

The MONASTIC IMPACT

On An **ABBHEY** **EDUCATION**



Abbot Placid Solari, O.S.B., Chancellor of Belmont Abbey College, has been a monk of Belmont Abbey since 1974 and was ordained in 1980. On Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 25, 1999, he was elected the 8th Abbot of Belmont Abbey. In the past, Abbot Placid has served as the President of the college, and he was its Academic Dean from 1996 until his election as Abbot. He continues to teach as well as provide an orientation session to every new hire to the college faculty and staff. Recently, *Crossroads* sat down with him to discuss the college, its educational philosophy and the relationship of the monastery to college.



Crossroads: What does it mean for a college to be Catholic and Benedictine?

Abbot Placid: Benedictines are part of the larger community of the Catholic Church, so we bring a unique aspect of the millennium and a half community life tradition of seeking God by living, working, and praying in community. I think that this community aspect of the Benedictines influences the tenor of college life here.

The aspect of mentoring also is important in monastic life, and I think that transfers into the educational experience offered to the students.

I think we have always adhered to what Pope John Paul II outlines in his document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* as the four essential characteristics about what it means to be a Catholic college. They are as follows:

1. A Christian inspiration, not just of individuals, but of the whole college community.
2. A reflection on the growing treasury of human knowledge in the light of the Catholic faith.
3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church.
4. A commitment of service to the church and to the larger human community.

Crossroads: The monastery is right in the center of the college and the monks are very much a part of the campus. What do you think is the effect of the monks on the students, and vice versa?

Abbot Placid: The first effect on the students is simply due to the fact that the monks founded and continue to sponsor the college, so the educational approach established and maintained here reflects the Catholic intellectual tradition. What do I mean by that? In particular, I mean the belief in the reality of the truth which can be found, and the belief that the study of any area of human endeavor or knowledge leads one to some authentic part of a whole truth. These parts must be integrated into a whole, and the complementary roles of faith and reason direct that integration. Furthermore, this tradition upholds objective moral norms found in the nature of reality. It upholds the importance of community in the formation of the individual, and the obligation of an educated person to contribute to the larger community.

And the very presence of the monks raises questions in students' minds that would not normally arise at another institution. Either they can consider Belmont Abbey College some kind of nice theme park, like a Catholic Williamsburg, or they must confront and answer for themselves why these men they see here every day would choose this type of life.

The students enjoy an advantage, too, because of the stability inherent in Benedictine life (the monks stay in one community for life), which sets up relationships here at the college that can endure over time in a way that does not happen at other undergraduate institutions. If I would visit my undergraduate institution (I am not a graduate of the Abbey here), there is only one professor still there who had a profound impact on me. The rest have moved on to other institutions, are retired, or are in heaven. We have graduates here from the '40s, '50s who can come back to visit the monks who were their professors, and though they are retired, they are still here. Or they can visit them in the cemetery. In this way, the monks can become a kind of touchstone in their lives.

Crossroads: What would you hope would be the result of a four-year undergraduate education here?

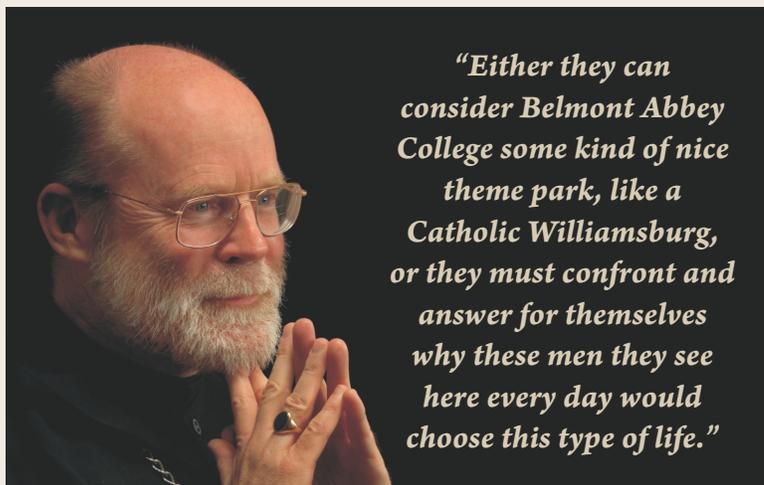
Abbot Placid: First of all, as in any educational institution, I would hope for intellectual development, normal things such as critical thinking and communication skills. The purpose of the college experience is to help set the stage for success in life. How will a graduate be successful in life? Part of that is career. Any educational institution should prepare someone for a successful career.

Even more important, though, what does it mean to be a good human being? How will you be successful in that? Often the seeds are planted here, because ultimately the definition of 'success in life' depends on faith, but they don't germinate until later, for example, at marriage or the birth of a child. Oftentimes, we again see that the college becomes sort of a touchstone in the lives of the alumni, a place they can come back to at these pivotal moments in their life to get priorities settled again, to be reminded of what they were taught, or to consult with us.

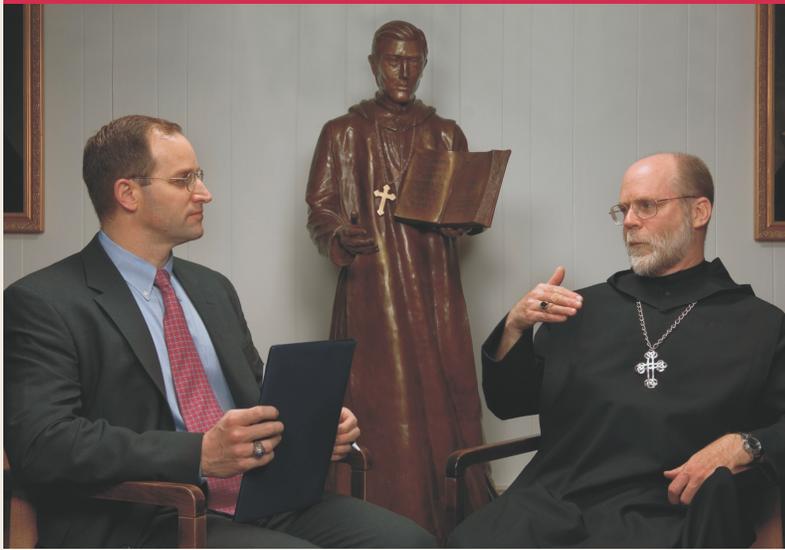
Crossroads: What type of student should come to be educated here at Belmont Abbey College, instead of going to a secular school or even to a Catholic school run by another religious congregation?

Abbot Placid: Well, all I've said before helps identify the type of student who is looking for what we are trying to impart. I think the type of student who would benefit most from the Abbey is someone who is looking for education not simply as career training or gathering a set of facts, but one who is looking for integration of that knowledge into a larger purpose; someone who sees education as character formation for living the rest of his or her life as a good human being; someone who sees education as relational, learning from educated human beings; someone who is interested in learning a tradition and passing that on.

Crossroads: Belmont Abbey College is a National Historical site with several impressive architectural edifices. A lot of effort goes into maintaining not just the buildings but the entire campus. How does the physical setting impact the experience here?



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Abbot Placid talks with VP of College Relations Ken Davison about the relationship between the monastery and the college.

Abbot Placid: Because monks take a vow of stability to this place, the place itself becomes important to us. It's not like a motherhouse to which we return from time to time, from which we go out to work, to do our ministry elsewhere—this is our home and we stay here for a lifetime. So there is a special connection between Benedictines and their home, their monastery.

If you are seeking God, beauty is an important part of that. The intentional creating of a beautiful space both helps that process and that process of seeking God overflows into the creation of a beautiful space. The same is true of an educational institution, or it should be. When you are seeking what is good, what is true, you are ultimately seeking God, however indirectly or indistinctly, and the beauty of the place is both conducive to that and should flow from that.

From another perspective, the whole aspect of transcendence in human life is best presented to us by religion in all types of human cultures, and particularly by art, by music, by literature. What makes a great piece of literature? It may be fiction, and yet it's true. What makes a great piece of music that endures for centuries? Why do we still listen to Bach? There is something in beauty that connects us with what our faith tells us about human persons being made in God's image and likeness. We yearn for and search for that which is perfect beauty, perfect truth; that is, for God. An intentional searching for perfect beauty and truth will automatically impel us to create something that expresses that transcendence.

Related to the question of beauty, too, is the reality of conscience, a realization that the terms 'good' and 'bad' mean something, even if individuals differ as to the precise content of those terms. 'Good' and 'bad' draw us beyond ourselves. We are subject to a standard beyond ourselves which judges the content of our behavior.

Crossroads: What have you heard from alums who have come back? What do they say about the education and the effect on their lives of the time they spent here?

Abbot Placid: The alums I have met over the years seem to have a somewhat unique relationship with this place, which is different from my relationship with my college alma mater. Part of it, I think, is due to the size of the college and the community which they experienced here, the hospitality, the friendliness of this place. Guests who come here tell me how friendly the students are, how welcoming, and it impresses them. So there is an aspect of making connections with other persons, with their peers or professors or monks or administrators, and they come back to maintain or renew that connection. During their time here, they almost inevitably found someone who helped them mature through their college years, and that person becomes an important mentor throughout their life.

In fact, I was speaking to an alumnus this morning who said there "is just something special about this place" which he found as a student. He's been out of college for four years, but he keeps coming back here for that "something special."

What is that 'something special'? Perhaps the fact that, here at the Abbey, there is prayer all the time which tends to give a distinct quality to the college. That's a metaphysical question, but a real one.

Crossroads: Prayer is an important part of the monastic life here. How does this daily rhythm of the monastic life affect the students, recognizing that this rhythm is different from even most Catholic colleges? Three times a day for community prayer and then once more for daily Mass, the monks come into the Basilica.

Abbot Placid: In the first place, the fact that the monks are here—our monastery, our home, is here right in the center of campus – means that it can't be missed by the students. Our Benedictine commitment is to live, work, and pray together for a lifetime. We are visible and somewhat obvious on campus given that our manner of dress does not blend with contemporary fashion. The students hear the bells ring to bring the monks to prayer. The students and the members of the college community join us for those prayers. So there is an awareness that we monks are here and that we pray together regularly.

An interesting thing that happens in talking with the students is the realization that we're really committed to this. Inevitably before a school break, a student will ask one of us, "Are you going home for the holidays?" And the reply is, "I am home." This makes them reflect a bit. Why are we doing this, and are we doing something valuable?

Also, we're involved in the college, as teachers, chaplains and administrators. This gives us access to develop relationships with the students.

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Crossroads: Not just the students perceive this monastic influence, but the faculty must be affected, as well. How does faculty here perhaps differ from faculty at other colleges, given the Catholic and Benedictine mission of the college?

Abbot Placid: We have an outstanding faculty. First, they are here to teach. They are highly educated people who wish to, and, in fact, have a passion to share that education and insight into life with other generations. They are specifically here to mentor and teach.

Second, they are passionate about their discipline. Whatever it was that gave them the energy and the discipline required to become experts in their fields also gives them the passion about passing it on.

I think there is a great sense of collegiality between the monks and the members of the faculty. Faculty members have made sacrifices for the welfare of the college, and they are deeply concerned about the college as a whole, not just their own personal work. They work well together and enjoy each others' company and cooperation. I hope this sense of community is one effect of the Benedictine community life. The monks are here not only as founders, not as a group that is living off to the side here on campus, but as an integral part of the college together with the faculty, who come and go every day.

Another aspect that arises from this connection with the monks is that faculty feels they are carrying on the mission of the monks to develop the whole person. They are continuing what began when the entire faculty and administration was the monks.

Crossroads: How do you see the relationship of the community outside the college with the monks?

Abbot Placid: This relationship has been varied through the years. Initially, this monastery was the Catholic center in North Carolina. Very early on, shortly after the Abbey became independent, the Abbot was named by the Holy See as the Vicar Apostolic of the entire state. There were so few Catholics in North Carolina that it could not be organized into a diocese. From the beginning, the monks were oriented towards establishing a more stable Catholic community, particularly in western North Carolina. That mission continued through 1977, as up to that time the Abbey was unique in the United States as being a quasi-diocese, and the monks were deeply involved in pastoral work outside the monastery.

Now, there are two dioceses in North Carolina, and the focus has now turned more properly to our Benedictine community life and education. The pastoral role still exists in cooperating with the diocese of Charlotte primarily through our school. Oftentimes, we were the ones introducing people who had never met a Catholic before to the Catholic Church, reaching out and making bridges with people of other faith traditions. Also, during the Great Depression, when the Abbey had a farm, we provided food to those in the area who had no work and no means to support their families.

The current development of our property in cooperation with three of the adjacent landowners, who have been leaders in the county for the last century, is also a way in which the monastery is contributing to the larger community. On the one hand, we are taking the initiative in protecting the surroundings for the monastery and college and showing good stewardship in developing our property for the long-term benefit of the monastery and college. On the other hand, we are also making Belmont a better place to live for our neighbors in eastern Gaston County.

Crossroads: As more and more people hear about Belmont Abbey College, we are receiving inquiries not just from prospective students, but from those who would like to join in a more long-term capacity, in the administration or faculty. What would you say to someone interested in joining the faculty?

Abbot Placid: I interview every prospective faculty member. When I was the dean in the college, prospective candidates for faculty positions were sent the mission statement and asked how they would incorporate that mission into their service both in the classroom and as a part of this college community. The college's vision statement says that we find our center in Jesus Christ. I want prospective faculty members to tell me how they will make that apparent. I do not mean that there is a Christian accounting or a Christian biology. Rather, referring to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, I want to know how they will bring their particular discipline, which will reveal some aspect of truth, into relationship with all the other disciplines, each of which will have some other aspects of truth, and into an overarching search for meaning and purpose. How will they share with their students that everything in life has an ethical aspect, and how are they going to contribute to this college community and further our mission? How are they going to foster the mission of this college as Catholic and Benedictine? Do they understand that? Can they commit to that?

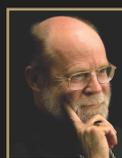
Crossroads: That reminds me of a recent talk given by a professor to new students at a major university in which the professor said that at that university they were not concerned with the truth as such or with any sort of moral formation of students. To them, college education was essentially the handing on of facts, and what the student did with those facts was not a concern of that university. How would you respond?

Abbot Placid: That is why it is important that colleges like Belmont Abbey continue to exist, because we have a nearly diametrically opposed idea of what education is and what it ought to be.

Our understanding of education grows from the Catholic intellectual tradition which inspired the foundation of the university system in Western culture. There is a truth to be learned. Humans are hard-wired to search for that truth. In a college or university, we need to find parts of that truth by being faithful to the methodology of that discipline we study, whatever we study. The challenge, then, is to relate all those parts of truth together into an overarching truth to answer the question, "What's the purpose of it all?" And from that truth arises a reality of right and wrong, a moral reality which is built into the order of things and that we must discover, not simply invent for ourselves.

And finally, our understanding of education also is based on recognizing that this truth we are seeking can only be learned in its fullness in community, and that, therefore, community is not just a nice thing, not just an amenity, but that good community is absolutely essential to the flourishing of human life. We need to know first what that good community consists of, and second, that we have an obligation to contribute to form that sort of community.

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