

Saint Anselm, Blessed John Henry Newman, and the Idea of a Benedictine University

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John Henry Newman's "Benedictine Essays" develop a strong thesis that Benedictine spirituality is necessarily at odds with the methods of the modern university. Benedictine spiritual life encourages the monk to mortify his intellect, not to satisfy it or to stir it up. It is best suited to grammar school, to the study of literature and history and Scripture, while rejecting the value of studying worldly topics that don't prepare a person for union with God in the next life. Newman's account makes the project of a Benedictine university like St. Anselm's College seem deeply problematic, even oxymoronic. St. Anselm of Canterbury, a transitional figure on Newman's account, shows some ways of reconciling a speculative intellectual life with Benedictine spirituality, but Newman's challenge to the project still remains.

It's a great honor to be here. When I was invited to give this lecture, that is to give the Saint Anselm Lecture at Saint Anselm College on the Feast of Saint Anselm, I thought I noticed a theme. I'm an expert on Saint Anselm, having written my dissertation on your patron saint and having been studying him since I was a senior in college more than twenty years ago. So I figured that the topic of my talk was going to be Saint Anselm. But then I read the fine print of the invitation, and realized that because this year is the anniversary of the College, that I was being asked to talk not just about Saint Anselm and his continued significance, but about something I didn't know anything about, namely "distinctively Benedictine Catholic higher education." I'm sure that's a topic of some reflection here, at a Benedictine College, but it's not something I've ever thought about. My major experience at a Catholic university was at the University of Notre Dame, which does not belong to the Benedictine tradition and in many ways tries to position itself as generically Catholic, appealing to Catholics of all sorts without being "distinctively" of any one spiritual tradition. So the more I thought about how my lecture could rise to this important occasion, the more I wondered about what it meant to be a Benedictine college.

Fortunately, one of the great thinkers of the Catholic Church did spend some time thinking about the Benedictine intellectual tradition and its relationship to the university. Blessed John Henry Newman was the most famous convert to Catholicism in 19th century England. Before he converted, he had been a famous scholar and intellectual, the Anglican college chaplain at Oxford, an important and influential position in his day, whose sermons were at the same time spellbinding and thoughtful, and whose insistence on holiness as important to Christianity captivated many and attracted some of England's most talented people to his cause. When this exemplary Anglican clergyman converted to Catholicism, he became overnight the most famous Catholic in England. After he was ordained a Catholic priest, he was asked by the bishops of Ireland to start the first Catholic university in Ireland. The university opened in 1854 with Newman as its first rector. The project failed quickly because the bishops didn't really

support it—for example, they took most of the money that had been raised for the University and used it to support Irish soldiers fighting to defend the Pope during one of the Italian civil wars.

Disgusted by all the crazy politics, Newman himself resigned as rector after only three years, in 1857. However, in his short time there, he wrote and lectured on the nature of the university, trying both to get influential people excited about the idea of a new university (Ireland was not the most educated place), and also to provide guidance for the university itself about the direction in which it ought to grow. The most famous product of his time as rector is the book *The Idea of the University*, originally a series lectures. Less well-known, but perhaps more important, was his more historical book *The Rise and Progress of Universities*, which was originally published as twenty short articles in what amounts to the school newspaper.

And finally, we have the two long articles which are of primary interest for us here, Newman's two lengthy Benedictine Essays, published in the university's newly founded academic journal *Atlantis*. These essays called "The Mission of Saint Benedict" and "The Benedictine Schools" are Newman's attempt to describe Benedictine intellectual life.¹ His original plan was to write further articles on the Dominican and Jesuit ideas of education, but he never did. Fortunately, I'm not giving talks at Dominican or Jesuit universities today. So what I propose to do in this lecture is to look at Newman's summary of Benedictine education, to show how Saint Anselm both exemplifies and deviates from the Benedictine model as Newman describes it, and then to engage in some perhaps risky suggestions about how the Benedictine idea might be made real in the context of Catholic higher education today.

Imagine you wake up one day when you are older and you know, with absolute certainty, that at the end of the day you will die. Maybe you've had a vision, or a mystical confirmation that it was your last day—the details don't matter. What you do? How would you go about your last day? Many people today talk about their "bucket list," the list of things they want to do before they "kick the bucket." Would you try to cross a few things off your bucket list, for example, hurriedly arrange to go skydiving? Would you go visit important people in your life, or urgently request that they come to visit you? Would you go a little wild, have that bacon donut you've been denying yourself because of its cholesterol content? What would you do?

The English Benedictine saint Bede the Venerable reportedly was faced with this question on May 26, in the year of our Lord 735 (Bede is the reason we use A.D., so a tip of the hat is in order). Bede woke up that Wednesday morning, with a sense that it was his last day. Remarkably, he didn't do anything different, but instead kept doing what he did every other day: teaching the younger monks, writing things that would help them in the future, and so on. Here is how his fellow monk Cuthbert describes it.

¹ John Henry Newman, *Rise and Progress of Universities and Benedictine Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). The two essays will be referred to as "Mission of Saint Benedict" and "Benedictine Schools" in the notes below.

When the morning dawned, that is, on the Wednesday, he bade us write **with all speed what we had begun**. . . . And there was one of us with him who said to him, ‘There is still one chapter wanting of the book which thou hast been dictating, but I deem it burdensome for thee to be questioned any further.’ He answered, ‘Nay, it is light, take thy pen and make ready, and write quickly.’ And this was done.

. . . He said, ‘It is time for me, if it be my Maker’s will, to be set free from the flesh, and come to Him Who, when as yet I was not, formed me out of nothing. I have lived long; and well has my pitiful judge disposed my life for me; the time of my release is at hand; for my soul longs to see Christ my King in His beauty.’ Having said this and much more **for our profit and edification**, he passed his last day in gladness till the evening; and the aforesaid boy, whose name was Wilbert, still said, ‘Dear master, there is yet one sentence not written.’ He answered, ‘It is well, write it.’ Soon after, the boy said, ‘Now it is written.’ And he said, ‘It is well, thou hast said truly, it is finished. Take my head in thy hands, for I rejoice greatly to sit facing my holy place where I was wont to pray, that I too, sitting there, may call upon my Father.’ And thus on the pavement of his little cell, chanting ‘Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost,’ and the rest, he breathed his last.²

The boy Wilbert’s words, “It is written” and Bede’s response, “It is finished” of course allude to Christ’s Passion. Cuthbert’s implication is that Bede’s life ends just as Jesus’ did, not with a pouring out of blood, but with a white martyrdom, the pouring out of his self for the “profit and education” of his brothers, manifesting the greatest love there is, to give his life for his friends.

At the end of his essay, “The Mission of Saint Benedict,” Blessed John Henry Newman uses Bede’s saintly death to illustrate something important about Benedictine spirituality:

To the monk heaven was next door; he formed no plans, he had no cares; the ravens of his father Benedict were ever at his side. He "went forth" in his youth "to his work and to his labour" until the evening of life; **if he lived a day longer, he did a day's work more; whether he lived many days or few, he laboured on to the end of them**. He had no wish to see further in advance of his journey than where he was to make his next stage. He ploughed and sowed, he prayed, he meditated, he studied, he wrote, he taught, and then he died and went to heaven. . . . Here the beautiful character in life and death of Saint Bede naturally occurs to the mind, who is, in his person and his writings, as truly the pattern of a Benedictine as is Saint Thomas [Aquinas] of a Dominican.³

² Letter of Cuthbert to Cuthwin, translation <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bede/history.iv.html> (accessed on April 28, 2015). Emphases added.

³ Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict,” 428.

As we can see from his praise of Bede's perfectly Benedictine last day, Newman held that for a Benedictine, intellectual work was essentially like any other work, something to do because man was created to work, but not something whose goal is to make this fallen and passing world a better place. A Benedictine monk saw his work as something to do as well as he could, with the goal of sanctifying himself in the process. Bede's decision to live his last day basically like every other, holding classes in the morning and dictating to his young secretary, reflects this sense that the purpose of work is the sanctification of the worker, not the accomplishment of anything. Thus what better way to prepare to meet your particular judgment than to continue the work of sanctification by continuing your work?

Newman emphasizes that the essence of the Benedictine spirituality was to leave the world behind so as to have eternal life. They did not have the ambition to do anything in particular that would make this world a better place. They weren't committed to social justice, they weren't committed to rebuilding civilization, they weren't committed to doing anything other than running out into the wilderness in order to fight the devil and his temptations to pride and sin. Older people talk about their "life's work," their "legacy." The Benedictine doesn't aspire to have a legacy in this world. Like Bede, he's content to live one day at a time, until he dies and (he hopes) goes to heaven. Anything that distracted from this was to be avoided. "The one object, immediate as well as ultimate, of Benedictine life, as history presents it to us, was to live in purity and to die in peace."⁴

A young man or woman today in our complex society has a bunch of options about what to do with his or her life. Even those who avoid the temptations to shallowness, who seek a life that is selfless rather than selfish, even those people have a lot of 'vocational' options: There are the traditional ones of being a monk, priest, or nun, but also being a doctor or nurse, teacher, social worker, public servant, to name just a few of the "service" professions. Even just being a good auto mechanic who is also a good husband and father and member of his parish has a kind of depth to it. So the person today has a lot of options, many of which seem to be more or less compatible with the Christian vocation. Part of the task of adolescence is to "discern" (as we say) how to place your gifts and talents at the service of God and his Church.

The early Benedictines did not hold that view. They believed that the desire to save the world was just a temptation to worldliness, that however good your intentions, to be attached to the world was to be seduced by the devil. "In later times a variety of holy objects might present

⁴ "The one object, immediate as well as ultimate, of Benedictine life, as history presents it to us, was to live in purity and to die in peace. The monk proposed to himself no great or systematic work, beyond that of saving his soul. . . . If today he cut down a tree, or relieved the famishing, or visited the sick, or taught the ignorant, or transcribed a page of Scripture, this was a good in itself, [even] though nothing was added to it tomorrow. **He cared little for knowledge, even theological**, or for success, even though it was religious. It is the character of such a man to be contented, resigned, patient, and incurious; to create or originate nothing; to live by tradition. He does not *analyze*, he *marvels*; his intellect attempts no comprehension of this multiform world. . . . It recognizes but one cause in nature and in human affairs, and that is the First and Supreme; and why things happen day by day in this way, and not in that, it refers immediately to His will. . . . **This is what may be called the Benedictine idea**" (Newman, "Benedictine Schools," 452-53). Emphases added.

themselves for devotion to choose from, such as the care of the poor, or of the sick, or of the young, the redemption of captives, or the conversion of the barbarians; but early monachism was flight from the world, and nothing else.”⁵

This drastically affects the way that one looks at work. “Prayer and work” is the motto of the Benedictines, but Newman emphasizes that only certain types of work were compatible with the Benedictine mission. Any work that you would take with you into the chapel when you prayed was to be avoided. Anything that could not be put down when the bell at the monastery called you to prayer should be avoided. We might say the monk had a job, not a career; not something that was supposed to be fulfilling or allow him to make his mark on the world, but something that provided for the needs of the monastery. “No elaborate undertakings,” in Newman’s words—the monks didn’t build the beautiful Gothic cathedrals of the later middle ages, because they wouldn’t want to spend their time at Mass thinking about engineering problems or inventing the flying buttress. And, significantly for our topic, they tried to avoid anything that was too intellectual, that would be too interesting and absorbing, because that would also distract them during prayer. The problem with intellectual work, from this point of view, is that intellectual work can consume the intellect. Unlike the instruments of manual labor, which the monk stores away before he enters the chapel, the intellect accompanies him wherever he goes.⁶

It’s not as if Newman thinks the monks were stupid, or even uneducated—they were usually the most educated people in their time. Newman doesn’t deny that. But he does insist that the monks, in their desire for simplicity and for a quieted soul that is disposed to prayer, engaged in intellectual mortification,⁷ especially mortification of the curiosity. They were interested in Scripture, and so they studied things that helped them understand Scripture. And they were interested in the Christian classics, especially the writings of the Church Fathers, and ancient Christian songs, and other things that helped them know and love God. But they were very much aware that the intellectual life could be a temptation to pride at one’s own cleverness, even in

⁵ “Their one idea then, their one purpose, was to be quit of it [the world]; too long had it enthralled them. It was not a question of this or that vocation, of the better deed, of the higher state, but **of life and death**. In later times a variety of holy objects might present themselves for devotion to choose from, such as the care of the poor, or of the sick, or of the young, the redemption of captives, or the conversion of the barbarians; but **early monachism was flight from the world, and nothing else** (Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” 452-53). Emphases added.

⁶ “Whatever literary [i.e. intellectual] work requires such continuous portion of time as not to admit of being suspended at a moment’s notice, whatever is so interesting that other duties seem dull and heavy after it, whatever so exhausts the power of attention as to incapacitate for attention to other subjects whatever makes the mind gravitate towards the creature, is inconsistent with monastic simplicity” (Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict,” 423).

⁷ “The monks were too good Catholics to deny that reason was a divine gift, and had too much common sense to think to do without it. What they denied themselves was the various and manifold exercises of the reason; and on this account, because **such exercises were excitements**. When the reason is cultivated, it at once begins to combine, to centralize, to look forward, to look back, to view things as a whole, whether for speculation or for action; it practises synthesis and analysis, it discovers, it invents. To these exercises of the intellect is opposed **simplicity**, which is *the state of mind which does not combine, does not deal with premisses and conclusions, does not recognize means and their end, but lets each work, each place, each occurrence stand by itself,—which acts towards each as it comes before it, without a thought of anything else*. This simplicity is the temper of children, and it is the temper of monks” (Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict,” 375-76). Emphases added.

matters of theology; and also that the study of other subjects could tempt them to love something other than God with all their hearts and souls and minds.⁸

On Newman's account, the Benedictines developed a particular balance or equilibrium, in which they used their intellects, just not in ways that conflicted with their spiritual goals. This Benedictine way of conducting the intellectual life was dominant in Western Europe from about the time of the fall of the Roman Empire until about the middle of the eleventh century. After a time of transition, in which Saint Anselm (who we'll get to shortly) was a key figure, the first universities formed in the middle of the 12th century, and then a different style of intellectual life became dominant for several centuries. It will be helpful for our purposes to look quickly at these two eras and styles of education.

Before we go further, we should note that on Newman's telling, Benedictines should not run universities. Historically they did not run them—in fact, the universities were started because the early medieval monastic schools were no longer serving society's needs. We'll get into this a bit later when we look at Saint Anselm, but I wanted to call attention to this point here. In fact, according to Newman, the Benedictine idea was opposed to pretty much everything the university stood for.

Newman characterized the Benedictine genius as “poetic.”⁹ He meant that it was characteristic of the Benedictine idea to marvel at and delight in things God has given us, to accept “it's just God's will” as a satisfactory explanation for why things are the way they are, to

⁸ “**This was their mortification of the intellect**; every man who lives, must live by reason, as every one must live by sense; but, as it is possible to be content with the bare necessities of animal life, so is it possible to confine ourselves to the bare ordinary use of reason, without caring to improve it or make the most of it. These monks held both *sense and reason* to be the gifts of heaven, but *they used each of them as little as they could help*, reserving their full time and their whole selves for devotion;—for, if reason is better than sense, so devotion they thought to be better than either; and, as even a heathen might deny himself the innocent indulgences of sense in order to give his time to the cultivation of the reason, so did **the monks give up reason, as well as sense, that they might consecrate themselves to divine meditation**” (Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict,” 376). Emphases added.

⁹ “Poetry, then, I conceive, whatever be its metaphysical essence, or however various may be its kinds, whether it more properly belongs to action or to suffering, nay, whether it is more at home with society or with nature, whether its spirit is seen to best advantage in Homer or in Virgil, at any rate, is always the antagonist to *science*. As science makes progress in any subject-matter, poetry recedes from it. The two cannot stand together; they belong respectively to two modes of viewing things, which are contradictory of each other. **Reason investigates, analyzes, numbers, weighs, measures, ascertains, locates, the objects of its contemplation, and thus gains a scientific knowledge of them. Science results in system, which is complex unity**; poetry delights in the indefinite and various as contrasted with unity, and in the *simple as contrasted with system*. **The aim of science is to get a hold of things**, to grasp them, to handle them, to comprehend them; that is (to use the familiar term), to *master* them, or to **be superior to them**. . . . Its mission is to destroy ignorance, doubt, surmise, suspense, illusions, fears, deceits. . . . But **as to the poetical**, very different is the frame of mind which is necessary for its perception. **It demands, as its primary condition, that we should not put ourselves above the objects in which it resides, but at their feet**; that we should feel them to be above and beyond us, that we should look up to them, and that, instead of fancying that we can comprehend them, we should take for granted that we are surrounded and comprehended by them ourselves. It implies that we understand them to be vast, immeasurable, impenetrable, inscrutable, mysterious; so that at best we are only forming conjectures about them, not conclusions. . . . Poetry does not address the reason, but the imagination and affections; it leads to admiration, enthusiasm, devotion, love” (Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict,” 386-87). Emphases added.

appeal to the emotions, to beauty, to the heart in religion and devotion. Monks have style, especially (Newman thinks) in comparison to the Jesuits, who are pragmatic rather than poetic, who “give up the poetry of life, the poetry of ceremonies,—of the cowl, the cloister, and the choir,—content with the most prosaic architecture, if it be but convenient, and the most prosaic neighbourhood, if it be but populous.”¹⁰ Benedictines are known for their music, their idyllic locations in the mountains or the countryside, a life organized not by an app but by a bell calling them to pray.

Universities are not monasteries. The university is organized around scientific knowledge, not wonder. By the term “science,” Newman isn’t limiting himself to what we call science—physics, chemistry, biology and so on, that which can be studied in a lab or with mathematics. He’s talking about a style of thinking and knowing, which certainly applies to our modern sciences, but also applies to, for example, theology as practiced by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The goal of scientific knowledge, we say, is to “master” or “grasp” something, to “get on top of it” or “get a handle on it”—all metaphors of control. To analyze it, to break it down, to use reason and not the emotions. When Aquinas solves a theological problem by making a distinction between something *per se nota quoad se* and *per se nota quoad nos* (literally, that which is self-evident in itself and that which is self-evident to us), he’s not doing anything which can be studied in a lab, but he’s using the tools of science as Newman thinks of it.

Universities are also not for the education of monks.¹¹ Monks tended to educate their own, which quickly led to most monasteries in Europe having schools for children. Why for children? Because, as Newman explains, it was the theory back in the middle ages that, just as parents of a baby could make the baptismal promises for their child, so parents could make the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for their child as well, at which point their child became a full-fledged monk, just younger and smaller. (When the children grew up, they were not permitted to renounce these vows any more than one who professed as an adult.)¹² It became rather common for parents whether rich or poor, to give their sons to monasteries, and so it became rather common for monasteries to have children to educate, as young as “three, four, or five.”¹³ As Newman remarks, they were pretty much like other children, even being unruly in the way boys can be, despite being called “Brother.” And they needed to be educated, so that they could read Scripture and the Church Fathers, and so on, like any other monk. Because the monks were often the only literate people available to be teachers, they often were persuaded to open their doors to other children, who were not necessarily to be monks. This work of forming monks who were children led to monastic schools.

¹⁰ Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict,” 370.

¹¹ “It was not adolescence, with its curiosity, its pride of knowledge and its sensitiveness, with its disputes and emulations, with its exciting prizes and its impetuous breathless efforts, which Saint Benedict undertook to teach; he was no professor in a University. His convent was an infant school, a grammar school, and a seminary; it was not an academy. Indeed, the higher education in that day scarcely can be said to exist. It was a day of bloodshed and of revolution; before the time of life came when the University succeeds the School, the student had to choose his profession. He became a clerk or a monk, or else he became a soldier” (Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” 456).

¹² Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” 455.

¹³ Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” p. 457.

Newman argues that this development of the Benedictine schools was compatible with the Benedictine idea, in part because they share a simple outlook: “simplicity is the temper of children, and it is the temper of monks,” he says.¹⁴ These schools had certain characteristics. Monks taught scripture, obviously, and also the Roman seven liberal arts, the same ones taught in the old empire, in keeping with their habit of preserving what was old and not innovating. Monastic schools are the reason we speak of grammar schools—grammar (closer to what we’d call literature, the Latin classics) was the first of the liberal arts. (The others were rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). The goal of this course of study was so that the student could not only read, but that he had enough culture to be able to understand the language and classical allusions in, for example, St Augustine; they couldn’t hand on the tradition of the Church without its cultural context. In many cases, Newman writes, they never actually covered all the liberal arts, but mostly just taught grammar (literature)—partly, because literary knowledge was better developed in their day than, say, astronomy; partly because the students would typically cease their education when they got to be fourteen, before they were ready to move on to the other subjects.¹⁵

The fact that literature was something one studied when one was young led to a curious side effect—literature was considered something childish. Newman quotes with relish the reprimand of Pope Gregory the Great to a Bishop: “A fact has come to our ears, which we cannot name without a blush, that you, brother, lecture on literature.”¹⁶ To read for pleasure was frowned upon, because it could seduce the monk away from his life of mortification and create an attachment to the world. Monks as adults were expected to work in the fields or copy manuscripts, not write verse. Their intellectual life should revolve around scripture, with the exception of one person, the *scholasticus* of the monastery, that monk (or rarely, monks) whose task was to teach in the school. He had the responsibility to invest himself more deeply in the liberal arts, so as to be able to teach and answer the questions of his students. But, as Newman notes, “the functions of a schoolmaster are not much akin to those of a monk”¹⁷; if the abbot decided that the monk’s labors as *scholasticus* were affecting his prayer life, he might remove him and appoint another to that role, even if the students would not be as well served.

The brightest monks did do intellectual work that has been handed down to us. Monks wrote histories, biographies, songs, and poetry; they collected the sayings of the Fathers; they copied and illuminated manuscripts from an earlier time; and they developed teaching aids and methods. Their intellectual production was consistent with their mission to preserve, hand on,

¹⁴ Cf. footnote 7 above.

¹⁵ Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” 461.

¹⁶ “The instance of Pope Gregory is well known: when the Bishop of Vienne had been led to lecture in the classics, he wrote, ‘A fact has come to our ears, which we cannot name without a blush, that you, my brother, lecture on literature’ (*grammatica*).—*Ep.* xi. 54. Such occupations, indeed, were in those centuries generally and reasonably held to be inconsistent with the calling of a Bishop. Saint Jerome speaks as strongly in an earlier age” (Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” 475).

¹⁷ Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” 449-50.

and teach. They did not look for problems to solve or misunderstandings to clear up, the way the later universities organized *disputatio*s, competitions among students and faculty to see who could solve philosophical and theological puzzles. Eventually, though, that too began to change. As society became peaceful and wealthy enough to spend more resources on education, and the institutions of society saw value in members being trained in more than just literature, the age where adolescents with their curiosity could be shunted off into the professions came to an end, and the age of the school devoted to addressing that curiosity, the age of the University, was about to begin.¹⁸

Was Saint Anselm Representative of the Benedictine Idea?

To understand something of this transition from the era of the monastic grammar school for child monks to the era of the non-monastic university for adult men, I think it helpful to look at the founding and development of one particular monastery, the monastery at Bec in Normandy in which Saint Anselm was a monk.¹⁹ Around the year 1037, the soldier Herluin left the service of the Duke of Normandy to found his own monastery with a few other men. He soon drew to himself an extraordinarily talented man named Lanfranc, a professor of the liberal arts, of logic and theology. Lanfranc was the son of a lawyer and perhaps even a lawyer himself, and had a sterling reputation as an educated man and a good administrator. When he joined the fledgling monastic community, Lanfranc was not suited for manual labor, so he contributed to the finances of the monastery by doing something for which he was suited—he opened a school. As Newman points out, most Benedictine schools were for children. But the school Lanfranc started quickly became famous for its education of older students, especially grown young men. The school at Bec under Lanfranc soon attracted many talented and highly placed students, including the great canon lawyer Ivo of Chartres, several future Archbishops and Bishops, and Pope Alexander II.

The greatest of Lanfranc's students arrived from Aosta, in the French-speaking region in the Italian Alps of Savoy, in 1059 or a bit earlier. Saint Anselm was rather old to be a student, 25 or 26, but he had bounced around a bit after leaving his comfortable but unintellectual family situation. Intrigued by Lanfranc's reputation, he came to Bec and quickly entrusted himself to Lanfranc's tutelage. Anselm studied for a time, perhaps a few years, and then professed his vows as a monk at Bec in 1060.

¹⁸ "But times were approaching when such peaceful labours were not sufficient for the Church's need, and when theology required to be something more than the rehearsal of what her champions had achieved and her sages had established in ages passed away. As the new Christian society, which Charlemagne inaugurated, grew, its intellect grew with it, and at last began to ask questions and propose difficulties, which *catenæ* and commentaries could not solve. Hard-headed objectors were not to be subdued by the reverence for antiquity and the amenities of polite literature; and, when controversies arose, the Benedictines found themselves, from the necessity of the times, called to duties which were . . . uncongenial to the spirit of their founder . . ." (Newman, "Benedictine Schools," 477-78).

¹⁹ For the history of the founding of the monastery at Bec, cf. R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *Saint Anselm and His Biographer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Sally N. Vaughn, *Anselm of Bec and Robert of Meulan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1987).

Within three years, Lanfranc had left Bec to found other monasteries. Anselm succeeded Lanfranc as the prior (second in charge) at Bec, and took over the school. Later when Abbot Herluin died in 1078 Anselm became the abbot. Anselm seems to have made some changes to the school: Having monks and others together in mixed classrooms was considered less than ideal—for the monks, it distracted from their formation into monastic life to have so many people who kept reminding them of the world and its concerns; for the other students, they were happy to learn from Lanfranc, but they were in classrooms with those who weren't necessarily interested or inclined towards such advanced study as they were. (Just because you're a monk doesn't mean you're a nerd.) Where Lanfranc took as students many men (perhaps a majority of his students) who did not intend to be monks (such as Anselm), in part to make money, Anselm seems to have largely stopped that practice and only took on adult students who expressed a desire to be monks, with others admitted only by exception. (The financial situation of the abbey was pretty solid by then.) It's interesting, then that the reputation and quality of the school got even better when Anselm took over, with the side effect that huge numbers of young men became monks at Bec: The monastery doubled in size during the years when Anselm was prior and teacher, averaging nearly 4 professions a year, which increased to nearly 12 a year when he was abbot.²⁰ The monks at Bec developed a reputation for being learned as well as pious; many intelligent young men found kindred spirits there, and consequently were drawn to a life under the Rule of Saint Benedict.

What we see here is a development of the institution of the monastic school, first by Lanfranc, then by Saint Anselm. Lanfranc didn't teach boys, but young men, indeed aspiring intellectuals. He didn't teach boys because, in the early years, the monastery wasn't established enough for parents to give them their children. He taught intellectual young men as a way of capitalizing on his reputation as a teacher of law, logic and rhetoric—which he had established before he joined the monastery at Bec—during an era in which the monastery desperately needed money. It was a sign of the development of society that there were a lot of talented young men who were willing to pay to attend Lanfranc's classes. Indeed, Pope Nicholas II sent several chaplains to Lanfranc so that they could learn “the arts of dialectic and rhetoric,” after which they were to return to Rome and serve in the papal and imperial courts.²¹

Anselm's development of the school was in a different direction. By the time he was a monk, they did have enough boys to start a traditional monastic school. But Anselm didn't really invest himself in that sort of teaching. He preferred to teach young men, thinking that they were the perfect age—not so young that you were teaching them everything, not so old that they were set in their own opinions.²² Where Newman thought monastic education was suited for younger

²⁰ Cf. Vaughn, *Anselm of Bec and Robert of Meulan*, 68-70.

²¹ Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 20-23.

²² Anselm's “chief care was for the youths and young men, and when men asked him why this was, he . . . compared the time of youth to a piece of wax. . . . ‘For if the wax,’ he said, ‘is too hard or too soft it will not, when stamped with the seal, receive a perfect image. But if it preserves a mean between these extremes of hardness and softness, when it is stamped with the seal it will receive the image clear and whole. So it is with the ages of men. Take a man who has been sunk in the vanity of this world from infancy to extreme old age, knowing only earthly things and

boys, Anselm instead relished teaching the very age that Newman thought was better suited for the university. But Anselm, unlike Lanfranc, didn't teach students who didn't want to become monks, who weren't at least open to it. So in his hands, the school at Bec became a sort of new thing—it taught only monks, like the earlier grammar schools, but taught them the more advanced subjects (including cutting edge theology!). It was neither a university nor a grammar school, but a transition point between the two institutions.

Newman mentions Anselm several times in his two articles, because Saint Anselm was perhaps the most obvious *exception* to his characterization of Benedictine intellectual life.²³ The Benedictine contents himself to hand down what he has received, while Anselm was one of the greatest and most original speculative theologians ever to live. Grammar or literature was the favorite liberal art of the Benedictine *scholasticus*; Anselm preferred logic. The intellectual life of the Benedictine is supposed to be something he can leave behind him when he enters the chapel to pray, to consist in no elaborate projects, to be taken up with matters that, as with Saint Bede, can make steady progress each day, such that a spare moment here or there means another sentence translated or copied. That's the ideal, says Newman. That's not how Saint Anselm conducted his intellectual life.

After Anselm had written his first great theological work, the *Monologion*, he set out to come up with a simpler argument that would arrive at all the same essential conclusions. His biographer Eadmer says that the effort “gave him great trouble, partly because thinking about it took away his desire for food, drink, and sleep, and partly—and this was more grievous to him—because it disturbed the attention which he ought to have paid to matins and to Divine service at other times.”²⁴ Being preoccupied in this way isn't a sin—many of us have been so engrossed in

altogether set in those ways. Converse with such a man about spiritual things, talk to him about the fine points of divine contemplation, show him how to explore heavenly mysteries, and you will find he cannot see the things you wish him to. . . . He is the hardened wax. . . . Now consider a boy of tender years and little knowledge, unable to distinguish between good and evil, or even to understand you when you talk about such things. Here indeed the wax is soft, almost liquid, and incapable of taking an image of the seal. **Between these extremes is the youth and young man.** . . . If you teach him, you can shape him as you wish. Realizing this, I watch over the young men with greater solicitude, taking care to nip all their faults in the bud, so that being afterwards properly instructed in the practice of holy exercises, they may form themselves in the image of a spiritual man.” Eadmer, *The Life of Saint Anselm* (henceforth VA), ed. R.W. Southern (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1962), xi. Emphases added.

²³ “At the end of two centuries [of Eucharistic controversies] indeed appeared the great Benedictines Lanfranc and Anselm, who dealt successfully with this as well as other controversies. But it must be recollected that, though their school of Bec is confessedly the historical fountain-head of the new theology which was making its way into Christendom, it is . . . far from a specimen of the Benedictine character in matters of teaching. . . . And thus the period, properly Benedictine, ended” (Newman, “Benedictine Schools,” 486). See also, Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict,” 417, 423.

²⁴ “It came into his mind to prove by one single and short argument the things which are believed and preached about God. . . . This gave him great trouble, partly because thinking about it took away his desire for food, drink, and sleep, and partly—and this was more grievous to him—because it **disturbed the attention which he ought to have paid to matins and to Divine service** at other times. When he was aware of this, and still could not entirely lay hold on what he sought, he supposed that this line of thought was a *temptation of the devil* and he tried to banish it from his mind. But the more vehemently he tried to do this, the more this thought pursued him. Then suddenly one night during matins the grace of God illuminated his heart, the whole matter became clear to his mind, and a great joy and exultation filled his inmost being” (Eadmer, VA, xix). Emphases added.

study, in researching something or working on a problem set, that we've lost track of time and missed dinner or stayed up later than we've intended. But whatever else it is, it is not the Benedictine ideal as Newman describes it.

If we look at Anselm's own account of his struggle to write the *Proslogion*, we see that he carries on a deeper intellectual life than Newman thinks is characteristic of the Benedictines, or good for them.²⁵ And we see Anselm, like a good old fashioned Benedictine, worrying that he's too caught up in his own intellectual problems, that they're messing with his prayer life to the point where he wonders if they're temptations from the Devil. His preoccupation with intellectual problems is not typically Benedictine, while his examination of conscience is. But we also see his joy in finding the answer, even attributing the breakthrough to divine inspiration, at which point he abandons all of his Benedictine scruples about intellectual projects and begins to write another major treatise. This prompts us to ask—is this sort of intellectual life, which clearly is compatible with the university, compatible with the Benedictine spirit? Because were it so, then the notion of an authentically Benedictine university just might be possible, or at minimum, it might not involve a contradiction in terms, as Newman's characterization would suggest.

I think Anselm's model of the intellectual life is “poetical” in Newman's sense, but with a “scientific” twist. Recall that Newman saw science as using reason for mastery, as analyzing what it studies so as to break it down, looking for where a thing fits into a complex system, so that at the end we neither wonder nor have doubts about the object of our study—we are certain. Newman thought this intellectual style was suited to teaching adolescents, when inquiring minds want answers to everything. Well, Anselm didn't think about “everything,” or just anything—he only thought in this way about topics related to God. And nobody reading Saint Anselm will come away thinking that his attitude towards God has any hint of mastering the topic, that it reflects anything but an attitude of wonder. Anselm wrote the *Proslogion*, for example, “in the character of one striving to raise his thoughts to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he already believes.” His goal is to use logic, metaphysics, and the other tools of (what Newman calls) “science” in order to contemplate God and to arrive at understanding. He's not looking to build a complex system, a *summa* of theologies, but to arrive at a new *simplicity*. He uses all the intellectual tools available to him, not to analyze and master, but to

²⁵ “When after many times earnestly directing my thoughts to this [intellectual problem], it sometimes seemed to me that what I sought was just within my grasp, but sometimes that it eluded my mind's sight altogether, at last I resolved in despair to renounce the search for a thing, the discovery whereof was beyond my powers. But this train of thought, so soon as I desired to lay it aside lest it should *hinder my mind while vainly occupied* therein from *attending to other matters which might be more profitable to me*, at once **began to press itself as it were importunately upon me**, unwilling and reluctant as I was to entertain it. And so one day, when I was wearied out with *violently resisting* this importunity, in the midst of the *struggle of my thoughts*, there so presented itself to me the very thing which I had given up hope of finding, that **I hastened to embrace that very train of thought which I was but a moment ago anxiously thrusting from me**. Thinking therefore that if I wrote down what I so greatly rejoiced to have found, it would please others who might read it, I wrote the following little work, treating of this and of some other matters, in the character of one striving to raise his thoughts to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he already believes” Anselm, *Proslogion*, preface (translation from <http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Proslogion>, accessed on April 28, 2015). Emphases added.

ascend and understand, insofar as we can, using our gifts to know better Him whom we are called to love.

Anselm doesn't mortify his intellect, at least not to the degree Newman thinks a Benedictine should. But he does mortify his *curiosity*, which he is reported to have defined (in traditional terms) as "the zeal to investigate that which it is not useful to know."²⁶ The worries he describes in the preface to the *Proslogion*—about whether the effort he's making is worthwhile, whether there even was an answer to the questions he was asking, and whether he was smart enough to find it, not to mention the effect that looking for it was having on his prayer life—reflect an examination of conscience regarding this vice. Philosophy begins in wonder, says Aristotle, but wonder avoids turning into curiosity only if the topics one thinks about are really worthwhile. One would think that theological topics ought to be worth studying. Except, sometimes the questions aren't answerable, in which case they're a waste of time, and to pursue them is curiosity. But, as Anselm found out, theologians don't always know when they ask a question whether it's possible to find the answer, or whether the search is a waste of time. Anselm clearly believes that finding the *Proslogion* argument was worth the effort—but only after he solved it. He wasn't so sure beforehand. Once Anselm arrives at a conclusion, his mind is at rest, returning to that peace that is so properly Benedictine. Anselm's topics, the mysteries of faith, by their nature cannot be grasped in this life, but the restlessness of his mind can be largely settled by his sort of investigation.

Anselm never keeps his answers to himself, but is always thinking about sparing others the sort of difficulties that he himself experienced. In this he's a Benedictine through and through. Today it is common to withhold answers from students to "make them think," based on the belief that critical thinking is itself a human perfection. Anselm did not subscribe to this view. Many of his writings explicitly are in response to questions from his students or his fellow monks, who wanted the chance to mull over some of the things he said in class or in chapter. The most famous example is his *Cur Deus Homo*, written in response to the persistent questions of the monk Boso. But we even see an example in the *Proslogion* preface, where once Anselm achieves his breakthrough, he wanted to write it down so that others could benefit from it.

This feature of Anselm's interior life helps us integrate it into Newman's Benedictine ideal. In the earlier monastery, there was one person, the *scholasticus*, whose duty was to teach the students. Of course, there was at least one other teacher in the monastery—the abbot, who had the responsibility of instructing the other monks in how to grow closer to God. Anselm, who advanced from teacher to abbot, seems to have regarded his intellectual life (with its gifts and dangers) not from the perspective of the virtuoso or show-off ("Hey, look what I figured out!"), but from the perspective of his responsibility for souls. Abbots often have to take on burdens that the other monks don't—they have to deal with the world more often in order to make sure the

²⁶ "Curiositas est studium perscrutandi eaque scire nulla utilitas." Anselm, "De humanis moribus, n. 26," in *Memorials of Saint Anselm*, ed. R. W. Southern and F. S. Schmitt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 47.

monastery's interests are protected. Perhaps we can look at Anselm's intellectual wrestling as him taking on certain risks to own his life of contemplation so as to benefit others.

Anselm's era was a time when young men often had theological questions, and they came to Bec hoping, not just to train their mind in logic, but to find answers that fed their soul. They didn't want to be mini-Anselms; they didn't need to find the answer themselves. Often they were happy if someone just explained things to them satisfactorily. If we look at Anselm's intellectual work from within this context, we can see how it might have contributed to the Benedictine goals of quiet and peace for the others. The traditional Benedictine response to a young monk with a lot of questions was to tell him to stop asking so many questions, and learn to mortify his intellect. Anselm preferred just to answer the questions. He relaxed some of his own intellectual mortifications so as to help his restless pupils sleep at night.

But, a crusty old Benedictine might point out, there might be a limit to how long even a genius like Anselm can keep it up. As the questions multiply and it becomes more difficult to keep the answers coherent with each other, there might be a spiritual danger to encouraging more questions. Does Anselm's relaxation of mortification of the intellect, even if one does not give in to curiosity, risk permanent disquietude? Was Anselm's style perfect for his moment, when he was a genius and the range of topics he was asked about was small—but could it be sustained when lesser men were asked more questions? One can see how over time, young men with questions might prefer, as Newman warns, the methods of the medieval university, with courses taught by several masters in their fields of specialization, rather than prolonged meditation in a community under the guidance of one teacher.

Is a 'Distinctively Benedictine' University Even Possible?

Obviously, Anselm's own educational style, which was primarily for his fellow monks, can't straightforwardly be translated into the modern college setting. (Imagine if you asked your professor why God became man, and he got back to you in five years. That's unreasonable in a university, but not crazy when professor and student plan to be in the same place for the rest of their lives.) So perhaps a better question might be, what parts of Benedictine spirituality, if any, can be translated to a modern college whose students and teachers are primarily Catholic laity?

According to Newman, Benedictine spirituality has an attitude towards the intellectual life that by and large is limited—it involves mortification of the intellect, and is vigilant in opposing the vice of curiosity. It recommends that adults primarily study scripture and the Fathers, the great works of the Catholic tradition, and little else. Children should study the liberal arts so that they'll be prepared to understand Scripture and tradition. A small library filled with tried and true books is enough.

Benedictine spirituality holds that intellectual work is best when it can be laid down and taken up again. It is dangerous when one becomes so preoccupied with a problem that it disrupts prayer. Curiosity, defined as being interested in the useless, is a vice and an ever-present danger

for the intellectual's soul. What's more, the Benedictine has a very restricted notion of what it is useful to think about, namely that which brings the soul to a greater understanding of God and his plan (the central problems of theology). And even those topics can be pursued in a disordered way. In the monastery, the *Abbot* might have a different intellectual responsibility to actually solve problems, to fight heresies and form his monks, so he often can't mortify the intellect as much as ordinary monks due to his larger responsibilities. A *teacher* has a responsibility to know his assigned subject, although one can be asked to lay down teaching just like any other job (unlike the abbot). *Students* are to respect the master, not challenge him—obedience and humility and mortification of the curiosity are more important than winning some argument in class. The teacher-student relationship is easier to maintain, therefore, when the students are younger; it takes a higher caliber of professor to have that relationship with adolescents and adults.

Benedictine spirituality rejects conflict, whether of authorities or contemporaries, as the method to arrive at truth; it prefers meditation as a way to get to deeper realities. It rejects the single-minded pursuit of truth in favor of maintaining a balanced life in the monastery. It rejects the practice of moving about to find the most intellectually stimulating atmosphere, in favor of monastic stability and educating the minds at home. And it rejects the training of external students (if older), in favor of training monks.

As Newman's essays suggest, an authentically Benedictine university is thus a problematic entity. Its students are not usually focused on a monastic vocation. The faculty come from diverse formational backgrounds—not only are they not all monks, they don't all come from other Benedictine universities. They might be good at their specialty, but they probably aren't trained to form students in how to integrate their work and prayer. There are financial and other pressures to imitate other universities, because students and faculty find it easier to move on to other institutions if there's a large degree of standardization (e.g., the undergraduate course of studies is four years divided into semesters; departments are comparable to departments at other colleges, so that biology 101 is basically the same everywhere; the faculty and students are not expected to live under the same roof). A university can't be that unusual—not even in a “distinctively Benedictine” way—or else it will be hard to find enough students or professors.

It would seem to be in keeping with the Benedictine idea for a university to be something of what today we call a vocational school, not of course a school that teaches you about the variety of religious vocations, but one that trains students for a job. What kind of job? Anything that works shifts, and does not absorb you intellectually, so that you can leave it behind when you go home. It would train grammar school teachers, for example. Perhaps it would teach engineering, but not *research* in the sciences, nursing rather than neurobiology, accounting rather than economic game theory. One goal of such an education would be to teach people how to work with the right spirit: that work should have as its end the sanctification of the worker, and it should be subordinated to piety and family. A graduate of a Benedictine university ought to want a job, not a career. This world is passing away, so don't get too wrapped up in it, but do what you have to do to defeat the devil and to cultivate your soul, supporting those you are obligated

to support with your skills, offering your best to God each day. If something can't be left behind when you leave work, then it's not right for a Benedictine college, at least not according to Newman's view.

Benedictines also taught the liberal arts, of course. Since a university is more than a grammar school, a Benedictine university ought to teach all the liberal arts, broadly conceived as that which prepares students to appreciate scripture and the tradition of the Church. To be able to understand the works of, for example, Saint Anselm, one needs to study Latin, logic, and history; one needs to be widely read in the things he read (especially philosophy and theology); and it's helpful to know how manuscripts in the middle ages were copied and preserved, and how to sift good and bad scholarship about Saint Anselm. To worship God in the liturgy, one needs to study music and the decorative arts, even poetry and literature. Theology, following Anselm's lead, would allow for theological speculation, rather than just studying the received wisdom of the Church, in an attempt to answer questions that were disquieting the students (or the college community), if there was a decent chance of success. Not, however, as is sometimes done, to use theological speculation for the purpose of attacking the student's presuppositions, as in "Everything you thought about the Bible is naïve!" or "We need to question everything to fight dogmatic slumber!" Critical thinking is not a goal in itself, but a means to peace in the soul.

A university inspired by the Benedictine spirit ought to cultivate certain virtues in its students. A Benedictine university should: Focus on formation of the whole person, *in loco parentis*; form students to see work as part of a balanced life; teach that this life is to prepare us for the life to come; pass on the intellectual heritage that contains guidance on how to go to heaven, while also passing on a trade; communicate a poetic spirit about life; inspire wonder, not a desire for mastery, speaking to the heart of students, not just their minds; teach that curiosity is a vice; and finally seek understanding of God through prayer, humility, and meditation on the mysteries of the faith.

A distinctively Benedictine university should develop institutional ways to foster this spirit among the faculty as well as the students. Perhaps work and prayer should be required for everybody in the community, even manual work, so that everybody learns to put down their intellectual work for other work. The university should be in the countryside, not the city, so as to foster a love of God's creation. If the Internet has to be used, there should be a filter on it. The university might put an unusual amount of control in hands of the abbot, thereby institutionalizing the detachment from the world and its measures of success that forms the *sine qua non* for a Benedictine spirit. As is always the case, the world is so opposed to the Benedictine spirit that a university cannot follow these principles without a fight—a fight that, as often as not, it will lose. Ideally, the Benedictine spirit would lead to a spiritual indifference to the commercial success of the college, but a passionate interest in its spiritual success, such that if the university is not leading to the salvation of souls, if it's not leading to a proper detachment from the world, what good is it, and who cares what happens to it?

So again, I ask, is a distinctively Benedictine university even possible today? I don't know. I don't have any answers for how to take these two competing ideas—the Benedictine mission and the modern university—and make out of them a unified whole. I sort of had the idea of ending with The Answer, showing how Saint Anselm could ride to the rescue, or something. But I don't have one. The very idea, now that I think about it, is somehow un-Benedictine, a little too scientific and analytical, and not poetic enough. It presumes that the world isn't fallen, that there's a perfect institution that can take people from all walks of life, stir, and produce a steady stream of Saint Anselms. That's not going to happen. The Benedictine spirit is many things, as we've seen, but it is nothing if not attuned to the difficulties of living in a fallen world. And somehow, from its beginnings 125 years ago, this college has done it, has managed to combine the poetical spirit of the Benedictines with the scientific institution of the university, at times compromising, at times insisting on principle, at times just living just for the day without having a grand master plan, trusting that if God wants the College to flourish, he'll make it so. I'm not the abbot; I'm not the president of the university; I'm not even a member of the Saint Anselm's community except in an honorary sense for these few hours today. So other people have the responsibility for worrying about the future of the College; today, on the Feast of Saint Anselm, let us wonder poetically at the fact that it is here and has done such good work over the last century and a quarter, and let us ask our patron saint to do the one thing he is most suited to do from his seat in the heavenly liturgy:

Saint Anselm of Canterbury, pray for us.