

**Which of the tools of good works would
St. Benedict have recommended in
particular to students in a
21st century Benedictine school?**

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words: 1 731

Nobody, except for God and Saint Benedict himself, knows for certain which particular good works St Benedict would have recommended to students in a 21st century Benedictine school. Although this might be both the beginning and the very end to every essay submitted to the Benedictine School Essay Prize, there are two things to consider if one is to avoid finishing the essay too early: firstly, we have the exact words of St Benedict. The first three tools of the chapter four begin respectively with: *'in primis'*¹, *'deinde'*, *'deinde'*, which suggests that these three tools are the most important in his judgment and thus should not be omitted; secondly, the daily experience of a Benedictine community life at Downside School helped me to comprehend the 'Benedictine spirit' and thus further ponder about the specific tools of good works.

'In primis Dominum Deum diligere ex toto corde, tota anima, tota virtute' is not only the most important tool of the good works from which all of the others can be inferred but also lies at the very heart of Christianity. *'First of all, love the Lord God with the whole heart, the whole soul and the whole strength'* - as usually translated (Boniface, 1949; Kardong, 1980). However, this is not the entire meaning of this essential advice since St Benedict says: *diligere* instead of *amare*. *Diligere* means to value, esteem highly or have special regard for something whereas *'amare'* means to love as a sentiment or in an affectionate way. This distinction is clearly shown when Jesus asks St Peter three times: *'diligas me'*² and St Peter answers *'amo te'* (The Vulgate). Christ is seeking respect and reverence from his Apostle whereas St Peter answers that he loves Him because he is attached to Jesus by a strong feeling³. St Benedict, like Jesus, does not solely recommend a strong emotional connection with God but a state of respect and esteem that involves the whole heart, soul, mind and courage from each student. It may seem that this advice refers solely to Christian students of a Benedictine school. However, concerning the nature of God⁴, everyone can show their reverence to God by studying the Bible, avoiding the use of God's name in trivial situations and by restraining themselves from common and unreasonable critique of the Catholic Church⁵ and God.

¹ In my essay I use the original version of the Rule of St Benedict from:

<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/benedict.html> due to one main reason: Latin text contains words which usually had multidimensional meaning which is lost in English translations.

² Jn 21,15-17.

³ This biblical situation shows the difference in modern translations and the Vulgate which derives its understanding of love from the ancient Greece, making a distinction between four different kinds of love: *agápe*, *éros*, *phília*, and *storgē*, known very well to early Christians. It is also evidently clear for St Benedict who distinguishes *diligere* and *amare*.

⁴ *'For faithful love is what pleases me, not sacrifice'* (Ho 6,6) Illustrated also in the story of the sacrifice of Izaac, Gn 22,1-18 and innumerable examples from teachings of Jesus and the whole Bible.

⁵ Though, the Church is the mystical body of Jesus Christ.

'Deinde proximum tamquam seipsum'. Respect and value for God, says St Benedict, should also be followed by *diligere* towards our neighbours insofar as we treat ourselves. This recommendation opposes the unrestrained will of an individual as well as the attitude of one's desires without any need for common service. Benedictine values such as: brotherhood, service and esteem for every human being, oppose to the permissive, individualistic and utilitarian culture which despise all values⁶ (Kundera, 1980). The active response to St Benedictine's advice, supplied by the cultivation of the other values and tools, is definitely crucial for 21st century Benedictine school students.

'Deinde non occidere'. If this tool is to be understood explicitly, then it merely states not to kill which is the fifth commandment. However, Jesus explored the commandments in the Sermon on the Mountain⁷ and St Benedict probably thought in the same way. Furthermore, most of the tools are rather laconic, but many inexplicit ideas can be inferred from them. In that way, all various 'kinds' of life should be preserved: flora because its beauty leads to its Creator; fauna which provide food for people and humanity, due to the possession of dignity by every individual which was given by God. By the preservation of flora, fauna and last of all, human beings, Benedictine students will make proper 'use' of this tool.

One of the most distinguished contemporary Polish philosophers was once asked what he considers as the main commandments. After a short while, he replied: 2, 4 and 8. When he was asked for his criteria, he answered: *'Those three because people sin against them the most often'*⁸ (Sommer, 2010). His reply has helped me to comprehend which criteria I should use to select some tools before the others⁹, namely it is the lack of these specific tools that makes them suitable for recommendation to students in a 21st century Benedictine school.

'Veritatem ex corde et ore proferre'. There is definitely some kind of *cliché* in the statement of constant mendacity in the world. However, St Benedict recommends to bring out the truth with heart and tongue rather than solely avoiding lies. On one hand, one should bring forth the true image of oneself without unnecessary explanations and reasonable judgments that very often obscure the truth. While on the other hand, the truth concerns the community in which one lives. To bring out the truth publicly, is to make it easy to see and understand by the others. For

⁶ Represented in a book of Milan Kundera 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being'

⁷ Mt 5, 21-26

⁸ Translation from Polish by myself

⁹ Since St Benedict recommended precisely 74 tools of good works. No more and no less with 3 emphasized at the very beginning.

instance, students of Benedictine schools who graduate and decide to read medicine at university, are encouraged by St Benedict to show the truth about the abortion, in-vitro fertilization and any other medical treatments that violate God's will, explained with the full medical consequences of these treatments according to their best knowledge. *Proferre veritatem* implies the sense of bearing testimony in the society in which Benedictine student lives as well as living a life of truth with conscience.

'Non pigrum'. For centuries, many generations of Christians emphasized the ultimate aim of Christian life, which is a life after death in Heaven. It may seem that Benedictine tools follow this attitude as St Benedict says: *'diem iudicii timere'*. However, he also does recommend the hard work and eagerness here, on the earth¹⁰. *'Do not be slothful!'*¹¹ says the author to every student of Benedictine school - laziness in work always affects enormously the future position in the life. It also stands against the God's will since God has given everyone specific talents¹². This is a very demanding tool, but would St Benedict recommend anything which is unimportant or what would bring any harm to his followers?

'Non esse superbum'. Do not be arrogant and rude. St Benedict warns that such behaviour will cause dangerous implications such as breakdown of brotherly relations within the school as well as the atmosphere of trust and respect to each other. The idea of a Benedictine community conveys a structure in which everyone has its own place within the school and responsibility for one another. Arrogance and selfish attitudes are utterly against the profit of students themselves as well as the whole community in which they live, seems to suggest St Benedict.

'Multum loqui non amare'. It may seem that St Benedict recommends abstinence from speaking, which, while definitely challenging for talkative students, is not the main tenet of this tool; it is a strong affection in talking that is dangerous and unwanted¹³. Talking for talking's sake often causes great harm to other people, mainly through gossiping and slander. Moreover, constant talk without any self-restrictions creates the lack of silence which successfully prevents Benedictine students from hearing the voice of their own conscience. In solitude there is a God¹⁴ (The Great Silence) and a rest from daily matters which is definitely needed in contemporary

¹⁰ St Benedict probably refers to the teaching of St Paul when he said: 'we urge you when we were with you no to let anyone eat who refused to work' (2 Th 3, 10)

¹¹ St Benedict did not put the exclamation mark, because Latin does not use punctuation. However, it may be deduced from the character and significant implications of this tool.

¹² Mt 25,14-30

¹³ St Benedict emphasizes the explicit words of Jesus who said: 'All you need to say is 'Yes' if you mean yes, 'No' if you mean no' [Mt 5,37].

¹⁴ Which was show in a beautiful film 'The Great Silence'.

societies of constant and permanent piles of information, flooding everyday with new pieces of the same 'news'.

'*Juniores diligere*'. Within the whole chapter 4 St Benedict uses word '*diligere*' 4 times in reference to: God, neighbour, personal enemy and youth. This special care and reverence towards youth, threw me at the very beginning into total confusion¹⁵. Then I understood why it is so significant- due to their pureness which embodies true faith¹⁶. When students take special care for them, they achieve two-dimensional aim: to learn from children how to believe without unnecessary excess of rationality and fulfill their duty to provide protection for them without which they would be scarcely able to survive.

These are the tools of good works which, I think, St Benedict would have recommended in particular to students in a 21st century Benedictine school. They are of a specific significance due to the immense resistance to them. The truth, respect for God and sacrum, humbleness and finally diligence are all enormously valuable as I discovered from the wide spectrum of good works. If they are all to be appreciated and 'used' by Benedictine students, *stabilitas in congregatione* of all followers of St Benedict and much more¹⁷ would be granted by God Himself¹⁸.

¹⁵ Since I was always told it is a duty of children to show respect to elderly. Not the different way round.

¹⁶ Mk 9,42 and Lk 18,16-17

¹⁷ '*Quod oculus non vidit nec auris audivit, quae praeparavit Deus his qui diligunt illum*' – quotes St Benedict at the end of chapter 4

¹⁸ *ibid.* 'a Domino (...) ipse promisit'

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