



SAINT BENEDICT'S OPTION

January 2016

Dear Friend of Clear Creek Abbey,

By now you will have read something about the “Benedict Option,” an expression devised by journalist Rod Dreher in reference to an idea of Alasdair MacIntyre’s in his book, *After Virtue*. Needless to say, as a son of St. Benedict I find the theme intriguing, even while realizing that the Benedict Option, along with the discussions it has occasioned, has more to do with choices faced by Christians living in an increasingly pagan culture outside the monastery walls than with the concerns of us denizens of the cloister.



This Benedict Option suggests a way forward for those who wish to live in conformity with their Catholic faith, despite the pressures of a society that has chosen to reject the very Christian principles around which it was formed. The “option” means that like-minded Catholics, along with honest men and women of other religious persuasions, will seek to congregate around monasteries in order to recommence the business of building a just and healthy form of social life, “from the ground up,” as it were. The Kingdom of Heaven will be its purpose, and its model the very practical faith of Benedictine monks.

At the heart of the matter, however, beyond the choices or options that men of the twenty-first century must make, there is the historical fact of the *original* option that St. Benedict himself decided upon some fifteen centuries ago. In order to assess the Benedict Option for Christians of our day, one would do well to contemplate the fundamental option that inaugurated a new world.

Had young Benedict elected to complete his studies in Rome instead of taking flight into the wilderness, he might have made a public career for himself as did his contemporary, the celebrated Roman senator and consul, Anicius Manlius Severinus, commonly known as Boethius (c.480-524). At first view it would seem that Boethius’ life was the more productive, not only in terms of a remarkable public service, but also regarding his contribution to what is now referred to as *humanism*, since Boethius wrote extensively on philosophical matters, including his classic treatise, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. It should also be noted that Boethius is a saint and martyr, having been canonized in 1883. He was truly an exceptional Christian and public figure of his day.

St. Benedict’s option was far different. I quote here the famous passage written by his biographer, Pope St. Gregory the Great, who powerfully evokes a decisive moment in St. Benedict’s life:

He was born in Norcia of distinguished parents, who sent him to Rome for a liberal education. When he found that many of the students were abandoning themselves to vice, he decided to withdraw from the world he had been preparing to enter; for he was afraid that if he acquired any of its learning he would be drawn down with them to his eternal ruin. In his desire to please God alone, he turned his back on further studies, gave up home and inheritance, and resolved to embrace the monastic life.¹

Now there is a possible source of confusion here. His Holiness, Pope Francis, has on many occasions criticized the attitude of a cowardly “flight from the world.” On the contrary, he is constantly asking the Church “to go out,” and to gain the peripheries of society, in order to bring the joy of the Gospel to the poor that are awaiting help. How can we reconcile the option of St. Benedict with the Pope’s exhortation to “go out” into the world? Does this mean that the path chosen by St. Benedict was good for the sixth century, but has no value in our own time?

In fact, for Benedictine monks as for all Christians with a sure sense of the Gospel and of the Church, the reaching out to all human beings in the world is always a priority. It is the very essence of evangelization, the concern of all. In His Divine Wisdom, however, God has provided the Church with different callings and manners of evangelization. The contemplative orders of monks and nuns, by choosing the role of Mary over that of Martha,² have proved through centuries of experience, that the spiritual power of their prayer can transform the world as well or better than the active ministry of the secular clergy and of missionaries. Of course both are needed, but each vocation serves in its own way. It is well known that one of the favorite books of Pope Francis (his bedside book) is the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, the French Carmelite, who, while never leaving the tiny property of her monastery, so inspired the missionary effort of the Church that she was named co-patroness of missions on an equal basis with St. Francis Xavier.

At the height of their development in the eleventh century, the monasteries of the great Benedictine family of Cluny fed countless poor people each day and provided farmland for great numbers of families who grouped themselves around monastic houses. There was really nothing selfish about the monks’ “flight from the world.” On the contrary, following the Lord’s admonition to “enter into thy chamber, and having shut the door, pray to the Father in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret will repay thee,”³ the monks found their hearts became as large as the world. This has nothing to do with the sort of “country club” elitism that shuns uncomfortable contact with the outcasts of society.

So who was right—St. Benedict or St. Boethius? Both, of course. But in the final analysis, there is little doubt that the fruits of St. Benedict’s vocation far outweigh those of the Roman senator and martyr. It may well be that as Rod Dreher and Alasdair MacIntyre have pointed out, the faithful of our time are in desperate need of a radical option—the total consecration of man and of everything around him to God—which was the option of St. Benedict. Once the ground is broken, no doubt other “options” will sprout forth in this spiritual and cultural furrow.

+ br. Philip Anderson, abbot

br. Philip Anderson, abbot

¹ Saint Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, book two, chapter one.

² See Lk. 10:38-42.

³ Mtt. 6:6.