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## Benedictine Values and the Need for Bridging

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Bridgefolk

Bridgefolk is about, well, bridging -- transcending old polarities, exchanging and integrating the gifts of mutually "separated brethren" and sisters too. It is about imagining Christ's Church without the divisions that long seemed to be givens, and doing the next thing God gives us to do in order that this vision might become reality. Many of those next things that we seek to bridge are evident in the lead paragraph of our mission statement:

Bridgefolk is a movement of sacramentally-minded Mennonites and peace-minded Roman Catholics who come together to celebrate each other's traditions, explore each other's practices, and honor each other's contribution to the mission of Christ's Church. Together we seek better ways to embody a commitment to both traditions. We seek to make Anabaptist-Mennonite practices of discipleship, peaceableness, and lay participation more accessible to Roman Catholics, and to bring the spiritual,

liturgical, and sacramental practices of the Catholic tradition to Anabaptists.

Such bridge-building is certainly easier in what many have come to call the "post-modern" situation, which encourages a crossing of boundaries in hopes of mutual enrichment among communities and traditions. Ivan Kauffman, a long-time religious journalist and co-founder of Bridgefolk, suggests that we might better name this "post-modern" situation the Ecumenical Age. His point is not that the formal ecumenical movement has been a resounding success -- though the successes it has had are one foundation upon which a group like Bridgefolk does surely build. His point is that in a more diffuse and grassroots way, increasing numbers of people recognize their need for insights and practices that other traditions embody. In the global Christian community, he likes to say, everyone needs the gifts that everyone else has to offer.

In order to explain what all this has to do with either monasticism or "new monasticism," and how Bridgefolk can have something to do with both when it is not a local community and its only slender "rule" is a single common prayer,<sup>1</sup> let me cut to the chase: We would do well to recognize that tensions exist between the four Benedictine values that Sister Joan Chittister names, as well as others she might name.<sup>2</sup>

Now, let me also hasten to add that this is a good thing. The tensions here are creative not tragic ones. To name these tensions is not to criticize either her or the Benedictine tradition. (After all, I myself am a Benedictine oblate). Much less are they grounds for

discouragement. For it is in holding these tensions together that all of us -- classic monastics and new monastics, professed and lay, oblates and seekers -- will generate what we most have to offer the Church and the world.

Take the Benedictine values of community and hospitality. Chittister's explanation of hospitality emphasizes non-exclusivity. Benedictine hospitality "takes everyone in," she writes. "No one is excluded from the Christian community. No one is too bad, too poor, too useless, too unimportant to be part of the community." But this is not the same as indiscriminate inclusivity. The Rule of St. Benedict instructs us to welcome all strangers as Christ himself, yet it also anticipates strangers who overstay their welcome, and warns outright against sarabaites and gyrovagues who abuse that welcome. Further, as a former prioress, Chittister surely knows from experience that some novices, even after the most generous Christian discernment, might prove incompatible with the community's life and discipline.

The call here is not to depreciate hospitality in any way but to recognize our challenge and the value of embracing that challenge. For if we jump from local Christian communities to either the national or world scene, we suddenly recognize that we are naming the greatest single challenge that churches, civil societies and humanity as a whole are facing. It is the challenge of finding ways to relate to one another well and humanely in multicultural churches, pluralistic societies and a globalized world.

For to mean anything at all, relating "well and humanely" must mean two things at once: It must mean welcoming the cultural riches of every people and preserving the cultural integrity of every people.

Hospitality that does not simultaneously respect and expect proper boundaries not only undermines community, it is not really very hospitable, for it trivializes and homogenizes the very otherness of the other, even while dissolving the distinctive gifts one's own community might have had to offer.<sup>3</sup> If Benedict famously wrote his rule to establish schools for the Lord's service, wherein "some degree of virtue" might be observable in the most basic practices of the monastery (RSB prol.45, 73.1), today churches and societies need desperately to observe communal laboratories that inculcate the virtues and practices by which hospitality and community are bridged.

To negotiate this abiding but creative tension, humility and listening -- the other two Benedictine values that Chittister names -- prove all the more important. Yet here too we must note creative tensions. We all know that leaders can abuse the humility of those with less power, and often do so precisely in the name of community. Of course that is why its practice must so pervade a community that it forms leaders who do not expect an exception.

Perhaps listening is not directly in tension with the other three Benedictine values. Much like the cardinal virtue of prudence with which it acts in tandem, after all, the practice of listening "with the ear of the heart" is what we need to coordinate and bridge the practices of hospitality, community and humility. Still, we must be honest: The very practice of attentive listening may initially accentuate tensions. "Listening to the Word of God, to the tradition, to one another, to the circumstances of life becomes the cornerstone of spiritual growth," writes Chittister. Yes! ... and one does not need to listen long to either the testimony of church history or the

noise of contemporary debates to hear Christians pitting one or another of the sources on that list against the others!

Here, I would suggest, is where we see the deeper contribution that Bridgefolk hopes to make, though of course not uniquely. While we most obviously seek to help build a bridge between Mennonite peacemaking traditions and Catholic sacramental traditions, any rapprochement between these churches represents hope for another bridge -- between Christian impulses of prophetic dissent that took archetypal shape in the 16th-century Radical Reformation, and Christian commitments to apostolic continuity which take archetypal shape in Roman Catholicism.

The need and value of this bridge is present in Chittister's article in one obvious way and another unnoticed one. Its obvious context -- indeed the subject of its entire first half -- was anxiety about Cardinal Ratzinger becoming Pope Benedict XVI, given the cardinal's reputation as a stern authoritarian. Unnoticed and unnamed, however, is another Benedictine value.

That value is stable monastic rootedness in the sacramental life of the Church, through the continuous rhythm of liturgical prayer and eucharistic sharing. This further Benedictine value is so basic that Chittister apparently took it for granted. But by juxtaposing the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition with the Roman Catholic tradition, Bridgefolk offers a reminder that to overlook it is a mistake. Efforts at church renewal -- calling individual Christians to more fervent discipleship and Christian communities to greater faithfulness -- have regularly enough led to alienation from church structures and ruptures

in Christian communion that we ought to underscore not overlook this value.

I do admit: Not all Bridgefolk participants would immediately name the bridging of prophetic dissent and apostolic continuity as our charism. But if we are contributing in any lasting way to Mennonite / Catholic reconciliation, in whatever form that might take in the future, this could be Bridgefolk's greatest historical significance -- affirming that movements for church renewal and prophetic dissent ought rightly to contribute to the catholic whole rather than breaking with the whole.

With her mix of courageous dissent even while remaining doggedly loyal to the Church, Sister Joan Chittister may actually represent this bridge of stability, continuity and sacramental rootedness as well as any one person. Certainly monasticism -- through its long arc of rigorous Christian discipleship, recurring witness toward church renewal and centuries praying the prayers of the Church -- has represented this bridge as fully as any one Christian movement. And so too, now, do oblates and new monastics and ecclesial communities, whenever they give back to the whole of Christ's Church their charisms of church renewal, deepening discipleship and prophetic witness .

In a way, this continuity -- this bridge -- is nothing more than the vow of stability and the virtue of fidelity writ large. Amid culture wars and clashes of civilization so-called, however, it is a witness that the Church, civil society and a globalizing world all desperately need. As such, it is no small thing, and certainly nothing to take for granted.

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A postscript: Most of what I had planned to say was directed in the direction of the "new monastic" communities of various sorts, urging them by implication to put down or sustain roots in the longer and wider tradition of the Church catholic. But after participating this week at the Monastic Institute, I would also like to address a word in the direction of the classic monastic communities. For if our goal this week has been an encounter between old and new forms of monasticism, there is an issue we have circled around but not faced squarely.

Sister Mary Margaret Funk concluded by saying that if the "wheelbarrow" of monastic life is balanced in all of its elements, then we can be confident that the abiding elemental form of monasticism will continue to reveal its mystery. What I would like to ask is whether celibacy is one of the essential elements of monastic life? It does not appear among the list of four values or elements that Sister Joan Chittister and now Sister Mary Margaret have discussed -- and yet most observers would take it to be elemental and indeed constitutive.

In explaining who Mennonites are I have sometimes quoted the historians who call them, the Amish, Hutterites, and the Anabaptist forebears who preceeded them all, "married monastics." Or to quote another pithy remark from my Bridgefolk colleague Ivan Kauffman, "Anabaptist-Mennonites are the old "new monastics." Growing out of late medieval movements for lay renewal, the Anabaptists sought to form communities of intentionality that would make the kind of serious Christian life of discipleship and communion long assumed only to be possible in celibate religious orders and live it out in families.

They did so not because they couldn't control their desires and just had to get married, but because Jesus calls us to follow him as disciples in all of life.

The question that the "old 'new' monastics" pose, but that we have not explored, is whether and how this may be possible today. We have not really explored the prospects and problems that arise, for example, within the experiments that do exist of mixed communities of celibate and married. We have not really asked what it would take for classic monastic communities to open their doors not only in hospitality toward married and lay people, but in stable bonds of shared community life.

There are of course some good reasons based on long historic experience for keeping marriage, family and all their complexities out of the monastery. But history also demonstrates a recurring need and deep longing to make serious discipleship, lived out in community and in service to the world, along the patterns of monastic life, available to ordinary Christians. If Mennonites come to Bridgefolk in hopes of reconnecting their "married monastic" charism to the longer pre-division traditions from which it sprung, Catholics come to Bridgefolk because Mennonites represent access to practices that are the inheritance of their own tradition, but from which they have been cut off by clericalism and too strict a division of labor between lay and religious. Let us listen to the cry they embody.



## Notes

1. See <http://www.bridgefolk.net/prayer.php>.

2. Joan Chittister, OSB, "And He Shall be Called.," National Catholic Reporter, 20 April 2005.

3. I know of no better resource for reflecting theologically on these themes in their global and intercultural context than the stunningly insightful book by Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).