SCHOOLS OF THE LORD’S SERVICE: BENEDICTINE IDEALS IN THE EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

Denis Robinson, O.S.B.

Constituenda est ergo nobis dominici schola servitii
Rule of Saint Benedict, Prologue 45

INTRODUCTION

Most Benedictines are familiar with John Henry Newman’s well-known adage: “For the monk, heaven is next door.” What may be less familiar to today’s monastics is that Newman, particularly in his philosophy of education, was profoundly influenced by Benedictine ideals, many of which are enshrined in his most enduring work, The Idea of a University (1854). In this article, I will examine Newman’s Benedictine ideals at their source, his early study of the theologians of the early Church, and consider the way in which Newman’s Benedictine ideals had an influence on his educational philosophy, with the idea that Newman’s insights may offer some challenges for Benedictines today.

NEWMAN THE EDUCATOR

Of the many vocational hats worn by John Henry Newman over his long life, the one most consistently identified with him today is that of educator. He was the author of one of the most widely read educational treatises since Plato. He spent a lifetime reflecting on the question of education, and his theories are still debated one hundred and fifty years after the appearance of his seminal work, The Idea of a University. Newman’s life as a professional educator began with his appointment as a Fellow of Oriel College in 1822.¹ At Oriel, Newman came into contact in a professional way with what he had previously known only as a student, the pedagogical processes of the English university system before the reforms of the mid-nineteenth century.² By and large, these processes were still predicated upon the monastic environment in which the university was created in the Middle Ages.³ From the time of his initiation into the educational world, Newman was interested in reform. He viewed the pedagogical process, as it existed at the time, as basically a dead re-presentation of old formulae with little direction. He was appalled at the lax attitude taken by tutors and students. Scholarship was little regarded, much less valued. He had an intuition that some overhaul was necessary, but where to look for guidance? It was also during this period that Newman had his first orderly exposure to patristic writing.⁴ Long before “the fathers made him a Catholic,” Newman valued the important contributions of the theologians of the early Church, not only in content but also in method. Newman’s experience of being introduced to the principles of the early Church decided influenced the formation of his perspectives on contemporary Church life.

For example, Newman advocated the important place of homiletic discourse in theological debate. He also considered the importance of a pastoral and spiritual dimension to intellectual questions. The Benedictine monastic tradition was a particular influence that Newman was to return to repeatedly in his writings in both an explicit and implicit way.⁵ Late in his life, receiv-


DENIS ROBINSON, O.S.B.
ing congratulations on his elevation to the rank of cardinal from the prior of Downside Abbey, Newman responded: "To receive so kind a letter as yours from a Benedictine body is of special gratification to me, in proportion as my love and admiration of the Benedictine order has been special."

When Newman set out to reform the tutorial program at Oxford, he advocated the centrality of the student/master relationship, the importance of spiritual guidance along with academic excellence and the development of the whole person, all of which are qualities of monastic life advocated in the Rule of Benedict.

BENEDICTINE INFLUENCES ON THE EARLY OXFORD MOVEMENT

The spirit of Benedictinism, particularly that of the Middle Ages, was very important to the Oxford Movement, with the latter's stress on liturgical ceremony and learning. The Benedictine ethos, the love of learning and the desire for God, appealed to the mixed academic and devotional sensibilities of the Tractarians. Another sphere of influence was the Benedictine reform of St. Maur in the seventeenth century with its tradition of monk scholars and impeccable historical investigation. The monastic ideal formed the core of the spirituality of the work of John Keble, with its fusion of doctrine and poetics. It also began to affect the way

of life promoted by the younger fellows of the colleges at Oxford.

Richard Hurrell Froude, for example, confessed that: "It has lately come into my head that the present state of things in England makes an opening for a revival of the monastic system... certain colleges of unmarried priests would be the cheapest possible way of providing for the spiritual wants of a large population." Newman and Keble were later to edit Froude's Remains after Froude's untimely death in 1836. Froude's advocacy of a celibate clergy, a community of scholars and the integration of liturgy and learning were built upon monastic models. Furthermore, Froude pointed out the central theme in the evocation of monastic values in educational reform, that of spiritual enrichment.

Newman and the other Tractarians viewed the processes of education as something more than the training of clergymen in the rhetoric of the pulpit and the inculcation of some memorized verses of Homer or Cicero to enlighten the gentlemanly mind. Education was part of the most critical endeavor, the development of the whole person, body, mind and soul. It was the love of learning and the desire for God, the admixture of the intellectual and the spiritual, the sense and the sensibility that constituted the complete life for Newman. The Benedictine tradition, in his estimation, understood this sense of comprehensiveness. Newman comments on the Benedictine ideal of education in The Historical Sketches: "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." The essay, written in 1859 for the Atlantis, was the culmination of years of rumination on monastic values in education. For


John Keble (1792-1866). On Newman and Keble see: W. Beck, John Keble's Literary and Religious Contribution to the Oxford Movement (Ni-


Newman, monasticism represented that crucial balance between reason and feeling, the complex action of the human mind by which the monk confronted the world. Newman goes on in the essay to call “the monastic state the most poetical of religious disciplines.” There is no doubt that Newman had a somewhat romanticized view of monastic life. His few encounters with monks were not particularly successful. Nevertheless, the primacy of monastic culture was central in Newman’s estimation.

When the old order of things, that is, the classical patristic era passed away, “The lonely Benedictine rose from his knees and found himself a city. This was the case, not merely here or there, but everywhere; Europe was new mapped, and the monks were the principle of mapping.” Newman posits that the educational imperative of the West was laid down on the principles of these brethren engaged in their various activities. They demonstrated by their lives as well as by their doctrines the principles of a life well lived, that is, the necessity of a poetic, integrated, and balanced existence. The virtues of monasticism for Newman were enshrined in five basic ideals: (1) the significant bridge monastic culture formed with the patristic past, (2) the mixture of the active and contemplative ideals, (3) the notion of the central spiritual dimension in education, (4) an essentially Platonic epistemology, and (5) the expression of these in the practice of the Liturgy of the Hours.

THE MONASTIC CULTURE AND THE PATRISTIC CHURCH

When Newman took up his study of the Church Fathers in the early 1820s, he became increasingly convinced that the patristic era held the key to understanding the problems experienced by the Church in the early nineteenth century. Newman’s instinctual renaissance paid off in the re-appropriation of patristic scholarship and method in his Tractarian endeavours and in all of his later works. Newman was intrigued by the patristic penchant for preaching theology. His own style of preaching repli-

13Jen 1:385.
15Jen II.442.

64 ABR 57:1 · MARCH 2006

cated the aims of earlier preachers like Chrysostom and Augustine, that is, the integration of formal theology with pastoral concerns. For Newman “... preaching was not the way to convert people, but to prepare them for conversion.” It was part of a delicate task of formation.

In his estimation the Benedictine tradition formed a bridge between the world of the Fathers and the modern world. Monks enshrined the values of the classical world by carrying forward the teachings of the ancient church in a way of life as well as in formal theory. Newman’s extensive treatment of the patristic world in The Arians of the Fourth Century (1833) and in the Historical Sketches (1853-59) illustrates this point. For Newman the dynamism of the early Church sprang precisely from its reliance on “popular enthusiasm, on dogma, on hierarchical power, and on a supernatural Divine Presence.”

The Church of antiquity was characterized by the ability to stimulate both the mind and the senses, to be a Church of intellectuals and a source of devotion. Indeed, it was Newman’s conviction that the early Church was most clearly represented in modern Roman Catholicism that lead to his conversion in 1845. Theory leapt into life. For Newman, monasticism, along with apostolic authority, the Church’s rites and doctrines, formed a continuous bridge between the world of the early Church and the modern world. Likewise, it was the achievement of monastic culture that preserved not only in type, but also in parchment, the testimonies of the early Church, and, more importantly, what was excellent in the spirit of the classical world. The Homer and Cicero beloved of Victorian gentlemen was available to their enlightened minds due largely to the rapacious copying of the early monks, even though those same gentlemen in the nineteenth century would have disdained monasticism asGithub: prestige.

THE ACTIVE AND CONTEMPLATIVE IDEALS

An important feature of monastic culture for Newman was its fusion of apostolic endeavor and contemplation, which could also

16Jen I.342.

DENIS ROBINSON, O.S.B.
be understood as action and theory, or better, theory-in-action. While the monk may have displayed "that union of simplicity and reverence, that clear perception of the unseen, yet recognition of the mysterious" found among children, he also, "ploughed and sowed, he prayed, he meditated, he studied, he wrote, he taught, and then he died and went to heaven." In fact, it was the active undertakings of the monk that made vivid the Mystery that his life celebrated. Newman had little taste for rarefied academicism. In his estimation, scholarship had to be sound, but it also had to be mixed with a "practical frame of mind." In other words, theory had to spill over into action or it was essentially useless.

Newman considered himself first and foremost a pastor of souls and his constant question was: "What would be the practical result of such a belief?" This vacillation between the active and the contemplative was historically verified in the monastic past. In his essay on "The Benedictine Schools" in 1859, he explored the various expressions of the Benedictine ethos in history. He describes the monk in this way: "He might perhaps have special duties as the scholasticus of his monastery, but ordinarily, while his manual labour was either in the field or in the scriptorium, his intellectual exercises were for the most part combined with his devotional, and consisted in the study of the sacred volume." Monasticism inscribed on the minds and hearts of its adherents that love of learning and desire for God spoken of in the classic work of Jean Leclercq. Newman described the process of the meditation in monastic spirituality as the movement from theory to practice, from notional to real assent, to use his phraseology. The hallmark of Benedictine spirituality, lectio divina, enshrines this deliberate move from the words of the text to prayer and action on behalf of the world. When Newman maintained, somewhat romantically, that "To the monk heaven was next door," he was, in fact, demonstrating what he perceived as that easy movement back and forth between the sacred and the secular that characterizes an integrated life in the world. Newman uses one of his characteristic building metaphors in describing the essence of Benedictine life and its spiritual education.

And when he began to build, his architecture was suggested by the scene—not the scientific and masterly conception of a great whole with many parts, as the Gothic style in a later age, but plain and artificial, the adaptation of received fashions to his own purpose, and an addition of chapel to chapel and a wayward growth of cloister, according to the occasion, with half-concealed shrines and unexpected recesses, with paintings on the wall as by a second thought, with an absence of display and a wild, irregular beauty, like that of the woods by which he was at first surrounded.

Monastic "building" was Newman's way of describing the scholarly and spiritual tasks that went hand-in-hand. Newman portrays the vocation of the monk in the University Sermons as the substitution for dead forms of academics. The monastic ideal instilled vitality in thought. The monastic life was balanced, demanding summa quies, putting the brakes on sense as well as reason while promoting each. Rather than being formed in advance by a plan or theory, the charism of monastic life and education was to respond in a balanced way to the environment in which it found itself. The monk did not build theories from his work and prayer, he built a life for himself and inspired the lives for others by virtue of his example as well as his teaching. He did not expect that life would fall into the confines of some pre-ordained architectonic plan. He built as he lived, carving out of the wild forest of his time the goal of life, which is the discovery of meaning.

SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION

Newman's view of education was precisely discovery of meaning. Theory had to be infused with an existential regard, a spirituality that spoke to the dreams and hopes of people where they lived, using the raw materials of their times and eras. When Newman considered such esoteric topics as the development of doctrine and the grammar of assent, in the back of his mind were

---

23 HS II.426.
24 HS II.427.
25 HS II.475.
27 HS II.426.
29 HS II.376-77.

DENIS ROBINSON, O.S.B.
these monastic models with their “real life” concerns. When the monk “turned to Scripture, the book of books, and there he found a special response to the peculiarities of his vocation; for there supernatural truths stand forth as the trees and flowers of Eden, in a divine disorder, as some awful intricate garden or paradise, which he enjoyed the more because he could not catalogue its wonders.”

The monk found there a paradox or a puzzle that was essential for Newman in drawing him into further relationship with the Creator of the puzzle. The Scriptures, with their inchoate, narrative and parabolic nature, led the monk further into a relationship with the Divine Author. This relationship impelled the monk forward, to read the Fathers where he found, “a like ungrudging profusion and careless wealth of precept and of consolation,” that is to say, he found writing that further engaged him rather than providing neat answers to particular questions.

The monk wrote his own learned treatises, Newman continues, but these were imbued “not with the sharp logic of disputants, or the subtle analysis of philosophers, but with the one aim of reflecting in his pages, as in a faithful mirror, the words and works of the Almighty, as they confronted him, whether in Scripture and the Fathers, or in that ‘mighty maze’ of deeds and events, which men call the world’s history, but which to him was a Providential Dispensation.”

The purpose of writing was to expose the nature of the divine, ever growing and expanding like the horizons of education itself. The paradox of education is that the more one knows, the more one knows there is yet more to know. The same is true of God. The alternative to this perfect distillation of the spiritual in education was dire: “If men may not be monks, they will turn Methodists.” In other words, if the balance between faith and reason, between thinking and feeling, between thought and action, was thrown out of kilter, the recourse is the precipitous fall into an overweening scientific rationalism such as that found among the Deists or a pining romantic emotionalism such as that found among the Evangelicals.

NEWMAN’S PLATONISM

Theoretically, this intersection of the visible world and the invisible reality of the divine points to Newman’s essential Platonism. Although Newman was influenced by the work of the earlier group of Anglican scholars know as the Cambridge Platonists, he was somewhat distrustful of their overly rational and supernatural interpretation of Plato’s work. Newman’s projects in the Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (1870) in many ways can be attributed to his need for an epistemological rehabilitation of Platonic idealism. Without getting into too much detail, Newman posited the necessity of innate ideas, refusing to accept Locke’s sense-based empiricism. However, Newman also appreciated, in a way Plato undoubtedly did as well, the need for the incubation and expansion of these values in the lived experience of human beings.

Learning, therefore, was not a strict handing over of facts, but a cultivation of what was already present in the person as a divine gift. It was the process of the Socratic midwife. Newman’s mature thought corresponded to these principles. In the Rule of St. Benedict, even the perfunctory reader notices the mixed concern of Benedict for the sublime and the mundane. When Benedict comments on the value of material things (RB 32) as concomitant with the value of sacred things, when he freely mixes discourses of manual labour with the task of holy reading (RB 48), when he invokes docere as often as utile, he is promoting that very practical Platonism that so appealed to the mature Newman. The Rule is a little guide for beginners, but it does not presume that even beginners come without some internal innate ideas that bring them to the monastery.

NEWMAN AND THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

Newman saw these virtues solidified in the monastic practice of the Liturgy of the Hours. One of the early innovations of the Tractarian movement was a renewed interest in prayer, based upon the practice of the Roman Catholic Church’s breviary. In

27HS II.427.
28HS II.427.
29HS II.428.
30HS II.165.
Tract 75, Newman offered an apologetic for the Benedictine breviary: "But even taking it in its present sense, it will be obvious to any one who inspects the Breviary how well it answers to its name." The lessons of the Liturgy of the Hours formed a compendium of prayers, doctrinal readings, Scripture readings and the poetry of the psalms. The Liturgy of the Hours was the ultimate catechumenal text in Newman's estimation precisely because it did what any good educational and formational tool should do, that is, it shaped the life and thought of the person through continual re-presentation of the truths of Christianity in a varied and multi-dimensional way. It used different genres to bring about different responses, one approach for the systematic, rational thinker, another for the artists. The cumulative effect was the realization of faith through converging means that represented for Newman the ethos of monasticism, the meaning of knowledge and the pre-eminent model of education.

THE APPLICATION OF THE BENEDICTINE IDEAL

In his essay on Benedictine educational ideals, Newman traced the parabolic history of monasticism between desert and convent, in the countryside and in the town, in silence and in bustling activity and found in these very oppositions the vitality of the movement. "These, and others such, sought out for themselves a seclusion and silence, most congenial to the original idea of monachism, but incompatible with those active duties—missions, the pastoral office, teaching in the schools, and disputations with heresy—which at the time there were none but monks to fulfil." With these ideals in the fore, Newman set out to reform the tutorial system at Oxford in 1826 upon his appointment as a tutor of Oriel. Newman indicated in his letters that his opinions about everything including education and religion were undergoing change. Nevertheless, he remained steadfast in his conviction that the tutorial relationship involved something more than literary pursuits. It was a spiritual relationship, not unlike that between the novice and a spiritual guide. The tutor nourished the intellect, but he also nourished the spirit and this holistic relationship promoted authentic growth in the individual. Newman's sense of responsibility caused him to be duly concerned with the rather lax moral climate of the undergraduate community in general, and he even considered relinquishing his tutorship if he could not exercise it in the way he considered necessary. Change did come in the system, although not to the degree that Newman would have liked. His real impact on educational reform would not be effected until many years later when he was given the opportunity to found his own university and enshrine his principles in one of the lasting classics of Victorian literature, The Idea of a University.

NEWMAN'S IDEALS AND THE TASK OF EDUCATION TODAY

Newman wrote The Idea of a University one hundred and fifty years ago. What can his insights offer students, monks, teachers and administrators of the twenty-first century? First, I think Newman proposes a challenge to our way of conceiving education. We have largely discarded the "liberal arts" model of education in favor of the utilitarian model proposed by thinkers of the nineteenth century, a trend Newman abhorred. We see this equally in both secular and religious schools. Are people better educated as a result? More crucially, are the universities of today making a significant contribution through their educational endeavors to the advancement of communities? Do they build communities like those of the monks of the early Church and the Middle Ages? Have we become aware of our mutual dependence or are we isolated by our methodologies and singular hypotheses? As teachers and tutors, are we inspiring students to a lifelong quest for wisdom such as that Newman described as belonging to the Benedictines or do we teach and promote our subjects in such a way that students are interested only in "what is on the examination"? More concisely, are the universities of today terminal, utilitarian training academies, or are they in every possible sense, including the divine, seats of wisdom?

When Newman set out to redefine what was meant by Truth, Reason, Knowledge and other epistemological categories, his re-appropriations had necessary consequences for the task of education. Those who think as Plato thought, about the reality of innate ideas and the faculty of amanemis will necessarily approach

---

33John Henry Newman, Tract 75.
34IIS II.428.
the question of education in a different way from those who em-
ploy an epistemology like that of Locke. Professor Socrates will
apply a maieutic method whereas Dr. Locke will employ a dis-
bruptive pedagogy. In other words, if Newman reinvented episte-
ology he necessarily reinvented education and he was, of
course, aware of this. Newman used a primarily monastic model
in his attempt to deal with epistemological questions in the early
nineteenth century. He overcame the simplistic epistemologies of
Reason and Emotion with an appeal to complexity. For Newman,
this appeal was rooted in an acute observation of the real action
of the human agent, an observation he made first in his consider-
ation of the character of monastic culture. Newman begins his
understanding of knowledge and education with a phenomenolog-
ical observation:

It is the characteristic of our minds to be ever engaged in passing
judgment on the things which come before us. No sooner do we appre-
 hend than we judge: we allow nothing to stand by itself; we compare,
contrast, abstract, generalize, connect, adjust, classify: and we view
all our knowledge in the associations with which these processes have
invested it.37

What we might term Newman's holistic or monastic approach
to education cannot be construed only as a product of his later
thought. From the beginning of his teaching career, as we have
seen, Newman saw education as the formation of the whole per-
son. He insisted in his journal that, "education . . . has always
been my line." 38 Newman wrote:
The most important and far reaching improvement has been com-
 menced this term—a radical alteration . . . of the system. The bad
men are thrown into large classes—and this time saved for the better
sort who are put into very small lectures, and principally with their
own Tutors quite familiarly and chatteringly.39

Many of Newman's ideas about the very personal and "chatty"
nature of education stem from his appreciation of the monastic
culture of education represented by the school of St. Benedict.
The formation of the religious or spiritual aspect was necessary
in Newman's estimation because only insofar as one grasped God

37Newman, Essay, 34.
38Henry Tristram, ed., John Henry Newman: Autobiographical Writings

as epistemic category could authentic and complete learning take
place.

In light of Newman's epistemology, what can be known and
how it is known is actualized in the places of learning, the uni-
versity, which was in fact derived from a monastic model.

There is no other way of learning or of teaching. We cannot teach ex-
cept by aspects or views, which are not identical with the thing itself
which we are teaching. Two persons may each convey the same truth
to a third, yet by methods and through representations altogether dif-
f erent. The same person will treat the same argument differently in
an essay or speech, according to the accident of the day of writing, or
of the audience, yet it will be substantially the same.40

Epistemologically speaking, then, the university discloses sev-
eral characteristics, which are related to the monastic ideals con-
sidered above. First, the university provides an educational pro-
gram that is necessarily and purposefully broad and comprehen-
sive. Second, education is an engagement of the whole person and
is an active integration of the various and varying factors pre-
sented in the educational program. Third, education is not a soli-
tary pursuit, but takes place within the context of a community of
learners and teachers. Finally, for Newman, the only authentic
university is a Christian university.

THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AND THE WAY OF KNOWING

First, the educational process replicates the process of intellec-
tion itself. It is fueled by what Newman termed the illative sense,
 i.e., that fruitful interaction of many facets of reasoning, active
in the individual learner but also in the institutions themselves as
communities of learners. The problem of education as Newman
saw it in his time was the problem of isolation and fragmentation.
It did not demonstrate the unity of spirit evident in monastic cul-
ture. A strictly functional approach to the question of education
had led to a vision of education focused on specialized training in
a particular science or skill. With the rise of the education of util-
ity, promoted, for example, by Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Arnold,
Henry Brougham and the Edinburgh Review, there was a con-
comitant denigration of the importance of classical education and
religion.41 The culture of Greece and Rome and the presiding

41These thinkers believed that education should prepare students for

DENIS ROBINSON, O.S.B. 73
spirit of the patristic world, which Newman viewed as essential to an authentic and integrated life, were lost. If disciplines were not practical in the utilitarian vision, they were of no value. In this way, education was the product of a monocural epistemology. The integrative value of classics and patristics was set aside as too complex. They were not measurable and observable enough. They had no immediate utility. The pursuit of learning was isolated into disciplines and specialized. The value of utils subjected docere. For Newman, however, the authentic task of the university was purposefully to complicate the process of education by the introduction of a density, even convoluted, of learning that belies the simple conveyance of information and techné. Newman states:

This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture, is called Liberal Education; and though there is no one in whom it is carried as far as is conceivable, or whose intellect would be a pattern of what intellects should be made, yet there is scarcely any one but may gain an idea of what real training is, and at least look towards it, and make its true scope and result, not something else, his standard of excellence. 42

The university, for Newman, promotes a monastic vision of education that is integral and complex. It is an essentially amateur and communitarian approach that values dabbling and crafts, well-roundedness more than systems. Here the key to success in the university, as in the monastery, is the necessary promotion of the ideal. "A university may be considered with reference either to its Students or to its Studies; and the principle, that all Knowledge is a whole and the separate Sciences parts of one, which I have hitherto been using in behalf of its studies, is equally important when we direct our attention to its students." 43

The university, in Newman's estimation, does not simply provide the means by which an individual or the group can access specific tasks or trades rather than provide a broad, liberal education. See James E. Crimmings, ed., Utilitarians and Religion (Bristol: Thoemmes 1998).


knowledge from different disciplines; it rather designs its curriculum in such a way that "going around" is necessary and cooperation is essential. As Newman rather poetically expressed it:

Thought and word are, in their conception, two things, and thus there is a division of labour. The man of thought comes to the man of words; and the man of words, duly instructed in the thought, dips the pen of desire into the ink of devotedness, and proceeds to spread it over the page of desolation. Then the nightingale of affection is heard to warble to the rose of loveliness, while the breeze of anxiety plays around the brow of expectation. 44

The scholar must necessarily approach her topic from varying perspectives and angles in order to appropriate its content. Like the monks of different periods of history who took up the tools around them and built edifices that suited the times, the need for variation was essential. This variation is a value almost completely neglected in the modern seats of higher learning (and indeed in some monasteries). It is a question of methodology. Methodologies provide rules, systems of analysis, skeletons upon which to hang the sinews of a discipline. For Newman, however, it is necessary to be aware of "the harm which has been done to the interests of science by excessive attachment to system." 45

This is against the liberal educational ethos and against monastic principles, according to Newman. To employ a monastic metaphor, the disciplines have become eremitical, there is no spirit of community by which a fruitful exchange can take place. We are more of Antony than of Pachomius.

A serious consideration of the complexity of Newman's epistemology not only necessitates the need to develop a common language, but also the absolute need for disciplines to be in dialogue. In this way:

in the number of these special ideas, which from their very depth and richness cannot be fully understood at once, but are more and more clearly expressed and taught the longer they last,—having aspects many and bearings many, mutually connected and growing one out of another, and all parts of a whole, with a sympathy and correspondence keeping pace with the ever-changing necessities of the world, multiformal, prolific, and ever resourceful. 46


DENIS ROBINSON, O.S.B.
Interdisciplinary study, in light of Newman's epistemology, is not merely a good idea or an educational philosophy that promotes a well-rounded student. It is essential in the basic sense of that word; that is, it touches on the essence of what it means to be a complete human person. The university, like the monastery, creates the environment for enacting the very process of intellectualization that Newman asserts is natural. "I have said that all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator." The student is inevitably polymathic, practical, and, finally, poetical.

EDUCATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

In Newman's estimation education is not an exclusive activity of the mind. It is, rather, a way of life. If ideas, as Newman postulates, are not merely the desiccated specimens of mental process decaying in the clerical specimen boxes of Victorian methodologies, but living and breathing impulses, then they must be shown to be vigorous in the activity of the academic community. The monastic ideal inculcated this distinction of the use of the whole personality in the processes of education as a way of life. All that a person is and does, she brings to monastic life in the same way that a scholar brings personality into the communitarian atmosphere of the university. What one learns in the institution, as in the monastery, is informed and magnified, indeed given credence, by previous experiences, both named and unnamed. The nun, the sister, the monk and the student are inspired to learn and to develop as human beings because all that she or he has done before has prepared the person and compelled the student to continue the journey of education and of spiritual enrichment.

There is a tension inherent in university education that instills life and vigor. The tension brings the learner to the institution and sustains her presence there. Like the monastic person, we do not go to the institution for answers, but to be inspired. I learn not so much to know facts or things, but to know what there is to know and thus arouse me to greater learning and living. The central message of the monasticity and the university, then, in Newman's epistemology is that learning is not something acquired; it is a relationship that one commits to, not for a time of training or preparation, but for life. In other words, the university, like the monastery, inspires the student to a way of living and an imperative to continue to grow and develop.

In their curricula therefore, universities must excite this growth. In its Rule and customs, the monastery likewise is a greenhouse of human development. Students do not acquire facts from varied disciplines; they need to learn to think and live by a kind of peripatetic process, as monks must use the tools of the monastery for continued development. This inspires an ascent to Truth in all its incarnations and in all its angles. Monasteries and universities stir their adherents not to knowledge as a goal but to the wisdom that a life of learning and prayer offers. In this light Newman can claim "that Knowledge, in proportion as it tends more and more to be particular, ceases to be Knowledge." 48

EDUCATION AND THE COMMUNITY

The university, like the monastery, for Newman must always be conceived of as a community of learners and not as individuals pursuing knowledge and truth for their own ends, however fruitful such efforts may be. In terms of his epistemology, as we have seen, there is a limit to what the individual can know in and of himself. True learning only comes within the context of a community, living and working together and observing and respecting the action of growth in one another. Each person has something to contribute to the creation of the whole. Here we see the early Benedictine model at work again. Like a monastery, the university depends on cooperation, not only between individuals but also between disciplines and branches of learning. For Newman, the sui generis nature of the individual and his collection of intellectual insight is duly enhanced by dialogue with others:

The throng and succession of ideas, thoughts, feelings, imaginations, aspirations, which pass within him, the abstractions, the juxtapositions, the comparisons, the discriminations, the conceptions, which are so original in him, his views of external things, his judgments upon life, manners, and history, the exercises of his wit, of his humour, of his depth, of his sagacity, all these innumerable and incessant creations, the very pulsation and throbbing of his intellect, does he image forth, to all does he give utterance, in a corresponding language.

47 Idea 100.

48 Idea 113.

DENIS ROBINSON, O.S.B.
which is as multiform as this inward mental action itself and analogous to it, the faithful expression of his intense personality, attending on his own inward world of thought as its very shadow: so that we might as well say that one man's shadow is another's as that the style of a really gifted mind can belong to any but himself. It follows him about as a shadow. His thought and feeling are personal, and so his language is personal.\footnote{278

Self-will, self-motivation and auto-didacticism are counterproductive because the fullness of Truth can never reside in an individual. In theological terms, Newman understood this as truth dwelling in a complete way only in the sense of the faithful, a kind of Aristotelian phronema, or collective wisdom beating in the heart of the Church. Wisdom for Newman is not the province of the isolated sage speaking from the mountaintop; it is the collected wisdom of women and men, young and old, of all classes and “levels” of education.

All have a piece to contribute as with a jigsaw puzzle and the picture can never be complete until all have contributed. So the university, like the monastery, becomes the community of learners whereby this collaborative wisdom is shared. “It will give birth to a living teaching, which in course of time will take the shape of a self-perpetuating tradition, or a genius loci, as it is sometimes called; which haunts the home where it has been born, and which imubes and forms, more or less, and one by one, every individual who is successively brought under its shadow.” \footnote{148

Comparisons and contrasts are made between and among disciplinary concerns. Seeming differences that are collected and stored in the depositum of tradition arouse critical awareness. The only heresy in this context is deafness, a refusal to listen to others because of the conviction that one has attained the answers for oneself, or one's discipline is complete without the wisdom of the others. “Obscula, o fili, præcepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui.” The opening words of the Rule of St. Benedict could have been written equally well by Newman with their concern with hearing, the true obedience that weds the mind to the heart.

CONCLUSIONS

Here we have briefly sketched some of the Benedictine ideals found in the educational thought of John Henry Newman. The monastic model inspired him as a result of his study of the ethos of the early Church. He used these ideals in important ways in framing his concept of what education and the life of learning should be. As a result of Newman's insights, the contemporary monastic involved in education may be confronted with some crucial questions. Is it possible to view education at the dawn of the twenty-first century as the holistic way of living advocated by Newman? Is it possible to bring our Benedictine tradition to influence our ways of teaching and learning at every level of monastic life? If so, perhaps a new educational method is needed. But the method must not be confining; rather it must promote expansion so that the fullness of intellectual inquiry and life can be tested and explored. This seems to be one of the foremost challenges to university education today and perhaps also to monasteries. Newman certainly saw it as his greatest challenge. However, there is no other way of learning or of teaching, of working and praying.

Of course Newman, ever faithful to his epistemology, viewed any truly successful university as necessarily a Catholic university. “If the Catholic faith is true, the University cannot exist external to the Catholic pale.” \footnote{148

Newman's insistence on the point however should not be interpreted simply in a doctrinaire fashion. The assertion is more epistemological than creedal. For Newman, the paradox of education and the paradox of God were analogous: the more one knows, the more one knows one does not know. “And so in the intellectual, moral, social, and political world. Man, with his motives and works, his languages, his propagation, his diffusion, is from Him. Agriculture, medicine, and the arts of life, are His gifts.” \footnote{65

God as the endless fons sapientiae is the last and greatest object of study, a subject that leads the person not to knowledge but to relationship, which is the source of wisdom itself.

The word “God” is a Theology in itself, indivisibly one, inexhaustibly various, from the vastness and the simplicity of its meaning. Admit a
God, and you introduce among the subjects of your knowledge a fact encompassing, closing in upon, absorbing, every other fact conceivable. How can we investigate any part of any order of Knowledge, and stop short of that which enters into every order?  

Newman describes it thus in *The Idea of a University*: “To Him must be ascribed the rich endowments of the intellect, the irradiation of genius, the imagination of the poet, the sagacity of the politician, the wisdom (as Scripture calls it), which now rears and decorates the Temple, now manifests itself in proverb or in parable.” In other words, only the inclusion of God in the equation of education provides for the necessary interpretive key to understanding Truth. The engine of the illative sense generates Truth in all disciplines. From a phenomenological point of view, this is as true in the “secular” university as it is in the Christian or Catholic university. There is a grace in the Catholic university, however, in that Christians who learn, who enact Newman’s principles in a purposeful way, who live their faith not only intellectually but really, know more profoundly what they are knowing, that is, they know the Divine Reality and the sense in which the Divine Reality is the paradoxical Source of all knowledge.  

You see, . . . , if you trust the judgment of a sagacious mind, deeply read in history, Catholic Theology has nothing to fear from the progress of Physical Science, even independently of the divinity of its doctrines. It speaks of things supernatural; and these, by the very force of the words, research into nature cannot touch.”  

Perhaps Newman offers more than a comfortable adage to Benedictines today. Perhaps he offers the insights of an outsider that may re-enliven monastic life and Benedictine educational institutions as we continue to cultivate schools of the Lord’s service.

---

53 Idea 27.  
54 Idea 66.  
55 Idea 439.