

The Benedictine Collection at Belmont Abbey College

by Susan E. Mayes

Although the Benedictine Collection of Abbot Vincent Taylor Library has existed in its current location and form for little more than a decade, its genealogy can be traced back almost fifteen hundred years to the foundations of the Benedictine monastic order. St. Benedict of Nursia (480-547), the father of Western monasticism, established twelve monasteries in Italy during the twilight of the Roman Empire as havens for those who wished to devote their lives to God. In order to ensure the spiritual vitality and fair government of these houses, he compiled his famous *Rule*, a short work of seventy-three chapters with advice on the religious life ranging from the lyrical to the prosaic. Numerous commentaries have been written over the years on the *Rule*, but for most librarians two of its recommendations are paramount: the monk is called to live as a cenobite, or a productive member of his community, and secondly, the monk is to be a lifelong learner, with a corresponding duty of the community to provide him with the resources such intellectual work will require.

Wilfrid Tunink, O.S.B., is one of many monks to comment on how important the sense of community is to Benedictines.

In calling the cenobites the strongest kind of monks, St. Benedict turned away from a prevailing inclination towards the eremitical life manifest in the teaching and practice of most Eastern monks ... We must

conclude from St. Benedict's action that community life is a fundamental and essential characteristic of Benedictine monachism.¹

The word "community" implies the need to care deeply for the welfare of the group while acknowledging that individual differences will sometimes make this very difficult. St. Benedict tells the Abbot that he must adapt himself to a wide variety of characters (*Rule* of St. Benedict, Chapter 2, hereafter cited as RB) (RB2). The Abbot is granted formidable powers of leadership for preserving unity, yet is encouraged to take counsel from all his monks when a major decision is contemplated, for God often reveals what is best to the youngest (RB3). This creative tension between the individual and the group provides the ultimate test for what Abraham Lincoln so eloquently calls "the better angels of our nature," since people must consciously choose the high road over the low to achieve good results. In fact, Abbot Jerome Theisen (1930-1995) has written of community as a metaphor for grace, while disunity may likewise serve as a metaphor for sin.²

St. Benedict assumes in the *Rule* that one of the factors uniting the lives of his monks will be the ability to read. This ability is not treated casually, since the Scriptures are to be read every day, with extra time provided for reading on Sunday (RB 48). It was even the custom, continued to the present day, for suitable literature to be read aloud during meals.³ In fact, along with prayer and manual labor, reading is to be one of the

three main activities of the monk.

...One must, in the monastery, possess books, know how to write them and read them, and therefore, if it be necessary, learn how to read. It is not certain that St. Benedict is speaking of a library since the word *bibliotheca*, which he uses in referring to books read in Lent, can mean, for him, the Bible. But St. Benedict evidently takes for granted the existence of a library, and a fairly extensive one at that, since each monk is supposed to receive a codex in Lent. Toward the end of the *Rule*, it is suggested that all read the Scripture, Cassian and St. Basil; they should be able to read in the refectory, in choir, and before guests.⁴

Even in their reading, the monks are to maintain their respect for community, since they are enjoined not to read aloud (the custom of the day) in a manner that would disturb their brothers (RB 48). The great monastic libraries grew from this dual emphasis on the book and community.

As the monasteries grew larger, monks travelled as missionaries to distant locations. There they founded new houses and continued their work of prayer and labor. Many Benedictine establishments today can thus trace their origins far back in time. In the case of Belmont Abbey, the Monastery of Metten in Bavaria was founded in 766. St. Vincent's Archabbey of Latrobe, Pennsylvania was founded from Metten

in 1846. Finally, in 1876, Herman Wolfe, O.S.B., a native of Germany, a monk of St. Vincent's, and a former Confederate medical officer, took possession of the old Caldwell farm near a small town then known as Garibaldi, North Carolina.⁵ The new community took the name of Maryhelp, but when Garibaldi changed its name to Belmont it quickly became known as Belmont Abbey.

St. Mary's College, a school for boys founded at the Abbey, soon began attracting students from around the region. Many benefactors donated books to form the nucleus of the academic library. St. Vincent's Archabbey gave generously in the early years. Michael McNerny, O.S.B., a well-known architect, was responsible for the acquisition of a complete set of Migne's *Patrology*, now part of the Abbey's rare books collection.⁶ Thomas Oestreich, O.S.B., made several trips to Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s where he purchased books for the growing college.⁷ On May 19, 1900, the collection narrowly escaped destruction by fire.⁸

As was typical of most libraries in the first part of the twentieth century, the Abbey's collection, of necessity, had to stand alone. Interlibrary loan was slow, and it was difficult to determine what other institutions might have a needed work. This began to change when the Library Section of the American Benedictine Academy met in July 1948 and decided to begin work on a union list of holdings for North American Benedictine libraries. The projected work was to have both a list of Benedictine authors and a subject listing of works about Benedictines and Benedictinism. Oliver Kapsner, O.S.B., undertook this massive task, which was published as *Benedictine Bibliography*.⁹ Belmont Abbey College Library was among the ninety-four Benedictine libraries with holdings included.

Until the early 1950s books by Benedictine authors in the Abbey library were interspersed with other works in the general stacks. The *Benedictine Bibliography* project provided the impetus for a future collection to be devoted to monastic subjects. Under the leadership of cataloger Julia McDonnell and assistant catalogers Ethel D. Kaplon and Vickie Jenkins, works already processed were checked against the bibliography and a notation made on a separate shelflist card to indicate its need for inclusion in the planned collection. New items which met the guidelines listed in *Benedictine Bibliography* received a special notation on catalog cards. It would

now be a simple matter to pull Benedictine books from the stacks and move them to a separate location. At this point the search began for a suitable place to house the new collection.

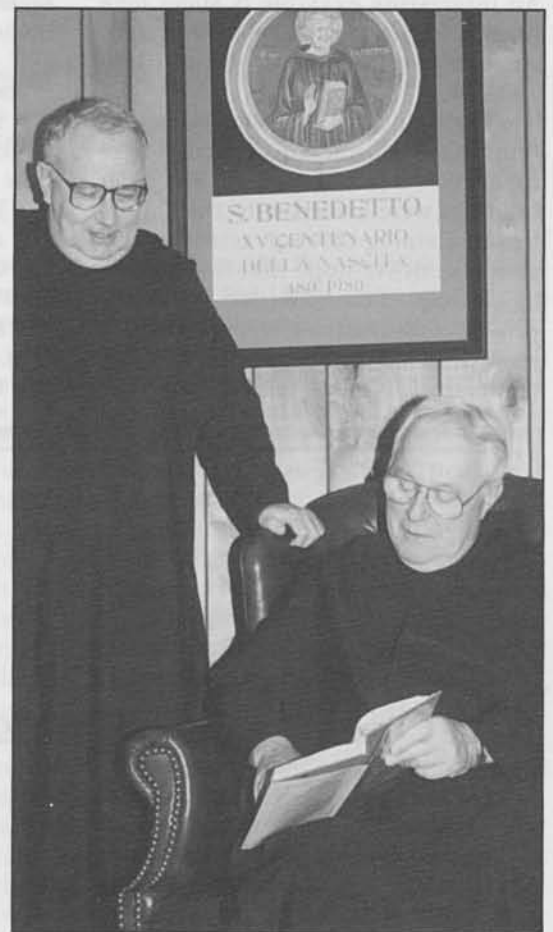
In 1975, the library's theology classroom served as a temporary "Benedictine room." In 1985, thanks to the generosity of the Cannon Foundation of Concord, North Carolina, the lower level of the College Library was completely renovated. At this time two rooms — the Abbey Room and the Archives Room — were combined to form the current Benedictine Room and dedicated to the monks of Belmont Abbey. The project was truly a labor of love for the library staff, who had worked hard over the years shifting the collection until it could find a permanent home. Mrs. Marjorie McDermott, Director of Learning Resources, and other staff members chose furnishings with care to provide a quiet, comfortable area for study and meditation. Benedictine tradition was not forgotten, as many antiques of religious and historical significance blend with modern furniture. Historic photographs of the Abbey decorate the walls. A statue of St. Scholastica, twin sister of St. Benedict, enjoys a place of prominence in the room, as does a "cathedra," or abbot's throne, handcarved by Brother Charles Eckel. Any librarian who has cleaned up after messy patrons will appreciate the sign on the wall which at one time hung in the Abbey Cathedral, "Notice: Tobacco chewing and spitting on the floor positively forbidden."

Today the Benedictine Collection contains about 3100 volumes and 350 bound periodicals. According to Ash, it includes "many rare volumes published in the last 200 years, and several journals published by European abbeys, some of which are difficult to locate elsewhere As far as we know, it is the only collection of its type in the entire South."¹⁰ Examples of this would be two well-known monograph series, *Cistercian Studies*¹¹ and *Beitrag zur Geschichte des alten Monchtums und des Benediktinerordens*,¹² held by only a few American libraries.

The collection continues to grow with new acquisi-

tions. Twenty-two percent of the holdings are in seven non-English languages, reflecting the Benedictines' worldwide interests and scholarly acumen. About twenty percent of the holdings are considered rare or fragile and are housed in a separate, noncirculating Benedictine Rare collection. Rare books are available for library use only Monday through Friday between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Other Benedictine books circulate under the guidelines of the library's established policies.

St. Benedict in the *Rule* encourages all manner of craftsmen to carry on their work in a spirit of service (RB 57), so the holdings in the Benedictine Collection reflect a broad spectrum of interests. While strongest in the areas of philoso-



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phy and theology, works in the sciences, psychology, art and music, sociology, history, library science, and even cookery are represented. North Carolina is not forgotten, having a prominent place in *Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia: Leaves of Its History, 1820-1878*, by the Benedictine Jeremiah Joseph O'Connell.¹³ Theses and dissertations of the Belmont Abbey monks, housed in Benedictine Rare, cover an array of subjects. One of the collection's specialties is American Benedictine history, featuring works on most Benedictine monasteries as well as biographies of prominent individuals. Many of the books have been authored by the monks of Belmont Abbey over the one hundred twenty years of its existence. An interesting example is *Major John Andre: An Historical Drama in Five Acts*, authored by Abbot Leo Haid (1849-1924).¹⁴

Beginning in 1988, all new acquisitions in the Benedictine Collection were cataloged via OCLC, and in 1994 older holdings were loaded onto the Online Union Catalog through retrospective conversion. We hope that this will increase usage of the collection. An online catalog is planned in the near future.

The past history of the Benedictine Collection is well-established; the

present holds a crossroads; the future remains to be seen. Some might say that a religious order steeped in a tradition of solitude and withdrawal from the world has little to offer in a technological age, but on closer examination this proves to be untrue. Web surfers will encounter numerous references to the Benedictines, including in many cases holdings of their libraries and homepages of their monasteries. For the Benedictines, with their fifteen hundred years of history, surviving the Dark Ages undoubtedly presented more of a challenge than that found on any computer network. The shape of the Benedictine library of the future may be unclear, but one thing remains certain: it will remain dedicated to the ageless ideals of service, knowledge, and life in community.

References

¹ Wilfrid Tunink, O.S.B., *Vision of Peace: a Study of Benedictine Monastic Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963, 48.

² Jerome P. Theisen, O.S.B., *Community and Disunity: Symbols of Grace and Sin*. Collegeville, Minn.: St. John's University Press, 1985.

³ Leo Fowler, O.S.B., interview by author, Belmont, N.C., June 10, 1996.

⁴ Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of*

Learning and the Desire for God: a Study of Monastic Culture. New York: Fordham University Press, 1961, 16-17.

⁵ Paschal Baumstein, O.S.B., *My Lord of Belmont: a Biography of Leo Haid*. Charlotte, N.C.: Laney-Smith Inc., 1995, 33.

⁶ David Kessinger, O.S.B., interview by author, Belmont, N.C., March 14, 1996.

⁷ Simon J. Donoghue, "Thomas Oestreich and the Founding of a Great Library," *Catholic Library World* 65, no.3 (January/February/March 1995): 33-35.

⁸ Baumstein, *My Lord of Belmont*, 185-189.

⁹ Oliver Kapsner, O.S.B., *Benedictine Bibliography: an Author-Subject Union List* 2nd ed. Collegeville, Minn.: St. John's Abbey Press, 1962; First Supplement, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982.

¹⁰ Lee Ash, comp. *Subject Collections: a Guide to Special Collections and Subject Emphases as Reported by University, College, Public, and Special Libraries and Museums in the United States and Canada*. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1978, 122.

¹¹ Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1969.

¹² Muenster, Germany: Aschendorff, 1912 - .

¹³ New York: D.J. Sadlier, 1879 (reprint, Westminster, Md.: Ars Sacra, 1964).

¹⁴ Belmont (N.C.): Belmont Abbey Press, 1913.



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