

The Radical Christian Life

THE RADICAL CHRISTIAN LIFE
A Year with Saint Benedict

Joan Chittister



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THE RADICAL CHRISTIAN LIFE

An Exercise in Spiritual Imagination

There are two stories, one from the Sufi masters and one from the monastics of the desert, that may have a great deal to tell us about what it means to live a radical Christian life in our own times.

In the first, the Sufi tell about a spiritual elder who asked the disciples to name what was the most important quality in life: wisdom or action? “It’s action, of course,” the disciples said. “After all, of what use is wisdom that does not show itself in action?” “Ah, yes,” the master said, “but of what use is action that proceeds from an unenlightened heart?” Or to put it another way, busyness alone is not enough to qualify us as a spiritual people. We must be busy about the right things.

In the second story from the desert monastics, Abba Poemen says of Abba John that John had prayed to God to take his passions away so that he might become free from care. “And, in fact,” Abba John reported to him, “I now find myself in total peace, without an enemy.” But Abba Poemen said to him, “Really? Well, in that case, go and beg God to stir up warfare within you again for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress.” And after that when warfare came Abba John no longer prayed that it might be taken away. Now he simply prayed: “Lord, give me the strength for the fight.”

Point: We are not meant to be long-distance observers of life. We are to give ourselves to the shaping of it, however difficult that may be in this day and age.

This commitment to co-creation is a great task, a noble task for which to give a life, but it is not a simple one. We are at a crossover moment in time—somewhere between the certainty of the past, the demands of the present, and the possibility of the future. It is a moment again in human history that needs deep wisdom and requires holy struggle.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the world is shifting. In fact, the world is dizzyingly mobile now. As a culture, we are shifting away from being isolationist and independent to being global and interdependent.

It is a world where “Catholic and Protestant” have melted into simply being Christians together and our new neighbors and their temples, monasteries, and mosques are Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim.

Our task now is to be radical Christian communities—in the here and now—not fossils of a bygone reality, not leftovers from an earlier golden age. Now we need new wisdom and a new kind of struggle to determine what we must be and do in the midst of these changing times.

Our choices are clear: We can go forward again and become something new in order to leaven the new or we can go backward in an attempt to maintain what we know better but which is already gone.

The question is then: What does it mean to be a radical Christian community in times such as these? And how do we do it?

The choice is ours. But, don't be fooled: not only is it not an easy choice; it is not an easy task.

The very map of the world is changing as we stand here: People are starving to death on the television screens in our family

rooms. People who have worked hard all their lives fear for their retirement while we continue to put more money into instruments of destruction in this society than we do into programs for human development. The economy is in a state of skew. Only those who do not have to work are really making money. And, at the same time, there are a growing number of very rich and an even greater number of very, very poor.

Life is counted as nothing. Abortion is the most popular form of birth control in developing countries.

Hundreds, thousands, of civilians everywhere—most of them women and children—die in wars that men design to “protect them.” And we continue to practice capital punishment even though we know that this so-called “deterrence,” which makes us just like what we hate, does not deter. In fact, the ten states without capital punishment have lower murder rates than those that do.

Christians, serious seekers, now must choose either to retire from this fray into some paradise of marshmallow pieties where they can massage away the questions of the time, the injustice of the age, with spiritual nosegays and protests of powerlessness—where they can live like pious moles in the heart of a twisted world and call that travesty peace and “religion”—or they can gather their strength for the struggle it will take to bring this world closer to the reign of God now.

But what can possibly be done in this runaway world of the powerful few by the rest of us who hold no malice and want no wars, who have no influence but hold high ideals, who call ourselves Christian and claim to mean it!

Who are we now? And who do we want to be?

Most of all, where can we possibly go for a model of how to begin to be a radical Christian witness in a society in which we are almost totally remote from its centers of power and totally outside its centers of influence?

My suggestion is that we stop drawing our sense of human effectiveness from the periods of exploration and their destruction of native peoples, or from the period of industrialization and its displacement of people, or from the periods of the world wars and their extermination of peoples.

My suggestion is that little people—people like you and me—begin to look again to the sixth century and to the spiritual imagination and wondrous wisdom that made it new. Because that is really the good news.

An Ancient Model

In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia was an aspiring young student at the center of the empire with all the glitz and glamour, all the fading glory and dimming power, that implied.

Rome had overspent, overreached, and overlooked the immigrants on the border who were waiting—just waiting—to pour through the system like a sieve.

Rome—ROME!—the invincible, had been sacked. As in the book of Daniel, the handwriting was on the wall, but few, if anyone, read it.

In our own world, the headlines are in our papers, too, and few, if any, are reading them.

But in the sixth century, one person, this young man, resolved to change the system not by confronting it, not by competing with it to be bigger, better, or more successful but by eroding its incredible credibility.

As Blaise Pascal would write: “It is true that force rules the world but opinion loses force.”

This one single person in the sixth century—without the money, the technology, the kind of systemic support our age considers so essential to success and therefore uses to explain its failure to make a difference—simply refused to become what

such a system modeled and came to have a major influence in our own time.

This one person simply decided to change people's opinions about what life had to be by himself living otherwise, by refusing to accept the moral standards around him, by forming other people into organized communities to do the same: to outlaw slavery where they were; to devote themselves to the sharing of goods as he was; to commit themselves to care for the earth; to teach and model a new perspective on our place in the universe.

And on his account—though numbers, history attests, were never his criteria for success—thousands more did the same age after age after age.

For over 1,500 years, popes and peoples across the centuries have called Benedict of Nursia the patron of Europe and accredited the Benedictine lifestyle that he developed in the darkest periods of Western history with the very preservation of European culture.

The values it modeled maintained the social order. And safeguarded learning. And gave refuge to travelers. And made rules for war that brought peace to chaos.

Those values turned a Europe devastated by invasion and neglect into a garden again. They modeled the equality of peoples. They provided a link between heaven and earth—between this life, chaotic as it was, and the will of God for all of life. Everywhere. Always.

But how was all of that done? And what does it have to do with us today? The answer upends everything our own society insists is essential to effectiveness.

The very model of life that Benedict of Nursia gave the world was exactly the opposite of what, in the end, was really destroying it.

To a world that valued bigness—big villas, big cities, big armies, big systems—Benedict gave a series of small and intense

communities where people of one mind gathered to support one another, to find the strength for the fight. Their struggle was for survival, but their strength was community.

To an empire with a global reach—France, Britain, Egypt, Constantinople—Benedict gave an unending line of local groups whose solicitude for the people and understanding of the issues of the area from which they came was built into their very DNA. The struggle of such small groups was for survival, yes; but their strength was total engagement in the human condition.

To an empire intent on the centralization of all cultures into one, Benedict gave a model of autonomy, of agency, of individual self-development to a culture that accepted both submission and slavery far, far too easily. The struggle against such odds was for survival, yes; but their strength was a sense of human dignity and personal possibility—in an era that had neither.

To a world with a bent for monuments meant to mark the history and the glory of an empire, Benedict abandoned the notion of a joint institutional history and built a common tradition out of many separate parts instead. The struggle was for survival of these autonomous small groups. Their strength was the singular commitment bred in each separate group to each carry the fullness of the tradition.

In a civic order strictly defined by specific roles and responsibilities, Benedict chose instead to create a lifestyle rather than to define a fixed work that the years could erode or the culture could abandon. The struggle was surely for survival; but the surety of that in every group was creativity and adaptation.

In a world made up of powerful institutions Benedict did not create an institution; instead, he started a movement—a loose collection of similarly serious and equal seekers who gave the world new ways of thinking about autocracy and narcissism, oppression and injustice, inequality and authoritarianism. The

struggle was indeed survival; the strength was an energy and dynamism that affected the whole society.

And finally, in a world where the word of an emperor meant death, Benedict built a world where the word of God gave new life day after day after day to everyone it touched.

A Tradition that Transforms

And little by little, this little movement of serious seekers, small rather than large, local rather than global, autonomous rather than centralized, more intent on a common tradition than a common history, more a movement than an institution, more committed to the Gospel than to the system—bound together as equal adults in communities of heart and mind they crept up slowly on the culture around them, they seduced its hardness of heart, they converted its soul, and, in one small place after another, they made the world whole again.

So why does it work? What can something so small, so fragile, possibly be able to give to a world like that?

How is it that something built on individual members in small individual houses for which survival is always the order of the day can possibly have “saved European culture” and then spread across the whole wide world? After all, individual Benedictine monasteries have come and gone in great number century after century but the tradition has lived on.

The fact is that Benedict left us a very simple structure, yes, but he left it standing on very deep pillars.

He established it on values that spanned the whole human experience—not on rules or specific works that would crash and crumble with the crumbling of the time and cultures.

He based the life on human and spiritual insights that never go out of style: on foundational human needs, for instance, like

community and work and service; on profound spiritual practices, like prayer and contemplation and humility; on major social issues, like stewardship and hospitality, equality and peace; on basic organizational givens, like leadership and communal decision making, on mutual service and mutual obedience.

And so as every era grappled with its own agendas and issues, the importance or consciousness of each of these Benedictine values became the gift Benedictines gave to a culture out of sync with its own best interests.

In early Benedictinism, community itself and the need for hospitality, generated by the breakdown of public security that came with the fall of the empire, was the issue. When pilgrims and travelers were being raped, robbed, and pillaged on the roads, these communities built guesthouses—whole hospitality centers—to protect them.

In the Middle Ages, the need for agricultural development and social services became paramount. When whole tracts of land were burned out by war or fell into disuse, when crops died for want of good husbandry, when the peasants were starving and without work, small communities set up granges—small missions of three or four monastics—to organize the laborers and distribute the crops to the poor. And they did these things while they tried, at the same time, to make rules for war that would mitigate its effects and control the seemingly endless insanity that was destroying, ironically, exactly what was being fought for.

With the rise of cities and the dawn of commercialization, the creation of spiritual and educational centers became a major Benedictine concern. Where learning became a thing of the past and whole areas were left spiritually starved, monasteries took upon themselves the preservation of ancient texts and became the spiritual refuge of the poor, the homeless, the oppressed.

In the nineteenth century European Benedictine monasteries sent some of their best to the new world to do the same. It was a world of Catholic versus Protestant cultures, a dying but still potent remnant of the wars of religion long centuries past. The Benedictine task in the new world was to educate Catholic immigrant populations to take their place in a world that was largely WASP—white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. It was a very radical Christian mission for that time to educate the poor and illiterate, integrate sharply divided worldviews into a democratic whole, and adjust to the kind of pluralism the world had never known. And it was successful.

Through it all, for centuries—centuries—Benedictine communities—small, local, and autonomous—worked in creative ways to meet the needs of the areas in which they grew, struggling always to shape and balance a deep and communal spiritual life with the great social needs around them.

They gifted every age out of the treasures of the heart that are the pillars of Benedictinism. As a result, they grew and they concentrated and they specialized and they changed till there were as many slightly different but all basically the same Benedictine monasteries as there were stripes on a zebra.

If the twenty-first century needs anything at all, it may well be a return to the life-giving, radical vision of Benedict. Perhaps we need a new reverence for bold Benedictine wisdom if civilization is to be saved again—and this time the very planet preserved.

The values that saved Western Europe in a social climate akin to our own were creative work, not profit making; holy leisure, not personal escapism; wise stewardship, not exploitation; loving community, not individualism raised to the pathological; humility, not arrogant superiority; and a commitment to peace, not domination. Today, just as 1,500 years ago, those values have been foresworn.

We dearly need them again.

The Pillars of Benedictine Spirituality

Creative Work

This age needs to rethink work. Work in our time has either become something that defines us or something that oppresses us. We do it to make money, money, money or we decry it as an obstacle to life. We are a culture that too often stands between workaholism and pseudo-contemplation.

For years I watched Sophie, an old Polish lady across the street from the monastery, sweep the sidewalk in front of her house with a strong and steady hand and then move methodically to the front of the houses to her left and to her right.

She became, in fact, a kind of neighborhood joke, doing a fruitless task. After all, the street was spotless already, wasn't it? What was the use of this senseless monotony?

And then she died.

Newer, younger neighbors moved into her house who had no time, no interest, in sweeping sidewalks. And the street has never been clean since.

Sophie reminded me again what Benedict's commitment to work was meant to teach us. I recognized in her that the work we do is not nearly so determining as why we do it.

Work—every kind of work: manual, intellectual, spiritual—is meant to be the human being's contribution to the development of the human race.

The Benedictine works to complete the work of God in the up-building of the world. We work, as well, to complete ourselves. We become more skilled, more creative, more effective. When we work we discover that we really are “good for something.”

Work, the Benedictine sees, is an asceticism that is not contrived, not symbolic. It's real. It is a task that puts me in solidar-

ity with the poor for whom the rewards of labor are few and far between while the rigors are constant and security is tenuous.

Work is our gift to the future, and if the work we do is a contribution to the order and the coming of the reign of God, and if we do it well, like Sophie, it will be needed, and when we are not there to do it, it will be missed.

Holy Leisure

This age needs to rethink leisure, as well. Play and holy leisure are not the same things. Leisure is the Benedictine gift of regular reflection and continual consciousness of the presence of God. It is the gift of contemplation in a world of action.

Holy leisure is a necessary respite from a wildly moving world that turns incessantly now on technology that grants neither the space nor the time it takes to think.

I remember the day some years ago when a reporter called to ask for an interview on some document that had just been released from Rome.

“I can’t talk to you about that,” I said. “I haven’t seen it and I don’t comment on anything I haven’t had a chance to read and study.”

“Well,” he said, “if I send it to you, will you talk to me about it then?”

I calculated the time: This was Thursday. The document couldn’t possibly arrive in the mail before Monday, so I figured I could meet the deadline I was working on now and get the new document read before he called.

“All right,” I said, “You can send it.”

A few minutes later I heard a clacking sound coming from an office down the hall.

“What is that?” I said to the sister in the office.

“It’s the fax machine,” she said. “It’s something for you from New York and it’s already over eighty pages long. There’s a note on it about calling you back to talk about it this afternoon.”

This is a world high on technology, short on time, starved for reflection.

Benedictine leisure is a life lived with a continuing commitment to the development of a culture with a Sabbath mind.

The rabbis teach that the purpose of Sabbath is threefold: First, to make everyone—slave and citizen alike—free for at least one day a week.

Second, to give us time to do what God did: To evaluate our work to see if it is good.

And finally, the rabbis say, the purpose of Sabbath is to reflect on life, to determine whether what we’re doing and who we are is what we should be doing and who we want to be. Sabbath is meant to bring wisdom and action together. It provides the space we need to begin again.

If anything has brought the modern world to the brink of destruction it must surely be the loss of holy leisure.

When people sleep in metro stations it is holy leisure that asks why.

When babies die for lack of medical care it is holy leisure that asks why.

When thousands of civilians die from “death by drones”—unmanned aerial predators that bomb their lands and lives unmercifully—it is holy leisure that asks, how that can possibly be of God?

To give people space to read and think and discuss the great issues of the time from the perspective of the Gospel may be one of Benedictinism’s greatest gifts to a century in which the chaos of action is drying up humanity’s deepest wells of wisdom.

Dom Cuthbert Butler wrote once: “It is not the presence of activity that destroys the contemplative life; it is absence of contemplation.”

Holy leisure is the foundation of contemplation and contemplation is the ability to see the world as God sees the world. Indeed, the contemplative life will not be destroyed by activity but by the absence of contemplation.

In Benedictine spirituality, life is not divided into parts, one holy and the other mundane. To the Benedictine mind all of life is holy. All of life’s actions bear the scrutiny of all of life’s ideals. All of life is to be held with anointed hands.

Who shall lead them into a contemplative life if not we?

Stewardship

The spirituality of stewardship, one of Benedictinism’s strongest, greatest gifts, must be rethought in our time.

The 401 pounds of garbage per U.S. citizen that the world cannot dispose of is made up of the Styrofoam cups we use and the tin cans we’ve discarded rather than recycled while the rest of the world reuses three to five times as much material as we do. Humans today are polluting earth, sea, and sky at a rate unheard of in any other period of history and we in the United States more than most.

But Benedictines before us brought order and organization, learning, Scripture and art, the tools of civilization and the sustenance of the soul.

They used every human form of education and skill to bring order out of chaos, equality to the masses, and healing to their world. Benedictines before us tilled dry land and made it green. They dried the swamps and made them grow. They seeded Europe with crops that fed entire populations, they raised the cattle

that gave new life, they distilled liquors and brewed hops that brought joy to the heart and health to the body. It is not possible to live life with a Benedictine heart and fail to nurture the seeds of life for every living creature.

How, as Benedictines, if we are serious seekers, can we possibly build now what is not green? How can we soak our lands in chemicals and grow what is not organic? How can we possibly, as Benedictines, use what is not disposable and never even call a community meeting on the consequences to others of our doing so?

To allow ourselves to become chips in an electronic world, isolates in a cemented universe, women and men out of touch with the life pulse of a living God, indifferent to creation, concerned only with ourselves, and still call ourselves good is to mistake the rituals of religion for the sanctifying dimensions of spirituality.

The serious seeker knows that we are here to become the voices for life in everything everywhere—as have done our ancestors before us for over 1,500 years.

Benedictine spirituality, the spirituality that brought the world back from the edge before, asks us to spend our time well, to contemplate the divine in the human, to treat everything in the world as sacred. We need the wisdom of stewardship now.

Community

Community is a concept that our age must reexamine and renew. An old woman in my Pennsylvania hometown lived alone in her own home till the day she died. The problem is that she died eighteen months before her body was found because no one ever came to visit her, no one called to see if she had gotten her prescriptions, no one checked when her water was turned off for lack of payment. And there are thousands like her in this world of ours.

And how are we reaching out to them? Benedictine community assumes by its very nature that we exist to be miracle workers to one another. It is in human community that we are called to grow. It is in human community that we come to see God in the other. It is in its commitment to build community that Benedictinism must be sign to a world on the verge of isolation.

But a Benedictine spirituality of community calls for more than togetherness—the very cheapest sort of community. Communal spirituality calls for an open mind and an open heart. It centers us on the Jesus who was an assault on every closed mind in Israel.

To those who thought that illness was punishment for sin, Jesus called for openness. To those who considered tax collectors incapable of salvation, Jesus called for openness. To those who believed that the Messiah—to be real—had to be a military figure, Jesus was a call to openness.

The Benedictine heart—the heart that saved Europe—is a place without boundaries, a place where the truth of the oneness of the human community shatters all barriers, opens all doors, refuses all prejudices, welcomes all strangers, and listens to all voices.

Community cannot be taken for granted. We must ask ourselves always who it is who is uncared for and unknown—dying from loneliness, prejudice, or pain—and waiting for your community and mine to knock on the door, to seek them out, to take them in, to hold them up till they can live again.

Real community requires mindfulness of the whole human condition—so that the spirit that is Benedictine may spread like a holy plague throughout the world.

Humility

Humility needs to be rediscovered if we are to take our rightful place in the world in this age. It was July 20, 1969, the night the

United States landed the first man on the moon. I was standing next to a foreign exchange teacher who had come from Mexico to teach Spanish for us.

“Well,” I laughed, looking up into the dark night sky, “There’s the man in our moon.” I could almost hear her bristle beside me. In a tight, terse voice she said back, “It is not your moon!”

At that moment I got a lesson in Benedictine humility, in international relations and racism and multiculturalism that springs from it, that no novice mistress had been able to articulate nearly as well.

Humility is about learning your place in the universe, about not making either yourselves or your nation anybody’s god. It is about realizing that we are all equal players in a common project called life.

Learning like that can change your politics. It will certainly change your humanity—your soul.

In a culture that hoards money and titles and power and prestige like gold, Benedict makes the keystone value of his rule of life a chapter on humility that was written for Roman men in a society that valued machoism, power, and independence at least as much as ours.

It is the antidote to an achievement-driven, image-ridden, competitive society that is the hallmark of the modern age.

Humility, the acceptance of our earthiness, is also the antidote to the myth of perfectionism that, masking as holiness, can sink the soul in despair and lead it to abandon the very thought of a truly spiritual life in the face of the very failures we fear.

It makes us look again at our so-called patriotism, our sexism, our racisms, and our narcissism, both personal and national.

It makes us look again even at our spiritual arrogance in the face of the world’s other great spiritual traditions.

Most of all, it enables us to learn and to grow and never to be disappointed in what we don't get in life because, we come to realize, it isn't ours to claim in the first place.

We need the wisdom of humility now. We need that quality of life that makes it possible for people to see beyond themselves, to value the other, to touch the world gently, peacefully, and make it better as we go.

Peace

We must, most of all, in our time, rethink the meaning of peace. Over the archway of every medieval monastery were carved the words, *Pax intransitibus*, "Peace to those enter here."

The words were both a hope and a promise. In a culture struggling with social chaos, Benedict sketched out a blueprint for world peace. He laid a foundation for a new way of life, the ripples of which stretched far beyond the first monastery arch to every culture and continent from one generation to another, from that era to this one, from his time and now to ours. To us.

That is our legacy, our mandate, our mission—as alive today as ever, more in need in today's nuclear world than ever before.

Once we could teach that the United States' major export was wheat. Now we have to admit that weapons are. We arm 250 different countries every year and provide almost half of all the arms sold in the world while we decry the selling of them.

Indeed, as Benedictines we must rethink our own commitment to Benedictine peace and our obligation to proclaim it in this world. Benedictine peace, however, is not simply a commitment to the absence of war. It is, as well, the presence of a lifestyle that makes war unacceptable and violence unnecessary.

Even if we dismantled all the war machines of the world tomorrow, it would be no guarantee that we would have peace. The

armies of the world simply demonstrate the war that is going on in our souls, the restlessness of the enemy within us, the agitation of the human condition gone awry.

To all these things we need to bring a new spiritual imagination. Imagine a world where people choose their work according to the good it will do for the poorest of the poor—because they saw it in us.

Imagine a world where holy leisure, spiritual reflection rather than political expedience, began to determine everything we do as a nation—because they saw it in us.

Imagine a world where the care of the earth became a living, breathing, determining goal in every family, every company, every life we touch—because they saw it in us.

Imagine a world devoted to becoming a community of strangers that crosses every age level, every race, every tradition, every difference on the globe—because they saw it in us.

Imagine a world where humble listening to the other became more important than controlling them—because people saw it in us.

Imagine a world where what makes for peace becomes the foundation of every personal, corporate, and national decision—because they were called to it by us.

And now imagine what communities inspired by Benedict can do, should do, will do—consciously, corporately, conscientiously—to bring these things into being in every area, region, street, city, institution here and now.

Let us resolve again to follow the fiery-eyed radical Benedict of Nursia whose one life illuminated Western civilization. Let us, in other words, live Benedictine spirituality and illuminate our own darkening but beautiful world.

On the Dialogues of Gregory

A follower of Benedict who became Pope Gregory the Great is attributed with preserving the life of Saint Benedict in a document called *The Dialogues of Gregory*. The *Dialogues* are the only source of biographical materials that we have on either Benedict or his sister, Scholastica. Through stories in the metaphorical style of the time, the *Dialogues* give insight into their personal qualities and character of soul rather than a recitation of simple historical details. The stories are fanciful to modern ears, perhaps, but logical to the heart. These are the things of which real humanity is made: the spiritual life and the human community. As a result, Benedict and Scholastica do not shine in the human constellation of stars because of who or what they are as individuals. No, Benedict and Scholastica stand out in history because of what their lives did for the centuries of lives that would follow them.

It is my belief that the way of life established by Benedict over 1,500 years ago is a gift to our times, a beacon in the dark showing us still how to live well.



THE MENDING OF A TRAY

A Call to Good Work

Benedict was born to a noble family in what is known as Norcia, Italy. As a young man, Benedict was sent to Rome to study. But Benedict, whose heart burned with the love of God, soon became disenchanted with the debauchery of metropolitan Rome. He abandoned his studies and left Rome to pursue his call from God in solitude. He settled in a small village, accompanied only by his nurse.

One day the nurse borrowed a special tray to prepare a meal. But then, inadvertently, she dropped the tray and broke it. The old woman wept. It was a matter to be taken seriously in a place and time where neither mass production nor money were common. Seeing her distress Benedict knelt down, took the two parts of the broken tray into his hands, and, weeping himself, prayed. No sooner had he finished praying than he noticed that the tray was mended and, with great joy, returned it to his nurse.

It is a simple little story, almost laughable to the scientific, rationalist types of our time. Yet it tells us something too long lost, it seems, under layers of data and levels of systems:

It tells us that there is nothing so small that it does not deserve our attention.

It tells us that we must weep with those who weep.

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It tells us that the lives of the little ones of the world depend on us.

It tells us that every living being has a right to dignity, protection, and help.

It tells us that we must be menders of what is broken in society, not its judges, nor its mocking observers.



January 1

It's World Peace Day. All over the world today—in Haiti, in Palestine, in inner-city Chicago, and in the backwaters of every little town—working people live without dignity. The story of Benedict is a call to take the plight of the poor seriously. The question for our time is: Is it possible to live a truly spiritual life unless we care about the things that the poor care about?



January 2

During the Christmas season we celebrate the Magi who saw the divine where others saw nothing but strangers. And poor ones at that. Learning to see more in life than life itself demonstrates is a gift of true spirituality. Benedict saw in his weeping nurse the broken bits of humanity that have been left behind in the race for money and power in life. Who around you is broken now? And how are you responding as a result of it?

January 3

“What is the deepest meaning of Buddhism, Master?” the disciples asked. And, in reply, the Zen story recounts, the Master made a long, deep bow to his pupil. The learning is an important one: Unless we come to reverence the others in our lives, we will never really give ourselves on their behalf. Worse than that, we will miss much of the beauty of life ourselves.



January 4

“You save your soul by saving someone else’s body,” Arthur Herzberg wrote. To anyone who would make the spiritual life an escape from reality, an avoidance of human problems, the tale of the broken tray is clear warning that those who ignore a commitment to uphold human dignity everywhere ignore the essence of sanctity.



January 5

Of the billions of dollars spent on world military expenditures, over half of it is spent by the United States. Now. While the poor get poorer everywhere—and even here, as well. Imagine the kind of dignity we could provide for the people in our lives, if we cared enough to protest that waste of money on potential destruction so that it could be spent on human development instead.

January 6

An African proverb reads, “Not to aid one in distress is to kill her in your heart.” Clearly what is argued here is the responsibility that each of us has to the dignity of the other. Sinlessness is not enough. Only love is the measure of goodness.



January 7

On this day in 1971, the government banned the use of DDT. It was the beginning of the struggle to save human lives from the effects of toxic chemicals designed, ironically, to enhance natural processes of agriculture. This consciousness of the linkage between life and death, between “progress” and disaster, is a call to spirituality, more now than ever.



January 8

Once upon a time a rabbi asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun. “When you know that the animal in the distance is either a sheep or a dog?” the first pupil answered. “No,” the rabbi said. “When you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?” the second pupil said. “No,” said the rabbi. “Then when is it?” the pupils demanded to know. “Daylight is when you can look into the face of any man or woman and see that it is your brother or sister. If you cannot see that, it is still night.” Concern for human dignity is the key to human community.