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Freedom and Forgiveness

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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Patrick Henry: Now we start the reflections by Christian monastics on this book, on *Benedict's Dharma*—what they see in it, how they respond to the questions they have. And, as you will see from the program, we have a responder to each of the four major sections of the book. What we will do is hear the speaker and then have a sort of committee of the whole discussion, in which I will first ask Judith and Yifa as Buddhist authors of the book if they have any response they want to make, and they are free to say something or not, as they will. Then we will open up for general discussion, and around 10:00, we will say it's time now for the dyads to start their conversation

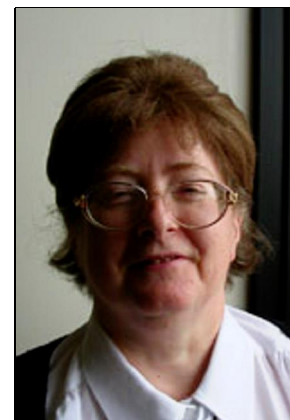
The first response to the book is from Sister Sarah Schwartzberg, a Benedictine Sister of Perpetual Adoration who is currently stationed in St. Louis. She has served on the general council of the congregation for the past five years—five years rather than fifty; she has forty-five years to go in administration, Abbot Patrick, before she can say, "Well, no more of that." She is the director of the Benedictine volunteer's program. She's an avid student of Hebrew and scripture and is a new member of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue board.

Sister Sarah Schwartzberg: Thank you. I live in St. Louis, but I'm a native New Yorker and I'm proud of my city. I was last there three weeks ago, on Labor Day, which was a beautiful, sunny day. I took a ride on the Staten Island Ferry and looked toward the New York skyline, dominated then by the massive twin towers of the World Trade Center. Later, walking through Battery Park and along the harbor, I gazed at the towers as they caught the rays of the afternoon sun and gleamed silver-gold against a blue, cloudless sky.



Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

[All articles by or about Patrick Henry, Ph.D.](#)



Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB, is a member of the

Now the towers are a pile of rubble and a tomb of thousands, and my topic today is freedom and forgiveness. I do not know if I can forgive the terrorists who did this thing, or even if I should forgive them. Perhaps only those who suffered and died, those who lost family and friends, have the right to forgive. The images of a shattered and devastated city fill my mind and talk of forgiveness seems sentimental and trite. I do know that I cannot forgive until I let go of both my anger and my futile attempts to understand what has happened. I cannot let go until I am able to empty my mind of these graphic pictures, of my whirling thoughts and emotions, perhaps until the cloud of dust and smoke and toxic fumes finally settles down. This is where monastic practices and prayer offer guidance. We might even find a parallel in the words of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who said this past week that we should go back to work, return to our daily routine.

The conversation recorded in Benedict's Dharma proceeds from an understanding of the Rule of Benedict as a trellis or framework on which plants can grow, and having a blue card and being analytic, I tried to analyze the structure of that chapter [laughter], which was a task. The topics as I see them fall into three general categories. First, general guidelines for an inner spiritual journey, including the cultivation of the virtues of humility and obedience. Second, the relationship of the monastic or the practitioner toward things and possessions, and in particular a stance of nonattachment and generosity. And third, one's relationship with individuals and community, dealing more specifically with the practices of confession and excommunication. In spite of the title of the chapter, it seems to me that only in the concluding paragraphs is the human experience of forgiveness discussed, and that in the equivalence of love and emptiness. So I have organized my own observations and reflections along these same lines.

Often, we look for a spiritual path distinct from our common life and rule as if the spiritual life were disconnected from both of these. In my own Benedictine congregation, we've gone through phases of fads, it seems, of Ignatian meditation and thirty-day retreats. So I took a thirty-day retreat when I was just newly into the novitiate, which was a mistake [laughter], followed by a Zen retreat. We turn to Zen, yoga, and the meditation of centering and sitting prayer; Native American

Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She contributed to the conference on Benedict's Dharma in September 2001 and participated in Nuns in the West I and II. She lives at the community's ashram, Osage Monastery in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, and is a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

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and Celtic spiritualities; and pyramids and crystals in search of a spiritual path—and then somewhere along the way we remember that we follow the Rule of Benedict, which we have done since our foundation. So it is refreshing for me to remember that, for Benedictines, the Rule is our primary spiritual path, whatever else we might add. Those are good things that we add. They're not the trellis; they're put onto the trellis.

In this chapter, the structure of the Rule is described as a commitment. It does not simply provide an external framework for our lives; rather, it puts us on a path toward divine intimacy and union. So when I first was looking for a religious community, I knew nothing of the Rule of Benedict and less of monasticism. I was seeking to be a mystic. I wanted to find a place where I could learn how to be a mystic, without realizing of course that that was not something to be accomplished, but something that is a gift. And I haven't made it yet. As the writers point out, the prerequisites for any spiritual path, whatever that path may be, include humility and obedience. And of course these stand at the heart of Benedictine spirituality. In this conversation, humility is defined by Joseph Goldstein as selflessness, and obedience is treated in relation to the silent and patient endurance described by the fourth degree of humility, and to the skillful means employed by the spiritual teacher. I don't know if it refers also to the awkward efforts of an inexperienced novice director.

In the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, humility is a stance taken before a God who is both immanent and transcendent, to whom one surrenders one's entire being and to whom one cleaves with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength. In the Hasidic tradition, God is perceived as a life force that we sense pulsating within ourselves, the energy we long for when we are tired, dejected, sad, or simply overwhelmed by events that are out of our control. God is one and there is nothing that is not God. God is the ultimate reality, and there is no place that is devoid of God's presence. One meditates on God and all things, God's permeating all things as a straight line or ray of light. And all things are within God, God as encompassing all things in light. Also, in the Hasidic tradition one seeks unity with God by means of self-negation. The ego and all forms of selfhood must be nullified. To be concerned with one's self, to be self-centered, is dualism, and dualism is conceived to be idolatry.

For Christians, the paradigm of this unity, this oneness with God, is Christ. I and the Father are one, it says in John's Gospel. However, because Jesus is, in Christian theology, the mediator between the human and the divine, without whom there is no access to the Absolute, Christian practice, it seems to me, must make room for personal and even objective elements. I think this is where the Benedictine practice of lectio, or reflective reading of sacred scripture or other spiritual books, finds its place.

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