Materialism aspires to eliminate the enigma and make everything crystal clear and explainable; but the enigma exists, and therein lies the whole surprise of existence*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. DSG Bk. II Chap.XXXV [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Col 1, 17. In all things may God be Glorified- from the dispersion of the fragmented disciplines towards the unity of wisdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “*Monastic theology is a theology which is open to admiring. Admiration and speculation are two words which represent ways of viewing something. But the view of admiration has something superior to that of speculation: it does not see more, but the tiny glimpse it gets, as it were ‘between the lines’ of what it sees, is sufficient to move the whole being of a contemplative to a state of joy and thanksgiving”.* Jaen Leclerq [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Proslogion 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Pope Benedict XVI homily at the beginning of the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome 24th April 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Benedict XVI Inaugural address Aparecida Document 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf Jn 14:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. We know that our view of the human person, and this perspective on reality, are not things that can be imposed to our students, but they can be offered by the testimony given by educators who are aware of presence and love of God in their lives and in all creation. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Sense of Balance, between setting us apart from the world, building a cloister in which our schools communities may deepen and strengthened its identity, and the openness in order to welcome every one that may come along our communities in order to share the gift we had received and develop our mission. That´s why is so important that at the heart of a community should be rooted in the monastic communities from where they can be nourish. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. RB Prol. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. There is a path of knowledge, similar to the one that St. Benedict describes in the chapter about humility, that goes from the depths of our inner being to the this truth that can be discovered by reason, but can only be grasped by love. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *“Today, there is a tendency towards neopositivism, which is to say, to educate in immanent matters. For my point of view, education´s greatest crisis in terms of it being Christian, is this shutting it off from transcendence (…) we are preparing hearts so that God can manifest himself”* (Pope Francis, address to the participants at the closure of the World Congress for Catholic education, 15th November 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *“We enlarge the scope of our rationality, to reopen it to the larger questions of What is true and what us good (…) This is the task that is before us, a fascinating adventure, worthy of our commitment, to give new impulse to the culture of our time; and restore the Christian faith to full citizenship within it” (Benedict XVI, 19th October 2006, Italian National Ecclesial Assembly)* [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Conference José Manuel Eguiguren “A new Benedictine school” Worth 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)