Can the Rule of St Benedict Provide an Ethical Framework for a Contemporary Theology of Work?

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Introduction

In this paper I have attempted to map out what I consider to be the main features of an investigation into the question, "Can the Rule of St Benedict provide an ethical framework for a contemporary theology of work?"[1] What I am going to say is "work in progress". Firstly, this question arises out of a need for a theological foundation to underpin the growing interest in "Spirituality in the Workplace" or "Spirituality at Work." Secondly it is an attempt to answer an urgent need often voiced by the various organisations involved with ministry to the workplace, including Industrial Mission. In this paper I would like to share with you a number of ideas in the hope they will trigger new thinking about the Rule and its relevance to the world of work today. How can the way Benedictines live their lives, especially the way they work, be a prophetic witness to the world today? My hope is that it is possible to develop a theology of work which is rooted in the Benedictine monastic tradition, gives an authentic foundation to the spirituality of work and a sound theological underpinning to workplace ministry.

It cannot have escaped the notice of many in our monastic communities that in the last two decades there has been a growing interest by people of many different faiths and cultures into this phenomenon called "spirituality at work". It has not stopped there. Many organisations, both "for profit" and "not for profit", are embracing the concept of a "spiritually friendly workplace." Some have commented that this interest is a cynical attempt on the part of individuals and businesses to maximise profitability. Others regard "spirituality in the workplace" as being a rather nebulous and "flaky" concept. Hard-nosed business people ask, "how is this going to improve the bottom line." Yet in spite of these negative comments why is this interest in the spiritual dimension of work growing? So, I would now like to make some observations about the contemporary workplace which try and explain this growing interest in the spiritual dimension that may also have some bearing on our understanding of a theology of work..

Growth in the interest of the spiritual dimension of work

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[1] Timothy Fry, ed., *Rb 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, Minnesota, USA: The Liturgical press, 1981).

The following comments are largely directed at the post-industrial free market economy as it exists in many developed countries around the world, but especially in Europe and North America. Such "capitalist" economies place emphasis on profit generation, market share, maximising return on investment and efficiency. Firstly, economic growth has brought greater prosperity with the result that the material and secular needs of many people in the workplace are increasingly met. Greater prosperity has brought more leisure time and holidays. Yet in spite of these people are not happy or fulfilled (whatever that is). As one recent author put it, "when people reach the top why do they hit rock bottom?"[1] They are seeking meaning to their lives. I suspect that we have all noticed that many guests who visit our monasteries are on some kind of spiritual journey or exploration. They come from a variety of backgrounds and do not claim to have any particular religious affiliation or practice. Quite a number, graduates or professionals, will be from the "baby-boom" generation. A second reason is perhaps a feature of postmodernism. People have lost confidence in the major religious, social and political institutions to which they traditionally looked for support and encouragement. We only have to examine the statistics in church attendance and the cynicism with which the political parties and elections are viewed to realise this. We might ask ourselves what effect is the break-up of the family unit having on society? In some city areas in this country the majority of children are born to single parents. There also appears to be a crisis of trust or at least a culture of suspicion in all spheres of life Increasingly we are faced with parliamentary legislation, codes of practice, guidelines that enforce a moral behaviour that hitherto relied on a climate of reciprocated trust. In my experience, trust and relationships continue to be a crucial area for people in the workplace, they feel very vulnerable. They are looking for a workplace where they can be affirmed and nurtured. In the absence of community traditionally based around the family, home, local neighbourhood many are trying to create community in the workplace. Thirdly, there is the whole question of the change in work patterns and work practices. A host of factors enter here. We have moved into a post-industrialised age when rapid, complex technology and communications have brought increased pressure. Hidden away as we are in our monasteries think how E mail and the Internet have affected our lives? With the emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency fewer people are responsible for more and more. One person I was speaking with, who works in the finance sector, reckoned that she was doing the work load which ten years ago was previously done by four people. We have all these labour saving technologies, so why is it that people are working far harder? This is not an unfamiliar problem in monasteries either. Falling vocations, age profile of the community, complexity of tasks puts fewer people under greater pressure.

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[1] Steven Berglas, *Reclaiming the Fire* (London: Random House, 2001).

The culture of "presenteeism" is having a detrimental effect on hours worked – you have to be seen at work – if the boss stays until 8.00 pm you have to stay too. If you go early you are letting the side down even if you are inventing non-productive work to keep you at your desk. With ease of travel, global investment, international trade and instant communication employees, especially salaried, can be on the go eighty plus hours a week. Work related stress is the major contributor to workplace absenteeism. For some this stress is unbearable leading to burnout, mental and physical breakdown and even suicide. These pressures are having an adverse effect on the physical, psychological and emotional health of the working population. Inevitably these factors diminish the "quality of life" and frequently lead to problems at home resulting in divorce and family break-up. Fourthly, the volatility and instability of the job market has caused people to be more self-sufficient. The UK and the rest of Western Europe are no longer the "workshops of the world." Around 70% of jobs in the UK are in the service industries. Much of our production base, especially unskilled, manual or labour intensive, has moved overseas to low wage economies. Gone are the days when we could expect to remain with the same employer or in the same occupation. In the twenty first century the typical person will have several jobs or even what is called a "portfolio lifestyle", combining a number of jobs at once. Fifthly, insights learned from disciplines such as behavioural psychological and psychotherapy indicate that we need to pay attention to all aspects of our human development. Over the last ten years this has led to an increased emphasis on the emotional and spiritual dimension of work and its importance for personal transformation. This interest has manifested itself in many ways. In addition to intellectual ability (IQ) attention is being paid to EQ or emotional intelligence[2] and SQ or spiritual intelligence[3] when recruiting and developing people for leadership positions. More people are discovering that they have a spiritual dimension and desire to be spiritually nourished in some way. They are not sure what it is, or if they want to admit it, or how to go about it. For this reason, one significant development is the growth in "coaches", "mentors" and "buddies", especially for senior executives. A final reason is the interest in virtue ethics. Up to now emphasis has focused predominantly on personal and organisational effectiveness. The

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[2] Daniel Goleman, "Leadership That Gets Results," *Harvard Business Review* 2000, no. March-April (2000).

[3] Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *Sq: Spiritual Intelligence - the Ultimate Intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

incidence of fraud, dishonest work practices, environmental damage are forcing people to think more clearly about how to act ethically. The focus is turning to the agent, the character traits of the person and the way they impinge on the workplace. It is not only about behaving ethically at work, it is about the meaning of work and work life balance.

From what I have said so far it is likely that some of you are starting to make a connection between the above and the Rule of St Benedict. Some social historians have observed that many of the conditions that exist at the start of the twenty-first century are not unlike those of the sixth century.

There is a recognisable loss of confidence in traditional structures, such as the state, monarchy and the church. We are under constant threat from outside our national boundaries: for Vandals and Goths read Islamic terrorists, economic mercenaries, chemical warfare or nuclear threat. Community structures, in particular family life, are breaking down. Those crushed by work are saying that it is not going to be possible to sustain the pace of current change and activity. Something is going to have to give. There certainly seems to be a renewed interest in the Benedictine monastic tradition. A recent report (Zenit May 21, 2002) spoke of the "globalisation of the Benedictine charism". It went on, "the number of foundations in the twentieth century had increased" with 116 new foundations alone in the period 1980-2002. Preoccupied as we are by our own survival perhaps we lose sight of the global perspective and the signs that Benedictine life is flourishing.

The ethical framework of the Rule of St Benedict

What do we mean by an ethical framework? Ethics directs our attention to what it is to do good and to be called good. It studies activity, whether personal or institutional, in particular its significance for character and human flourishing, *eudaimonia* as Aristotle[1] calls it. In Catholic ethical reflection about ethical behaviour the question of relationship between reason and revelation in the scriptures has long been debated. Broadly speaking there are three approaches[2]. The first places emphasis on the recognition of moral arguments and conclusions available by natural reasoning. This approach dominated Catholic moral theology until the 1960's. Since 1980, with the publication of *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, by John Finnis, Germain Grisez and Joseph Boyle a revised theory of natural law has been developed. This has caused much debate and stimulated thought about contemporary approaches to natural law.

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[1] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Betty Radice, trans. J.A.K.Thomson, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1976).
[2] John Sherrington, "Ethics and Faith: Being Open to the Relationship between Them," in *Putting Ethics to Work* (University of Surrey: 2002).

For this school of thought revelation confirms the same conclusions as the natural law.

A second approach has focused more explicitly on the relationship between reason and revelation. It is argued that Christian faith changes the reasoning process, and that the reasoning of the believer takes place within a particular context and tradition. Thus scripture and other narratives (such as the Rule of St Benedict) are important in shaping our ethical behaviour. Neither does this reflection take place in a vacuum. It is important to engage in ethical dialogue within a particular community or church setting.

The final approach is the prophetic. These are the "whistle blowers" of our age. They tend not to analyse the situation as thoroughly as one should and their arguments are emotionally driven. Whilst the role of such prophets is important there is a danger of falling into moralism. Issues tend to "black and white". To my mind there is little doubt that the Rule of St Benedict falls into the second category although it has a prophetic dimension also. It is an ethical framework which is based both on natural reasoning and scripture. Although Benedict rejected the teaching of the Roman schools and fled to his monastic cave it is unlikely that he was left unaffected by what he had learned as a young student. We can only surmise on how familiar Benedict would have been with the teaching on virtue by the earlier pagan writers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. Even if these works were unknown to Benedict, their thought must have had some influence on the writings of St Augustine of Hippo and perhaps St Basil both of whom Benedict used in compiling his own rule. In this "little rule for beginners" (RB 74:8) Benedict, referring to the writings of Basil and Cassian calls them "tools for acquiring virtue". Just a cursory glance at the rule reveals the importance of the virtues of humility, obedience, patience, courage, charity, compassion, solidarity, discernment (prudence) and temperance. The chapters on the Abbot and other officials together with those on the correction of monks provide implicit teaching on the virtue of justice.. Those reading the Rule of Benedict for the first time at one of the Douai retreat workshops are particularly struck by this emphasis on personal transformation, the quality of being rather than doing. A management training consultant one called it "a manual for high-performance coaching." They are also impressed by the balance between prayer, study and manual work, the rhythm of the daily routine, something that is missing in frenetic activity of secular working life.

For those used to working in a bureaucratic organisation "summoning the brethren to council" is an attractive feature of the RB, especially the process of listening to each member of the community before coming to a decision. The emphasis on the spiritual as well as the physical dimension of hospitality has encouraged some participants to change their approach to other staff and customers. Perhaps one of the most significant things, something that we might tend to overlook, is the power of our liturgy, worship and community prayer (or *Opus Dei*) to form an ethically sensitive community. When one considers that in addition to *lectio divina* and private prayer we spend something between two and three further hours a day in church either at mass, praying the psalms, listening to the word of God and commentaries, singing hymns and antiphons, how can we fail to believe that they do not have some effect on the way our lives are transformed. Finally, the discipline of our daily work, the way we do it and the reason we do it, rather than the kind of work we do, is another aspect of the ethical framework that shapes our lives. Although Benedict gave precedence to the Work of God other work was just a sacred. Work was a communal service, not just a way of getting chores done. The prominence of work in the RB is in contrast to the ideal of leisure cultivated in sixth century Italy. As he does when speaking about the Abbot and Bursar, Benedict elevates the work of the kitchen helper, the porter, the infirmarian, the Guestmaster to the service of Christ. Great emphasis is placed too on stewardship. Benedict reminds the Bursar that all utensils and goods of the monastery are to be regarded as the sacred vessels of the altar (RB Ch 31). Work, humility and obedience were inextricably linked.

A contemporary theology of work

By itself the Rule can only provide part of the foundation for a contemporary theology of work. We must look to other sources such as scripture, early Christian writers, lives of the desert fathers, the various monastic rules and references to monastic work such as those found in the Rule of the Master, Pachomius, Cassian, Basil and Augustine. Contemporary with Benedict (c. 480 – 547) were Boethius (480-541) and Cassiodorus (485-577). Much of their learning passed through Benet Biscop to England. The *Dialogues of St Gregory* and St Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* are examples. The latter shaped the character and behaviour of many leaders in medieval Europe.

Benedict's chapter on work (RB 48) is of course helpful. In it he gives a double justification for work. First it is to establish a timetable to ensure that no one remains idle. Secondly "when they live by the labour of their hands , as our fathers and apostles did, then they are really monks." This is probably a reference to the Pauline teaching that a monk should take care of himself and not be a burden to others. A monk has to earn his daily bread. In addition, a monk, by his work earns the means of helping those less fortunate with alms and hospitality. Work was more than an

ascetical exercise, it was an economic necessity and religious duty. The establishment of monasteries frequently brought prosperity to the neighbouring community as well. Although the social and economic history of monastic life is reasonably well documented evidence of a monastic theology of work is not easy to find. In many cases it has to be deduced from examining selected writings of monastic scholars from the Middle Ages such St Anselm (1033-1109) and the Cistercian reformers. This is a task that needs to be done and I would be grateful for any insights that any of you can offer on where to look and how to do this. A list of monastic theologians down the centuries would be enormously helpful. As well as monastic writings the various customaries of monastic houses and congregations could provide theological evidence especially about the understanding of economic activity and the need to adapt to local conditions. The classification and theology work found in St Thomas Aquinas is of courses indispensable to any enquiry.

A survey of contemporary sources reveals a significant body of social teaching on work by the popes and Vatican II spanning a 110 years starting with *Rerum Novarum*[3] in 1891. Apart from this the evidence is fragmented. Theologies of work by authors such as Chenu[4], O'Connor[5] and Volf[6] provide important insights. The commentaries of de Voguë[7] and *Consider your Call*[8] but have something to say about monastic work too. In the UK there is great deal written about the history and theology of work of Industrial Mission. Those involved in ministry to the workplace frequently remark on the urgent need for a contemporary theology of work. I suspect the history and theology of the Worker Priest movement in France may provide valuable insights.

So my conclusion, so far, is that the RB can provide insights on as to how Christians can engage with the workplace in the 21st century. As custodians of the Benedictine Rule we are on the threshold of an important time. I would like to end with the following quotation from Alasdair Macintyre's *After Virtue*[9]. In this book he compares our present time to that age in Europe when the Roman Empire declined into the Dark Ages. He concludes,

> What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within
> which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new

[3] Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum (Encyclical Letter)* (1891).
[4] Marie-Dominique Chenu OP, *The Theology of Work: An Exploration* (Dublin: 1963).
[5] Richard O'Connor, *The Theology of Work* (Castleisland, Co Kerry, Ireland: Richard O'Connor, 1995).
[6] Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Towards a Theology of Work* (1991).
[7] Adalbert de Vogüé OSB, *The Rule of St Benedict: A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary*, trans. John Baptist Hasbouck (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1983).
[8] Daniel Rees, ed., *Consider Your Call: A Theology of Monastic Life Today* (London: SPCK, 1978).
[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

dark ages which are already upon us…we are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.

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