

## Is a Benedictine School likely to favour the Arts rather than the Sciences?

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There are reasons why, at first glance, a Benedictine school should seem to favour the arts over the sciences. Coming to understand God demands engaging with artistic traditions: we meet Him in the words, images and music of services, the narratives and fragments of history collected in the Bible. In contrast, the fact that much of our faith defies the laws of science – transubstantiation, life after death, even the possession of a soul – suggests that a Benedictine school could never place a scientific outlook at the centre of its philosophy. Some people, of course, sadly see science and religion as fundamental opposites: each has to be an obstacle to accepting the other. It is this atmosphere which Umberto Eco chose to exploit in *The Name of the Rose*, in which exposure to William of Baskerville's scientific method indirectly leads to the destruction of a monastery.

Such arguments are flawed. Positioning science as an obstacle to religion is a superficial response. Science is, as someone once said, simply too young to understand: had St Benedict been writing his Rule later, he would surely have mentioned science's role in the lives and studies of monks. In many respects, understanding science enhances faith. Living in a time in which it is accepted that the Red Sea can not part, a virgin can not give birth and water can not be turned into wine by any scientific means makes God's intervention in the world seem more wondrous. A Benedictine school can use the study of sciences as a means of glorifying God if it shows pupils the heights which man's resourcefulness can reach, only to remind them that, even still, *'as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'* (Isa 55:9). Furthermore, our instinctive desire to discover how the world behaves and how to harness its resources is a God-given duty, inspired by his call to *'cultivate and take care of it'* (Gen 2:15). A scientific education, with Benedictine emphasis on the use of science for *'good works'* rather than exploitation, helps pupils to fulfil this call.

Indeed, there are two respects in which the sciences focus on the values of the Rule of St Benedict more clearly than the arts. The first is the call to *'humility'*. In Chapter 57, St Benedict demands that a craftsman who *'becomes conceited over his skill in his craft, because he seems to be conferring a benefit on the monastery'* should be removed from duty. This poses a challenge to the teaching of arts in modern schools, where the focus is on praising the creativity of an individual and the way in which they have benefited the world around them through their distinctive skill. The creator can become more important than the creation, an accolade only deserved by God. This problem is evident in the difference between the arts and the sciences in the wider world: writers, artists, actors and composers generally achieve greater celebrity than scientists.

The second value is the call to *'obedience'* and to acceptance that there is 'one right answer' in God. This concern runs through the Rule but is shown most clearly in the

Prologue, where St Benedict explains the unchallengeable truth behind various passages from Scripture in the context of his call to monastic life. Today, applying absolute unbreakable laws that apply across contexts seems to be the domain of the sciences; the focus of the arts, particularly in the current A Level English and History syllabuses, is on weighing up interpretations of texts and events. While debate is important to scientists, their debate is founded on the knowledge that one side will eventually be proved right; in the arts, the thrill is in the chase not the capture.

However, even these arguments are unconvincing: the conclusion has to be that both the sciences and the arts are valid and necessary as part of a Benedictine education. Artists do not act as individuals but as members of a tradition, working together and following on from the work of those who have gone before them. Just as the Liturgy of the Word celebrates how the New Testament counterpoints and rewrites the Old, so the arts are a system of re-creations where fresh individual skill is in fact submissive to ideas, tropes and purposes that are greater than itself. It is no surprise that God is often at the centre of these recurring themes: to give a literary example, Ted Hughes spoke of '*a direct line which can be traced...from Dante to Milton*' and on to TS Eliot, perhaps because all three used poetry to reinterpret the challenge of faith for their times. Seeing the arts as a response to others' ideas prevents the '*conceitedness*' that St Benedict fears. This use of both artistic and scientific disciplines to communicate across time and space, marrying living and dead minds to form new ideas, is just another way in which a school can encourage pupils to behave '*on earth as it is heaven*'. Benedictine learning has to be a learning of response to others: this is what distinguishes '*a school of the Lord's service*' from merely 'learning to serve the Lord'.

It is also wrong to see education, even one which stresses learning '*obedience*' and acceptance, in terms of finding and learning 'right answers'. The essence of education is not 'answers' but 'signs' – learning how to interpret the evidence, picked up by our senses and intellect, from the world around us. Scientific theories such as Rutherford's model of the atom which have been disproved as accurate 'answers' to problems are still used if they provide convenient 'signs' or representations of how things work. The call to keep looking for further signs of God's presence, which will eventually lead to the 'divine answer' of salvation, is the message in the Epilogue of the Rule. The language St Benedict uses to describe his recommended further reading – '*perfectly straight*' and '*loudly proclaim*' – highlights the attributes that make them such perfect signs: there is a clear and direct link between their signifying surface features and the signified truth they convey. Identifying the signs God leaves for us in the world is vital: failure to do so leaves us '*lazy and loose-living and negligent*' according to St Benedict, but doing so excessively without evaluating them leaves us jumping to the conclusion of a wrong 'right answer' and spotting patterns that aren't there, like the protagonists of *The Name of the Rose*. A Catholic education is particularly suited to such sign-spotting because at its heart lies the Mass, the perfect sign, in which the signifying offered gifts actually becomes the signified, Christ.

The arts and the sciences are both necessary because they present us with two different types of sign. Studying the system of words, notes, images and movements which make up a work of art encourages us to consider the internal effect it has on ourselves experiencing it and why it has that effect. The signs that we encounter in science – the symptoms that indicate diseases, the effects which demonstrate that a

chemical reaction has occurred, the features required for a particular geometric shape – can be described as external, pointing out towards an understanding of the natural world around us. Therefore, a Benedictine education which balances the arts with the sciences will also balance knowledge of the self with knowledge of what lies beyond the self. This in turn can only lead towards fulfilment of the Great Commandment: *‘You must love your neighbour as yourself’* (Mk 12:31).

Finally, St Benedict’s call for *‘good works’* throughout the Rule can be answered equally through the arts and the sciences. *‘Labore est orare’* because both work and prayer are equally transformative action. If prayer transforms our relationship with God from one of idleness to one of dedication, work transforms our relationship with the world in exactly the same way: it is the God-given and uniquely human ability to take the resources at our disposal and consciously create something new, whether that be transforming plants into medicine, magnets and coiled wire into electricity, numbers into their sum, stone into sculpture, everyday language into poetry, or, more generally, our own internal ideas into a system of external ideas that others can experience. It is the call to this creative kind of work which allows us to live up to the promise of being *‘the image of God’* (Gen 1:27). Through it we can recreate His world, following the models of God the perfect scientist, designing a universe totally fit for purpose, and God the perfect artist, designing it with supreme attention to its beauty. It is the duty of a Benedictine school to present both of these mutually inclusive models to pupils, so that they can discern their own personal path of *‘good works’* to *‘run’*.

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