



**Learning from the Land:
In the School of Saint Benedict**

February 2009

Dear Friend,

As we enter the Lenten season — leaving behind the splendors of Christmas and looking forward now to that other pole of the liturgical year which is Easter — we discover that the greater simplicity and sobriety of this time of year lends itself well



to a meditation on man's proper place in the universe as caretaker of creation.

For many years now ecology has aroused much interest, not only in regard to the immediate practical decisions that must be made by governments and businesses, but also as a topic of discussion in the broader cultural context. Our contemporaries seem to experience an ever increasing alienation from nature and a need to somehow “re-connect” with the earth, while

scientists continue to point to signs that the ecological balance of the natural world is being seriously compromised by the excesses of our technology.

The Church too has participated in the discussion. The Holy Father recently alluded to these questions in an address to the members of the Roman Curia (December 22, 2008):

Since faith in the Creator is an essential part of the Christian creed, the Church cannot and must not limit herself to passing on to the faithful the message of salvation alone. She has a responsibility towards creation, and must also publicly assert this responsibility. In so doing, she must not only defend earth, water and air as gifts of creation belonging to all. She must also protect man from self-destruction.

What does the great monastic tradition issuing from Saint Benedict have to say about this essential relationship with creation?

In fact, for men and women living in Saint Benedict's day, the question would have had little meaning. The vast majority of human beings lived in rural areas then, and for them life was intimately and necessarily connected to the rhythm of nature. The day's activities were programmed according to the hours of sunlight. The year was punctuated by the various seasons in which planting, harvesting and every important task found its appointed time. In such a world, excepting the case of a few very rich people in large cities, it was scarcely possible to become disconnected from the rhythm of creation.



Nonetheless there is much in the wisdom of Saint Benedict that speaks to our present needs in terms of returning to a wiser way of life, a life closer to the land.

One of the pillars of the *Rule* is evangelical poverty. There would be neither an economic crisis in the world today, nor an ecological threat, were it not for the evil done by greed. Monastic poverty

means being content with the simple things that sustain human existence in its inherent goodness. This poverty allows man to live in harmony with field and forest, without feeling the need to brutally strip the earth of her resources in order to realize an immediate gain. Although the economic reality in America has become increasingly complex in our day, it is still possible to recapture this joyous sort of poverty. We are not speaking of the tragic misery of the desperately poor, but of an attitude rooted in the Christian faith. E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* (first published in 1973) offers insights that seem more timely than ever. Another important work, *Flee To The Fields: The Founding Papers of the Catholic Land Movement*, with a preface by Hilaire Belloc, charts a way forward in terms of an explicitly Catholic perspective.

Of course, the great corollary of evangelical and monastic poverty is work, especially manual work. *Ora et Labora* ("Pray and Work") is often given as the Benedictine motto. The very early monks found that this work with one's hands was something necessary in order to be able to pray well. Sometimes they would burn all the baskets they had woven during the year — having no need to sell them in order to make money — and start all over again, simply because this activity was good for body and mind! Saint Paul worked with his hands, even though he was entitled to live from his preaching of the Gospel. Manual work is an excellent way to put us back in touch with the wonder and beauty of creation, despite the fact that since the Fall man must toil by "the sweat of his brow" amid thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:18-19).

At Clear Creek we exercise many forms of manual labor, including carpentry, forging and much building, not to mention those domestic activities such as cooking and the making of clothing and shoes. In terms of our direct relationship to the land, the most notable activity would probably be that involving our forest, composed mainly of various types of oak trees. For several years now, thanks to a grant from the *Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program*, we have been working to improve our land by clearing unhealthy trees from the forest, thereby letting in more sunlight. This allows certain grasses to grow, which in turn offer new pasture for our rugged-hair sheep. We intend to bring in goats as well to clear unwanted weeds and brush from the under wood. We also have planted many trees, especially pines. Monks learn many a lesson from the land.

It would all be to no avail, however, without something more. The French author and statesman, Andre Malraux, famously said, “The twenty-first century will either be spiritual or it will not be”. Even if a nuclear conflagration is somehow avoided — and the threat has by no means disappeared — it will take something more than a form of “global awareness” to preserve the world’s natural resources. This is where the other half of Saint Benedict’s motto, *Ora* (“Pray”), enters the picture.

Among the animals of the forest only one is capable of ruining everything, the one who walks upright, the same one whom God established shepherd of all creation in the beginning. It is the spiritual struggle between good and evil being waged in his heart that causes man, either to care for creation, or to destroy it. This is what Pope Benedict XVI meant when he said in his discourse to the Roman Curia last December, “What is needed is something like a human ecology, correctly understood”. It is through prayer that we realize this human ecology, transcending the limited resources of the natural environment.

Between the somewhat romantic musings of city folk, who dream of moving to the country to start a new life, and the harsh reality of having to earn one’s daily bread from the earth that has become rebellious to sinful man, there is certainly a wide margin, which is also a serious challenge. But do we really have a choice?

The well-known Catholic author and educator, John Senior, was once giving a talk to a small group of adults about this very idea of escaping from the excesses of a civilization worn thin with technology. While he was saying something to the effect that “real swimming” is done in the ocean or lakes — or more modestly in the “old swimmin’ hole” — an old-timer who was among the listeners brought forth the



objection that “we used to *lose a few* in the ‘swimmin’ hole . . .”. Looking the man squarely in the eye, Senior replied, “Yes, but we are losing *all of them* in the swimming pool.”

Monastic life does not hold the key to unlock all of the world’s problems, but a serious reading of the *Rule* of Saint Benedict can be an inspiration, not only for monks, but also for those living outside the monastery walls. This is especially true due to its precious sense of balance, organizing things around the poles of prayer and work. It is our hope that Our Lady of Clear Creek Monastery, by living from the *Rule*, can help many to recapture the joy of a human existence rooted in faith — and the not-so-common realism of common sense.

May Our Lady of the Annunciation obtain for you an abundance of heavenly blessings.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Br. Philip Anderson, Prior". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

br. Philip Anderson, Prior

A WORD FROM FATHER CELLARER

Although the construction of a true church remains our priority, we are hoping to install in the more immediate future a wood-burning facility for heating the monastery with firewood (of which we are abundantly blessed). Anyone who is interested in helping us realize this particular project may “ earmark ” a financial contribution or other form of aid for this purpose. We thank you in advance.