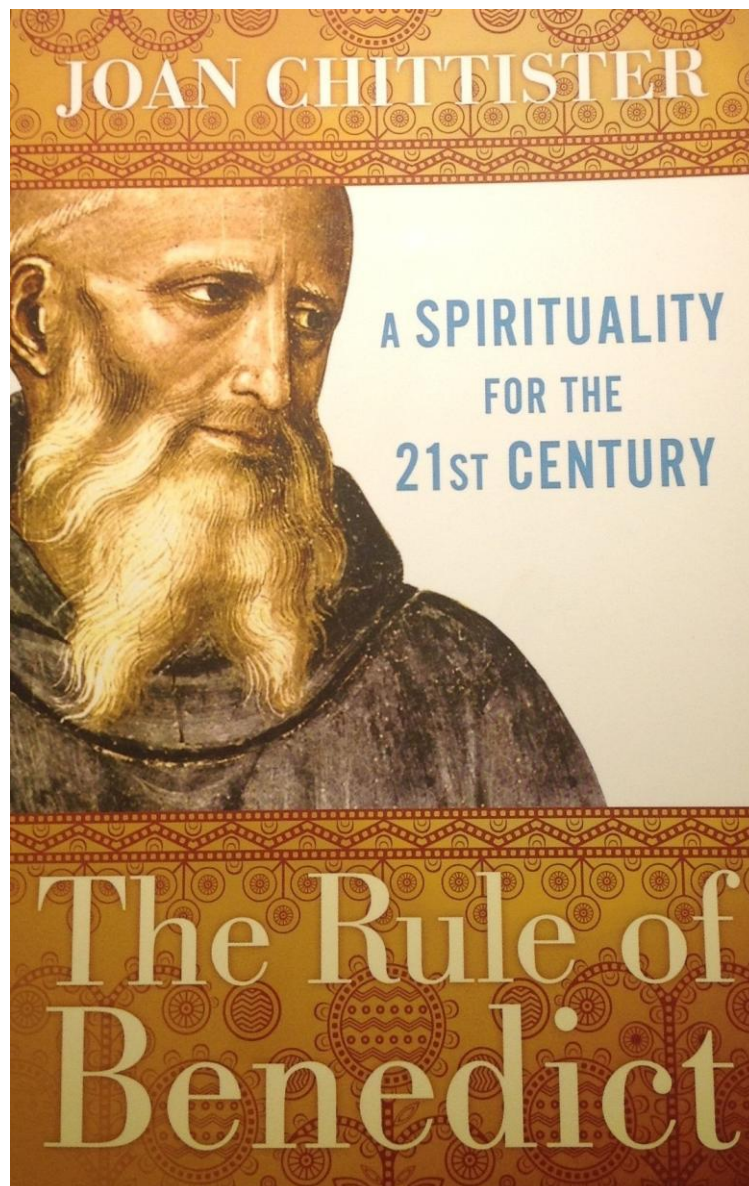


A Week With Benedict

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Having read *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* and experiencing many moments during the reading of identification and challenge, I decided to spend one week focusing on some of the key themes that emerged from the reading. As a wife, mother of four, classroom teacher and Religious Education Leader, life is often hectic, busily rushing from one thing to the next. I love it! But I also acknowledge that there is value in slowing down and being more mindful of and attentive to what is happening around me, to tuning in to the presence of God in everyday encounters, to really listening to what others are saying.

My own spirituality is grounded in a wonderful childhood brought up in a Catholic family within a vibrant Parish, and all of my education has taken place within that context also. For me, my spirituality is intrinsically linked to my faith, although I accept that this may not be the case for others. Collins (2004) defines spirituality as engaging one with a community of truly great people, within the context of a faith tradition, on a lifelong pilgrimage towards the transcendent. This is a well rounded definition for me and I particularly like the reference to the community engagement as for me, my spirituality finds its expression most naturally within the communities to which I belong; family, workplace, Parish, friendship groups.



Holy Spirit Community School Emblem

The author of *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* is Joan Chittester, a prolific author and Benedictine sister (www.spiritualityandpractice.com) who has written over forty books. Her own spirituality is borne out of the Rule of St Benedict and her book is written as a spiritual guide that seeks to make the Rule of Benedict accessible and relevant for life in the modern world.

So now, a week of attentiveness, mindfulness, listening, openness and reflection begins ...

Saturday 14th October

“To a world fragmented by transience and distance, the rule of Benedict stressed the need and nature of real community” (Chittester, 2010, p.XIII)



The Holy Spirit Community Fete was held today and what a triumph for the community it was. My children say it is their favourite day of the year bar Christmas, and this speaks volumes. Certainly, the freedom to spend money on lollies and other junk unchecked by me is enticing, but the freedom to be with peers for the whole day entices them more. Rolheiser (1999) states that spirituality is intimately connected to being in harmony in community, and this day is the epitome of a community working together. The common heart and vision, a hallmark of community according to Benedict (Chittester, 2010) is visible to every person who attends, and this fete reaches far beyond the Holy Spirit Community with attendances in the thousands. This event unites the Parish and the school communities with members working side by side, with a great sense of camaraderie and support. Whilst the profit is significant, the community feeling engendered by the day is priceless and a feature for all those who participate and attend. Dorr (2004) would see his principle of community building through collaboration in action on this day.

Sunday 15th October



Patience is not one of my strong points but Benedict points out the importance of developing patience in striving for holiness (Chittester, 2010), and holiness according to Collins (2004) is a central aspect of spirituality. So today, I dig up our veggie patch. It is hard work as there are many invasive weeds that need to be dug out before I can get to the fun part of planting. Billy comes out to help for a while but loses interest in the digging! I am reminded of this aspect of myself. I often long to skip the drudgery for the fun and excitement. Benedict also reminds me that “growth is not an accident. Growth is a process”(Chittester, 2010, p. 188). Like the veggie garden and the weeds that can potentially smother it, I need to move away from what stops me growing, from what smothers me. Small mindedness, gossip and comparing myself to others are all things I should eradicate from my life in order to work towards holiness.

Monday 16th October

I sit in staff prayer before staff meeting tonight and listen to many, many staff pray for sick and dying parents. I am struck by two things; how lucky I am, and how sad so many staff are. Benedict calls us to contemplation, to be able to see Christ in the other and treat one another as Christ (Chittester, 2010). This staff prayer pulls me up. It is so easy to see people’s short comings and perceived failures and forget that they are in fact people with families and concerns, just like me. I think about the statement of Collins that “primarily, (prayer) is what God does” (2004, p.66). The sense of relief around the room is palpable after people have had the opportunity to share what is in their hearts and on their minds and hand over to God. There are no prayers for miraculous recoveries but rather prayers for support, understanding and God’s care



Having this opportunity with colleagues to stop, reflect and ask for help is a gift in itself. We start everyday with Christian meditation with our classes, yet forget to give this same gift to each other. Starratt and Guare point out that our spirituality can enable us to respond to others with openness and acceptance and with a reverence for their personal stories (1995). This was keenly put before me today.

Tuesday 17th October



I am a little distressed for the staff who seem so sad and are dealing with such difficult times and challenging decisions. I love to bake so it seems obvious to me that I should make morning tea for the staff, if for no other reason than to see people smile as they walk into the staffroom. Benedict says that hospitality is the gift of myself to you (Chittester, 2010) and this seems like the perfect day to give that gift. Benedict also notes that hospitality can be a form of worship, an expression of love and a welcome to Christ for us today (Chittester, 2010). I watch staff as they enter for morning tea and delight in the oohs and aahs. Something so simple has touched people in a way that perhaps my words are unable to. Staff stay around for morning tea, enjoying conversation and sharing food and drink. Jesus

did this often, with not only his friends but the marginalised, poor, oppressed and sinners. He taught us that the presence of God can be found in the essence of everything and everyone (O’Leary, 1999). Here is a challenge for me; to be less judgemental, to look beyond what is obvious to what is deep within colleagues and friends, to what they may find difficult to express or talk about. I need to busy myself less with ‘responding to the obvious’ (Starratt and Guare, 1995).

Wednesday 18th October

Today we have an extended Leadership Team Meeting in preparation for our School Review in 2013. We have also been dealing with a number of staffing issues which are challenging and require careful decision making and action. Sometimes, this can feel overwhelming, especially as one who has just begun learning about the ‘challenging conversation’. So what can Benedict offer me in my role as leader? Benedict advocates the kind of leadership that “exists for the people it leads” (Chittester, 2010, p.51). It can be so easy to lose sight of this and get caught up in personalities or trivial matters. Wheatley outlines nine key principles of leadership and I am drawn to his notion of helping people to live with uncertainty and chaos (2002). This time of year in schools is full of both, as we try to complete the year in the best possible way for our students and grapple with the many issues of staffing and planning for the new school year. Keeping our focus on the School Vision statement is crucial to keeping us on track and clearly focused. In these times of challenge, it is also wise to remember that the Holy Spirit can work in, through and with us . . . also in spite of us at times. Starratt and Guare remind me that “In leading, we are always engaged with the power of the spirit performing over and over again some act of vision, of faith, of desire” (1995, p.202). I am going to use the following statements as a mantra throughout the remainder of the term to keep me focused and mindful in my interactions with others:

✚ *“Life is a consistent teacher.*

✚ *Change is just the way it is.*

✚ *Peace is not dependent on circumstances.*

✚ *We are motivated by meaning.*

✚ *We want to express our love through service.”*

(Wheatley, 2002, p.132)

Thursday 19th October

The Psalms are central to the spirituality of Benedict. His rule is explicit in the number of psalms to be read daily and they are referenced extensively in the rule (Chittester, 2010). Chittester challenges the reader to ask the question, Which psalms can I say without reading them? Which psalms come to mind easily? Which psalms might I think about when I am thinking about nothing in particular? This is the psalm that comes to me more often than any other ...

*O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.*

*May the glory of the LORD endure for ever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works—
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.
Praise the LORD!*

(Psalm 104:24-35)



I have sung this psalm many times and many places in my life, most often when witnessing the grandeur of creation. This psalm reminds me of my place in creation, as but one small part of a magnificent whole. It helps place me in relationship to the “one force, one spirit, that works in all of the universe” (Rolheiser, 1992, p.18). God’s life and spirit is evident in creation and I am challenged to nurture and sustain each element of it. Dorr describes this ‘ecological wisdom’ as acknowledging that we are but one part of the web of life, knowing we have a responsibility to think and act on the legacy we leave for future generations, and nurturing our spirituality through being in touch with nature (2004).

Friday 20th October

Today brings my week with Benedict to an ‘official’ close. As I read over my notes from the book, one statement grabs my attention:

“we are capable of choosing God in life”

(Chittester, 2010, p.82)

How might I do that I wonder? What do I need to focus on in order for this to happen more consistently?

Some of my thoughts ...

Focus on building good relationships as they “help us to bear the heat of life that shapes us, not to escape it” (Chittester, 2010, p.70). Most importantly, this calls me to be present to my family in a real and authentic way. Benedict points to the significance of the community meal as a “sanctifying centre” for a family (Chittester, 2010, p.195). As our children are getting older, meals become more and more enjoyable, and more important. Conversation

is usually lively and informative! It is amazing what tumbles out over dinner and often once the children have left the table, Craig and I have the opportunity to chat, reflect and make decisions. It can be the only time in the day when we are all together between school, work and sporting commitments. I need to treasure it! It is our own Kingdom of God that needs to be nurtured and shared.



“Listen today, start now Begin immediately to direct your life to that small, clear voice within.” Psalm 95:8

Benedict tells us that we each need to speak our own truth, to raise our own questions, to open our hearts and share our perspective (Chittester, 2010). It can be hard not to let myself be swayed by the thoughts and opinions of others that may not be in harmony with what I truly believe, but may make me more popular. This can happen with respect to decisions made about our children and what we feel is acceptable or not. There are many competing ideas about parenting out there but I need to acknowledge that a considered decision on our part is just as valid as what anyone else may have to say. As parents, we are at the very beginning of this new world as our eldest hits teenage hood but we need to stand strong and do what we think is best.

Professionally and personally this psalm has implications. It is important that I attune myself to the deeper meaning of life, to seek deeper insight and attention to the meaning of what I experience, say and do (Starratt and Guare, 1995). I need to attend to the fundamental human question of why (Wheatley, 2002) and seek to find the answer as I live my life with my family, friends and colleagues. Dorr suggests that we listen for the voice of the Spirit that invites us to “launch out into the deep” as recorded in Luke’s Gospel (2004). I have experienced the deep satisfaction that this leap of faith can bring and need to hold onto this in the times of doubt and chaos.

And so my week closes. I would like to think that there are many key themes that I can continue to explore from my reading about the Rule of Benedict. I have a heightened awareness of some of the possibilities and opportunities that I have on a daily basis to bring my spirituality to the fore in both my personal and professional life. Putting this together has been a small oasis in a busy life, a chance to reflect, be grateful, ponder and attend to the presence of God in my life. If I could keep this quote in the forefront of my mind, my life and the lives of those around me may be richer and more meaningful ...

“Life is a way of walking through the universe whole and holy” (Chittester, 2010, p. 3).

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