

Good Practices of Catholic Monastic Communities in North America
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Anyone familiar in the least with the Rule of Benedict will know that good stewardship is endemic to its spirit. However, not everyone who meets a follower of the Rule or appears on the monastery doorstep has actually read the written Rule. Instead they read the environment and practices; they listen to our vocabulary and tone; they observe how and what we acquire, use and dispose. Those of us who profess to follow Benedict tremble occasionally when we recognize that we are such public, even if sometimes unintentional, preachers. This is perhaps especially true when we are in buildings too big, too old, too inefficient that we cannot simply disencumber by good intentions. We have personal habits that we don't remember acquiring but that we now seriously want to unlearn. We reach for our Rule of Benedict for comfort; it is a Rule for beginners and that is what we are.

Every Catholic monastic community that started out in America had the same initial plan: make do. Most communities had early days of poverty ranging from dire to not-so-bad, and those were the days that were probably the most environmentally friendly in our history. Poverty makes it pretty easy to keep your ear to the ground and your face to the wind. In times when you have little, stewardship and stewardship of nature are somewhat synonymous. But as our communities built and accumulated, perhaps we became a bit careless and insulated with comfort and convenience. The terms diverged a bit, so when we spoke of stewardship we were most likely speaking of "our" resources, those we had accumulated for our use and dispensation rather than those of our planet present for sharing with all.

This divergence has proven costly both to our spirits and to our purses. Now the pinch to our purses is offering a gift to our spirits. Many of us who find ourselves going green now are doing so because we cannot afford to do otherwise, but once we are on that course we are spiritually restored by its wisdom and "run with hearts expanded" (Rule of Benedict, Prologue). As Bertolt Brecht says, "Terrible is the seductive power of goodness." The point I am making is that most of us started out environmentally friendly by necessity, strayed as we became more established and comfortable, and now, I propose, are looking again to renewed friendliness out of a tight blend of fiscal necessity and good ecological intentions, but find it more costly and complicated.

Last October, when I sent out a call in the American Monastic Newsletter for those who had made ecologically driven decisions, I was not overwhelmed with responses, but I did get some good ones. I would like to preface this section with three observations: first, we can assume, I am absolutely sure, that all communities embrace environmental stewardship as a core value but the degree to which they live that value vary; second, I am equally sure that communities want and strive to do more; and a minor third, it is just as well I did not hear from more communities than I did because my time is so limited and I want to acknowledge the distinct contributions of each of those who did respond. Here are some highlights from those who opened their doors to us.

The first community I heard from was the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at Clyde, Missouri. Even with the encumbrances of aging buildings, their commitment to preserving the planet has found expression in creative and substantial ways. Whether deconstructing buildings or small fans, the dismantling for other use is pretty total. What was old and useless in its former life becomes useful for the Amish, fashioned into art or awning, recycled as scrap metal, etc. Here “nothing is wasted” is truer than in most places.

In addition they have shifted priorities in the use of their land. The 200-plus acreage they had leased for income from crops is now home to native grasses and wildflowers as part of the US Department of Agriculture’s Conservation Reserve Program designed to reduce soil erosion and enhance the environment. Wildlife abounds here too. The Sisters (maybe not all of them) extend the Benedictine rule of hospitality, “Greet all as Christ,” even to the mice and bats they catch and relocate. Bats are entitled to their own lodgings because they earn their keep by devouring insects in the humid Missouri summers.

And finally, a 289’ wind turbine was erected on their property that benefits the local energy cooperative but not the Sisters directly because of a federal law that does not permit switching utilities. It does meet their goals, however, of contributing to the local community and promoting wind energy.

The second community is that of the Sisters of Immaculata Monastery in Norfolk, Nebraska. After two years of considering their gifts and energies for ministry, they divested themselves of their hospitals and focused more on the spiritual offerings at their home monastery. They are in the process of renovating their monastery built in 1964 and one of their primary values was recycling. Of the 100 loads of debris, more than 90 were completely recycled and the rest were partially so. The walls and concrete products are taken for use as filler for building and reinforcing roads. All metals that can be recycled are taken for new construction. They have asked that in their new construction as much recycled material be used as possible, thus closing the circle. The floors in the dining room and library will be made of cork, a natural product that does not require the destruction of the tree but merely the harvesting of the bark which regenerates. In addition to higher efficiency utilities, they are investigating ways to reclaim the condensation from the air-conditioning units to flow into a reservoir for their landscaping.

Their goal is not only to do as little damage to the planet as possible but also to educate and share their values with all who use their facility. Obviously their renovation continues to be as internal as it has been external as their community involvement has been high. And as a PS, because beauty is definitely environmentally friendly, they added a labyrinth!

We go to the East coast for our third community: Portsmouth Abbey in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. This community of fifteen monks has a boarding school and they, too, live and teach a strong message about the environment. After doing all the usual stuff they installed the first utility-scale 660 kW wind turbine in the State of Rhode Island. Though paid for by the abbey with a partial grant from the state, it was a gift to their school, a gift that keeps on giving. It will pay itself off in four years, even as it generates small revenue in the kilowatt buyback from the utility company when more is generated than used. That revenue is put into a fund to promote

environmentally friendly projects in the school. Last fall they completed a “green” dormitory with solar hot water and heat assist, heat-recovery ventilation, spray foam insulation, etc.

They are in the process of erecting a solar house designed by a local university for the 2005 Solar Decathlon, a house that is entirely energy self-sufficient. Incidentally, this was the only men’s community that responded.

We come back to the Midwest for our fourth community, St. Mary Monastery, Rock Island, Illinois. When I saw all that Sister Phyllis, the prioress, sent me I asked if we could have their house! She said no—but they would share it if I—or you—came to visit. This community had the “advantage” (I put quotes around that because home space is home space) of selecting a new location and new construction with at least some funds from the sale of their former monastery in Nauvoo, IL. That would not be impressive if they didn’t make good environmental choices but they did.

First of all they built a right-size place for the time they built in 1997 (they bought houses nearby for their larger numbers to sell when no longer needed), for the near future, for further down the road and have a gradual exit strategy, if necessary, in place because they constructed for future use of their buildings.

Second, they invested in geothermal heating and cooling, using pond loops in a 5-acre pond that also serves as an environmentally responsible place for water run-off, drainage and a natural habitat for fish and fowl. They have put 14 acres into Illinois prairie grasses and wildflowers, and they preserve another 11 acres of fallow land and 50 acres of woodlands. Within the building they are going to install a “green” Eco-Space elevator that uses traction rather than hydraulic fluid. Other than using a smaller motor and thus less electricity, it has no payback other than earth preservation and the community deemed that worth the expense.

We are on the home stretch now heading to the fifth (and my favorite) community, Sacred Heart Monastery on the plains in western North Dakota. We are presently in our second year of “right-sizing” a monastery building that is too large for us in our present and future numbers. As we do everything by consensus, we move at our pace which is one at which we can all move lovingly and wisely. Some of the hard practicalities we have had to face are that despite our best intentions we are going to have to let go of some things that are still useful but that are not useful enough in their present state for us to maintain. We have crafted our vocabulary to articulate our actions rather than hide them: we are deconstructing for harvesting rather than demolishing. This is a hard sell to a community that has known genuine poverty through the first half of our existence. We do not waste. Part of our dance through reality has been that, yes, we have this space and others don’t and could use it, but there really isn’t a way to take up this portion of a well-built brick building a move it to some place else.

One of our key insights about our stand on the environment came in 1997 when Bishop Zipfel made his first visit to our monastery. As we were going around the dining room introducing ourselves and saying what we did, one of our older Sisters in one of her last ministries said simply, “I’m Sister Jeanette Werner, and I save the world.” She had taken over the responsibility

of our recycling and she took the job very seriously and reveled in it. What was stunning about her statement was that she got it; she had her eyes on the goal. She also clarified for us our focus and our aim.

Since the mid-1990s we have been involved with wind energy and were the first to erect a commercial turbine in North Dakota. That story is a book and a movie in itself, complete with a cast of unsavory characters and plot twists, that kept us going for years, but we had done our homework, we knew someone had to take the risk for all of us in our area, as well as do something about our rising electric rates. So we plunged. On June 16 it will be 11 years since we began producing electricity. We have saved money, of course, but there are greater benefits. We got a glowing report from the University of North Dakota about the 1841 tons of CO₂ that we have offset in our first 10 years. Better still are the facts that wind farms in our state are growing and North Dakota, a state so rich in coal and oil (and so in the grip of those industries), is finally seriously thinking other energy sources. We have more strongly and publicly allied ourselves with the Dakota Resource Council and been identified as pro-environment because of our turbines; they serve as public testimony of our commitment. We've given countless tours and talks.

Another smaller environmental statement we make is through our herd of llamas. This commitment God rather tricked us into, but it has paid us dividends we never anticipated. When we were first offered a couple of llamas, they were at their peak in potential of return on the dollar. We had the room, the climate and they were low-maintenance animals, so it was a no-brainer for us. Of course, right after we got into the business, the bottom dropped out of it, but by then we were attached. Those llamas helped us back our way into organic farming—we use llama “soil enhancers” rather than chemicals in our garden. We also spin and dye their wool which has become quite a cottage industry for us and several of our Sisters knit, crochet or felt items for sale. These are real return-to-the-earth, peaceful animals and have done wonders for our spirits. They, too, are a great public attraction and offer an occasion for teaching.

Now, I would like to close with five insights on American monastic practices stated randomly and based not solely on these five responders but rather on my reading, observing and thinking over these last thirty years. These are obviously open for discussion or even refutation.

First, our hearts are good, but we are not nearly mindful enough in our behavior. It isn't so much lack of education as lack of disciplined commitment—speed, convenience, busyness, etc. are seductive and too easily excusable.

Second, necessity is an actual grace and God is generous with it. Necessity will prompt us to be better stewards and perhaps to take bolder risks, but the action will still have to be ours. Economics may force the decision, but the good of the environment will definitely shape it.

Third, we are all doing something but we can all do more, but in doing so we cannot be overwhelmed by all we are not yet doing. In an age and culture marked by speed and instant gratification, it isn't easy to see the value in bit by bit, in steady progress, in doing what we can instead of what we can't.

Fourth, good stewardship of the earth is inseparable from our promise of stability. While our community is our home, our home lives in a place and we become especially responsible for that environment and how it ripples out. We can't excuse ourselves from knowing our land and the politics that govern its future.

And fifth, because good ecology has become such an expensive venture in some of the larger, more long-term areas, it appears to create the false dilemma of conflicting with another promise we make: poverty. It is never enough to say, "We cannot go fully green because we haven't enough gold." We need to shift the focus from economics to the deeper values of the environment and start there. We must be innovative, creative—and sacrificial.

I would like to leave you with an image. Think of a clothesline continuum of care and concern for the earth. To my left is less and to my right is more. When we first consider the placement of American monastic communities along this continuum by what the communities may think and feel, we are probably heavily clustered toward the right. When we ask the question about long-term decisions our communities make that either affirm or don't affirm our care and concern for the earth, the distribution may be stretched even further along the continuum toward the left. And third, when we ask the question about daily behaviors of our communities and what it says about our care and concern, I daresay we would see the broadest distribution. This would be true, I think if you did this same exercise within each individual community, and with each individual in community. This is not surprising; we will always have a gap between the desired and the real.

What has not seemed to happen on a larger scale, I think, has been an ignited desire to radically change the real. We are still beginners and our dreams seem sadly small. And yet, from these five communities (and there are many more who did not respond but who are doing remarkable things) I draw hope and inspiration from their commitment, action, teaching, and fire. These examples are graced accelerants. May they fan the flames of our desires to tend this gracious earth more lovingly.