

St. Benedict of Nursia in the Third Millenium: A Theological Reflection on Prayer and Work

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Introduction

The third millenium is the third period of one thousand years in the Anno Domini which started on January 1, 2001 and will end on December 31, 3000.¹ In this millennium we are moving with great speed in almost every field of our human endeavor. Such as in science and technology, there are blistering structural changes, technical innovations that revolutionized the business world in the globalization of our economy. This indeed has brought us to progress. However it is interesting to note that in the midst of progress we experienced human sufferings because of rampant practices of injustice. The widening gap between the rich and the poor is a major problem all over the world. There are now even frequent incidents of terrorism, ethnic conflict and genocide.

To add insult to our human existence is the massive migration from underdeveloped to highly-developed countries. The phenomena of multiculturalism and an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious have been a source of further problems.² Furthermore, because of unprecedented progress and development, a dog in manger attitude is growing among us in our societies. Pope Benedict XVI complained that modern society has a certain “amnesia” about God as he lamented in the dwindling of our Christian faith.³ Hence, we are now facing a crisis of values. To this we ask ourselves: how do we solve such crisis? In this light then we need a model that will bring us hope in overcoming the crisis of values. It is a model that consists of two essential values in our human existence: spirituality that is attained through prayer and progress benefiting mankind through work. These two important values are present in the spirituality of St. Benedict manifested through prayer and work.

¹ Third Millenium, *Wikipedia The First Free Encyclopedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3rd_millennium.

² Ibid.

³ *Manila Bulletin*, Aug. 21, 2011 “Be Firm in Faith-Pope”

Prayer

The Bedan's ending prayer "That in all things God may be Glorified" has a significant bearing in our contemporary world known as third millennium. This prayer will give meaning to our existence in a seemingly God less world preoccupied with surviving in a jungle of materialism. It is this materialism that shaken our society into a new benchmark of consumerism, unhealthy competition, giving more value on cars and technological gadgets which are just few of the menace of materialism.

At this juncture it is necessary to pinpoint that materialism in itself is not totally unacceptable. In Hinduism acquisition of enjoyment of material wealth, comforts and pleasures are not forbidden. Even in the Benedictine's rule the monks are not strip of their wealth. Since the Benedictine rule does not condone living through the alms of charitable people. The Benedictine ideal of poverty is quite different from the Franciscan. There is no explicit vow of poverty but only vows obedience according to the rule. Such rule allows each Benedictine to have necessary clothing, abundant food, wine and ample sleep. However just as in Hinduism, the Benedictine has also a safety valve of moderation.⁴ Even our Catholic Church considered materialism as a needed factor for our human survival since we constitute body and soul.⁵

Moderation is explicit in the Benedictine rule. The Benedictines are expected to live with what is necessary and simple. Possessions could be held in common, they might be large, but they were to be administered for the furtherance of the work of the community and for the benefit of others.

This ending prayer of the Bedans reminds us the things we have come from the bounty of God's love for all of us. This reminds us of Moses who was asking God to see His glory. But the reply of our loving God: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exodus: 33:19). Thus, it just right to glorify God through the things He has given us.

⁴<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02467b.htm>

⁵Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, p. 56

“That in all things God may be Glorified”

St. Paul said: “The depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:33-36).

Thus, the Bedans prayer that in all things God may be glorified is a reflection of sincerest gratitude to God for the wonderful things we received from him in spite of our unworthiness. But glorifying God does not end in the mind only. It should be shown through our action in loving our neighbor particularly the poor and respecting all things created by our Almighty God.

Love of Neighbor

It is stated in the Book of Proverb 14:20-21: “The poor is hated even by his neighbor, But those who love the rich are many. But happy is he who is gracious to the poor. He who despises his neighbor sins. But happy is he who is gracious to the poor.” With this in mind each one of us human beings have the responsibility to treat well and take care of the most vulnerable members of our society. It is the poor who has the most urgent claim of being helped and be able to live a decent life.

The option for the poor is an essential part in our effort to achieve the common good. Thus, special attention should be given to those with special needs, to those who are poor and on the margin of society. The spirituality of St. Benedict⁶ is not far from giving special attention to these unprivileged people. It is articulated in the Benedictine rule that every Benedictine must always be in a position to give alms, relieve the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, bury the dead, help the afflicted, entertain all strangers, and even to entertain the possibility of helping those who are very much in need of paying their debts.

More than this act of charity articulated in the Benedictine rule, is we are entering into a profound relationship with those we are helping. And this can change our lives and give a distinctive, new

⁶Moga. S.J, *The Worlds of Human Morality*, p. 36

meaning of our existence. That is, a new attitude toward life, a new way of seeing things, responding to a new value, a giving of ourselves to a new relationship or an entering into a new involvement.⁷ In this regard, loving our neighbor particularly the poor has become part of our human nature and we are able to glorify God through the things we receive from our heavenly Father. This is what we mean by living in solidarity with everyone and again particularly the poor. As Jesus said “I am the vine and you are the branches”(John 15:5).

This teaching of Jesus Christ is reflected in the social doctrine of our Catholic church. According to the social doctrine of the Church, solidarity is a manifestation of a recognition of the composite ties that unite men and social groups among themselves. It is translated into the positive contribution of seeing that nothing is lacking in the common cause and into the willingness to give oneself for the good of one’s neighbor, beyond any individual or particular interest. The raising of hands therefore of the Bedans glorifying God is a gesture of loving their neighbors. This gesture can be a model for all of us when we praise God.

This is the kind of gesture we need in the third millennium. Raising one’s hand glorifying God is not only for our own self satisfaction in being able to give Glory to God. It is not simply giving thanks from all the blessing we receive from God, but raising one’s hand as a gesture of our commitment to share our blessing to our neighbors. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* presents differences between progress and development, and insists in that true development cannot be limited to the multiplication of goods and service-to what one possess – but must contribute to the fullness of ‘being’ of man. And all of us should work together to achieve this goal. So raising one’s hand glorifying God is a gesture of solidarity with everyone particularly the poor.

Respecting Creation of God

That in all things God may be glorified is not only a reflection of love of one’s neighbor but also respecting the wonders of nature given to us by God. Jessica Flanagan has this beautiful prayer: “If I could count all the stars in the sky, multiply them by infinity, and then, add one, the number still wouldn’t compare to how much you

⁷ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, p. 40

love and care for the world. Thank you, God, for everything you have given me and all that I will receive from you in the future. I especially thank you for your everlasting love and kindness!"⁸ We should always bear in mind that all life on planet earth requires clean air and clean water. Nature cannot take care of itself. Human beings must preserve an environment in which birds sing and flowers bloom. If we disregard the values long enough, our planet will die.⁹ This responsibility of stewardship is implicit in the Bedan prayer: "that in all things God may be glorified."

We should take care of the earth since God from the very beginning created the heavens and earth. This creation of our Almighty God is a necessary foundation for our environmental responsibility. Thus, we praise God because through His wisdom He made the heavens. He made the sun and the moon, the sun to rule over the day and the moon and the stars to rule over the night (Psalms 136:5-9).

God made the earth and gave to us a special place and a role of stewardship in relation to the rest of creation. Our environmental stewardship gives dignity to our very being within God's creation. Thus raising one's hand to give glory to God should remind us of this responsibility of taking care of the earth.

To respect God is to respect nature which is the basic meaning of the Bedan prayer "that in all things may be glorified."⁹ Thus, this prayer is significant to our contemporary world. There are three great powers in our contemporary world: money, media and politics. Unfortunately money this brings us to greed and indifference to what is happening to our fellow human beings. The media focus on violence rather than on promoting human values and ethics to educate humanity and foster love for one another. Politics and Government administration is incapable of solving poverty in our society because of too much corruption. In other words because of these three powers not properly utilized we have forgotten that our existence here on earth is to protect not to destroy. We protect all of life including the earth and animal too.¹⁰ Thus, the Bedan prayer "that in all things may be glorified" may always be a reminder for all of us to be responsible in taking care of the earth that will give glory to our Creator.

⁸ Schuller, *Don't Throw Away Tomorrow*, p. 53

⁹ *To Respect God, is to Respect Nature*. <http://www.vogaindellylife.org/knowledge/yoga-philosophy/to-respect-god-is-to-respect-nature>.

¹⁰ Law. *Seasons of Devotion*, p. 60

WORK

We pray: "O God, who has commanded that no man should be idle, but that we should all work with our hands the thing that is good; grant that I may diligently do my duty. Give me the grace that I may honestly improve the talents thou hast committed to my trust".¹¹ This is the very essence of the work affirmed in the Benedictine rule. The Benedictine approach to work is at the same time an act of prayer. St. Benedict would like everyone to live a balance life of prayer and work. It is his wish that Benedictines should not be too preoccupied with work, nor should they give too much time in prayer that responsibilities are neglected.¹²

Work is important in the Benedictine spirituality. St. Benedict stressed the importance of work as the great equalizer. Everyone are expected to work from youngest to the oldest, from the least educated to the most educated. As human persons we are subject of work and these actions independent of our objective content, must serve to realize our humanity and fulfill our calling to be a person (*Laborem Exercens*, Art.6). In the same light the Benedictine spirituality of work is rooted from the belief of St. Benedict that work was only a means to goodness of life. Work is considered the great disciplinary force of our human nature, thus idleness its ruin.

It is stated in the second letter of St. Paul to Thessalonians: For yourselves know how you ought to imitate us: for we were not disorderly among you; neither did we eat any man's bread for nothing, but in labor and in toil we worked night and day, lest we should be chargeable to any of you. For also when we were with you, this we declared to you: that if any man will not work neither let him eat. For we have heard there are some among you who walk disorderly, working not at all, but curiously meddling. Now we charge them that are such, and beseech them by the Lord Jesus Christ, that, working with silence, they would eat their own bread (Second Letter to the Thessalonians: 3:7-16).

¹¹ *Orare et Laborare: towards a Benedictine spirituality of work* Posted on August 18, 2010 by Autumn <http://iamhisbeloved.wordpress.com/2010/08/18/orare-et-laborare-towards-a-benedictine-spirituality-of-work/>

¹² http://watertownbenedictines.org/?page_id=2254

Benedictine Spirituality of Work

In today's generation the Benedictine spirituality of work is of utmost importance since work in our contemporary world has lost its meaning. This is the concern of our Catholic Church. Work is now a highly competitive reality that brings us to survival of the fittest. The work as comprehended by St. Benedict is now different in our postmodernist world. Work which is basically manual is now supported with highly perfected machinery both in industry and agriculture. And this change the way we understand the origin of work.

Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*: "man's life is built up every day from work. It is a perennial truth that he/she eats this bread by *"the sweat of his/her face,"* that is to say, not only by personal effort and toil but also in the midst of many tensions, conflicts and crises, which, in relationship with the reality of work, disturb the life of individual societies and also of all humanity.

In this situation, work should be understood in the light of how the Benedictine understood the nature of work. Work is a way to glorifying God and to please our Creator. It is stated in Revelation 4:11: "for all things were created according to God's will and for His pleasure and glory. In the same light of thought St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "whether then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Therefore, work is an activity of life that is to be done for the purpose of glorifying and pleasing God.

Work is included in the Bedan prayer "that in all things God may be glorified." It is for this reason that the Benedictines believed that in every work they do, they do it for Jesus. For the Bible says to workers: "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col.3:17). Moreover, Peter encourages people to work to glorify God: "as each one has received a special gift, use them in serving one another and in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 4:10-11). For this reason, work in the Benedictine spirituality is a condition of all growth in goodness.

A very important consideration in the idea of work of St. Benedict is that work is not something peculiar to slaves. Rather work is a necessary activity for one's well-being and essential for us Christians. Our Catholic church is convinced that work is a fundamental dimension of our human existence on earth. This is a universal stand in the context of "subduing the earth". Our dominion over the earth is achieved by means of work.

At one time, a Goth was working using a sickle to cut brush around a lake. The blade however slipped off the handle of the sickle and flew into a deep place in the lake. St. Benedict came to the rescue that after

he took the handle of the tool and held it in the water, the blade rose from the bottom of the lake and slipped back on the handle. What is indeed interesting is that as if nothing extra ordinary happened that St Benedict just told the Goth to continue with his work. “*Ecce labora*” go and work.¹³

It is stated in Chapter 48 of the Benedictine rule that idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore every Benedictine ought to be employed in manual labor at certain times. They should work gathering the harvest themselves. St. Benedict believed that work out of our hands is what our forefather and the apostles did. Thus, by means of work, we govern the world with God. Idleness is harmful our being human. To work however is good for our body and soul.

Implied also in the rule of St. Benedict regarding work, is that, as Christians we are called to work not only to provide ourselves with bread, but we have to work to enable us give food, drink, clothing, welcome, care and companionship. Every worker, Saint Ambrose contends, is the hand of Christ that continues to create and do good.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

We need a model to move on and live a good Christian life in the midst of crisis of values in the third millennium. St. Benedict’s prayer and work is an appropriate paradigm in giving meaning to our human existence here on earth. The Bedan’s ending prayer “That in all things God may be Glorified” has a significant implication in our postmodern world. A world of competition and survival of the fittest. Moreover, this kind of world is characterized by materialism in which enjoyment of material wealth, comforts and pleasure are measuring rod in living a happy life.

This is very much accepted by the Benedictine rule of having necessary clothing abundant food, wine and ample sleep. But such rule has a safety valve of moderation. The virtue of moves us to transcend all material things in order to glorify God. Thus, the Bedans pray “that in all things God may be glorified”. Included in this ending prayer is the nature of our work. It is the strong belief of St. Benedict that work is a way to glorifying God. After all, all things were created according to God’s will and for His pleasure and glory (Rev. 4:11).

¹³ Verheyen. OSB, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*. Chapter 48

¹⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Philippines: Art 265

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