

Benedict Option

Posted By *Rod Dreher* On December 12, 2013 @ 12:02 am In | [62 Comments](#)

Are we Rome? The question weighed on the minds of 2,000 libertarians who gathered this summer at FreedomFest in Las Vegas to talk about whether America is headed the way of the Roman empire. Bureaucratic decay, massive public debt, an overstretched military, a political system seemingly incapable of responding to challenges—the late Roman empire suffered these maladies, and so, some fear, does contemporary America.

If libertarians on the right worry about structural collapse, cultural and religious conservatives add a moral and spiritual dimension to the debate. Rising hedonism, waning religious observance, ongoing break-up of the family, and a general loss of cultural coherence—to traditionalists, these are signs of a possible Dark Age ahead.

Christians have been here before. Around the year 500, a generation after barbarians deposed the last Roman emperor, a young Umbrian man known to history only as Benedict was sent to Rome by his wealthy parents to complete his education. Disgusted by the city's decadence, Benedict fled to the forest to pray as a hermit.

Benedict gained a reputation for holiness and gathered other monks around him. Before dying circa 547, he personally founded a dozen monastic communities, and wrote his famous *Rule*, the guidebook for scores of monasteries that spread across Europe in the tumultuous centuries to follow.

Rome's collapse meant staggering loss. People forgot how to read, how to farm, how to govern themselves, how to build houses, how to trade, and even what it had once meant to be a human being. Behind monastery walls, though, in their chapels, scriptoriums, and refectories, Benedict's monks built lives of peace, order, and learning and spread their network throughout Western Europe.

They did not keep the fruits of their labors to themselves. Benedictines taught the peasants who gathered around their monasteries the Christian faith, as well as practical skills, like farming. Because monks of the order took a vow of "stability," meaning they were sworn to stay in that place until they died, Benedictine monasteries emerged as islands of sanity and serenity. These were the bases from which European civilization gradually re-emerged.

It is hard to overstate what Benedict—now Saint Benedict—and his followers accomplished. In the recent Thomas Merton lecture at Columbia University, law professor Russell Hittinger

summed up Benedict's lesson to the Dark Ages like this: "How to live life as a whole. Not a life of worldly success so much as one of *human* success."

Why are medieval monks relevant to our time? Because, says the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, they show that it is possible to construct "new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained" in a Dark Age—including, perhaps, an age like our own.

For MacIntyre, we too are living through a Fall of Rome-like catastrophe, one that is concealed by our liberty and prosperity. In his influential 1981 book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argued that the Enlightenment's failure to replace an expiring Christianity caused Western civilization to lose its moral coherence. Like the early medievals, we too have been cut off from our roots, and a shadow of cultural amnesia is falling across the land.

The Great Forgetting is taking a particular toll on American Christianity, which is losing its young in dramatic numbers. Those who remain within churches often succumb to a potent form of feel-good relativism that sociologists have called "moralistic therapeutic deism," which is dissolving historic Christian moral and theological orthodoxy.

A recent Pew survey found that Jews in America are in an even more advanced state of assimilation to secular modernity. The only Jews successfully resisting are the Orthodox, many of whom live in communities meaningfully separate and by traditions distinct from the world.

Is there a lesson here for Christians? Should they take what might be called the "Benedict Option": communal withdrawal from the mainstream, for the sake of sheltering one's faith and family from corrosive modernity and cultivating a more traditional way of life?

Progressive Evangelicals are engaged in a widely publicized lay movement called the New Monasticism, which typically involves single adults—and sometimes families—living in an intentional community, usually among the urban poor. Yet most people, especially those with spouses and children, will not be able to live so radically. Are there any models for them to follow?

Two contemporary lay Christian communities with roots planted in both the ancient church and the rural countryside offer glimpses into how the Benedict Option might work for ordinary people today.



Andrew Pudewa and his family, traditionalist Catholics, embraced the Benedict Option in 2006, leaving their home in San Diego for rural eastern Oklahoma. They wanted a more intensely Catholic life and to live in a place where they could learn to be more self-reliant. In their case, the Benedict part of the Benedict Option was literal: the Pudewas moved to be closer to the Benedictine monks of Clear Creek Abbey.

Seven years earlier, 12 Benedictines from the traditionalist Fontgombault Abbey in France established a daughter house in the rolling Ozark foothills an hour east of Tulsa. Some of the monks were returning Americans, former students of the late John Senior, a University of Kansas professor whose popular Great Books courses in the 1970s revived interest in the Catholic sources of the Western tradition.

“We just follow the old monastic life. We pray, worship, and do manual labor and give counseling to people,” Abbot Philip Anderson, a former Senior student, told *The Washington Times* in 2003. “There’s a whole culture war going on and a series of disappointments with the Catholic Church in America. People look to this monastery as a new beginning, as a new element that has a solid backing in a long tradition of monastic life.”

Now in its second decade, Clear Creek is home to more than 40 white-robed monks and to a growing community of laymen like the Pudewas, who—inspired by the writings of Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, and Wendell Berry—moved to the countryside to be near the monastery and embrace a more agrarian lifestyle. The lay Catholic community centered on the abbey now has about 100 people in it.

Though the Benedict Option is about creating a community of shared values, the Clear Creekers are not separatists. These Catholics get along well with their Baptist neighbors. What’s more, says Pudewa, the community’s lack of formal structure is a secret to its success.

“Everybody’s on their own,” he says. “If you find property around here, that’s great, but nobody’s organizing this for you. If you love the monks and want to go to mass every day, you can, but if not, nobody’s critical. There’s very much a live-and-let-live attitude around here.”

Many Clear Creekers are teaching themselves old-fashioned skills that will allow the community to get by in case of emergency, but they are not neo-Amish. Some work the land, but no family supports itself with farming. The monastery’s abbot tells me relative material poverty exists among the laity, but there’s also a richness in spirit and family life that you can’t put a price on.

“I think there’s a kind of gratitude we all share,” Pudewa says. “That’s what bonds people together a little more, rather than that we want to push our version of how to be more Catholic on other people.”

Clear Creek’s mothers and fathers bring up their children largely disconnected from mainstream American popular culture. Yet, though homeschooled, the community’s children are not being raised in, well, a monastery. They go to Tulsa for swing dancing twice a week, for example. Still, their relative isolation makes the mission of forming the children’s character easier, Pudewa says.

Stressing that the kids are not being taught to shun life outside the Oklahoma hills, Pudewa adds, “The purpose of the cocoon is not to be wrapped up in yourself forever; the purpose is to

prepare the butterfly.”

The Clear Creek Benedictines may remain for ages, but if the lay Catholics are going to enjoy any longevity, they need long-term means of material support. Some fathers work in the area construction business. Another sells insurance in Tulsa. Others telecommute—like Pudewa, dependent on the Internet for an income. (Ironically, the same technology accelerating the broader culture’s unraveling also enables latter-day pilgrims to sustain their families in rural exile.)

Pudewa, whose booming homeschool-teaching business employs members of four community families, balances his religious idealism with a practical streak. Holding on to future generations in such a geographically remote place requires commercial creativity and entrepreneurial initiative, he says. Spiritual conviction isn’t enough.

“You have to grow. You can’t have a community where everybody sits there doing nothing until they die,” he says. “We need to be about building things and thinking evangelically. That’s what attracts kids: doing things.”



The Alaska town of Eagle River is now part of greater Anchorage. But in the early 1970s, the settlement at the base of the Chugach Mountains was more or less the outback. Back then, Evangelical ministry leaders Harold and Barbara Dunaway bought five acres of land in the middle of a spruce and birch forest and moved their flock north from Anchorage. Their model was L’Abri, the legendary—and still extant—Protestant ministry Francis Schaeffer founded in Switzerland.

In 1987, the entire church community converted to Orthodox Christianity, and entered the Antiochian Orthodox Church. Harold became Father Harold; the church became St. John Cathedral. Cheap land in Eagle River allowed congregants to buy and build houses within walking distance of the church. Today, about 70 families live within a mile of St. John’s, in what looks like an old-fashioned village.

Father Marc Dunaway, a high-school junior when his parents, now deceased, moved to Eagle River, is today the community’s spiritual leader. It wasn’t founded on a particular religious vision, he says, but rather out of “a desire to hold on to the normal, human community that existed everywhere until the modern era.”

The hardships the community went through in the early years—grim winters, no running water—built strong bonds. Though everyday life is much easier now, the St. John’s community still works to care for each other in times of struggle. Recently, neighbors realized that a church member was going through a difficult personal time and stepped forward to help cook and care for her children.

“Christian love can be expressed in very practical ways when people are close by,” says Dunaway. “A friend is never far away. Also, community relationships can help people rub off their rough edges. This is necessary for spiritual growth.”

Like the Catholics of Clear Creek, the Eagle River Orthodox don’t live in a community with a formal structure. Its members mostly work around the Anchorage area and see each other at worship, at the parish school, or at social events. Sharing the church, a school, and the neighborhood, though, gives the community a sense of cohesion and camaraderie.

Over the years, some believers have parted ways, leaving in search of a stricter Orthodox communal experience. This is a perennial challenge to communities organized around ideas, religious or otherwise. What do you do when some members believe others are falling away from right belief or right practice? There are no simple answers. A certain flexibility is necessary.

“I think the cure for any community to avoid these sad troubles is to be open and generous, and to resist the urges to build walls and isolate itself,” Dunaway says.

As newcomers to Orthodoxy, the communal part of St. John’s life seemed off-putting to Shelley and Jerry Finkler, who converted with their children in 2007. The Finklers lived in an exurb a 20-minute drive from the cathedral, which made full participation in services throughout the week difficult and hindered the family’s spiritual life. They loved the liturgies and vespers but thought living among the people you went to church with was strange.

A brief experiment in living within walking distance of the cathedral changed their view. “Even though we were way poor that year, the quality of our life was so rich because of being able to make it to the services, and also because of the relationships we had with the people there,” Shelley Finkler says.

When the Finklers moved back to their exurban house, they were surprised by how much they missed Eagle River.

“In our old neighborhood, everybody was of similar economic status, and we all knew each other, but there wasn’t the sense of the common good that you have when you’re living around people who share your faith,” she says. “That made a big difference when it came to reaching out to help each other.”

This past summer, the Finklers sold their house and moved back to the St. John’s community—this time, as the host family for the St. James House, a cathedral ministry in which single young adults come to live for a year of prayer, work, and discernment.

“We think it is healthier for our children, ourselves, and everybody who lives around us to know that if you have a problem, there are 150 helping hands and hearts around you,” Shelley says. “There are no rules here, and we’re not closed off. There’s no weirdness. It just exists, and the

center of it is the church.”



It’s easy to be pessimistic about the viability of Benedict Option-style communities. History gives countless examples of intentional communities that began with high ideals but foundered on human frailty.

In recent years, pizza tycoon Tom Monaghan’s attempt to found a conservative Catholic community in southwest Florida fell apart largely because of Monaghan’s eccentric authoritarianism. In central Texas, Homestead Heritage, a Pentecostal-style back-to-the-land commune with Anabaptist overtones, has been the target of scathing accusations. A 2012 *Texas Observer* investigation revealed what the newspaper called “families broken apart, child abuse and allegations of mind control, cover-ups and secrecy.” In a statement, Homestead Heritage denounced the charges as “slanderous and inflammatory.”

Experience suggests that in the modern world, Benedict Option settlements have to be both relatively open to the world and vigilant about respecting personal liberty.

“I think trying to understand that freedom is pretty important,” says Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, who leads a pioneering New Monastic community in Durham, North Carolina. “Part of the grace of stability is knowing that everything’s a gift. You have to hold gifts loosely.”

This is a special challenge when your community’s very existence depends on renewing a calling to stand apart. That awareness of difference can turn toxic.

“Students at some small Catholic colleges are being taught to feel that as Catholics living in America they are members of an alienated, aggrieved, morally superior minority,” says John Zmirak, who was writer-in-residence at Thomas More College in Merrimack, New Hampshire until resigning in 2012. “They are learning that they owe no loyalty to our institutions, but should be working to replace them with an aggressive, intolerant Catholic regime. In other words, they are being taught to think and act like radical Muslims living in France.”

Zmirak, a traditionalist Catholic, concedes the appeal of Benedict Option communities to beleaguered Christians. Staying true to your values in a world that aggressively challenges them at every turn is exhausting. But withdrawal rarely works, he insists. “It’s looking for a bushel where your light will be safe from the wind.”

Yet the Clear Creek and Eagle River Christians communities have stumbled onto models that are modest, balanced, and so far sustainable. They hold on to distinctiveness without becoming rigid, intolerant, or controlling, by standing apart from the world without demonizing it.

“If you isolate yourself, you will become weird,” Father Marc Dunaway warns. “It is a tricky

balance between allowing freedom and openness on the one hand, and maintaining a community identity on the other. The idea of community itself should not be allowed to become an idol. A community is a living organism that must change and grow and adapt.”

There is no way to have Benedict Option communities without giving up a significant measure of individual autonomy—and the opportunity for career advancement—as the cost of stability. For those who take the Benedict Option, though, its rewards are a pearl of great price. These communities offer a way for believers to thicken Christian culture in a time of moral revolution and religious dissolution. And if they’re successful over time, they may impart their wisdom to outsiders who crave light in the postmodern darkness.

In this way, they might fulfill Pope Benedict XVI’s prophecy that believing Christians in the West would soon be fewer, but would serve as a “creative minority”—and in so doing, determine the future. [1]

Those taking the Benedict Option—Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox—are tiny minorities, certainly, but they may yet have more influence than anyone can now imagine. After all, St. Benedict didn’t set out to save Western civilization; he only wanted to start what he called a “school for conversion.” He was the right man for his moment, a period of calamitous transition—but also one of opportunity.

Wilson-Hartgrove, who has lived in the New Monastic community he founded for a decade, says this is another era of profound civilizational transition, and yes, opportunity. For Christians responding creatively to it, it’s a time of trial and error. Yet all the major religious orders and movements in Christian history arose from experiments undertaken by ordinary people engaging the challenges of their place and time. “That’s the only way the church ever finds these things out,” he says.

Rod Dreher blogs at www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher.



This article appears in the November/December 2013 issue.

62 Comments To "Benedict Option"

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[...] The Chosen – I thought this book was fascinating, particularly the education style described, and the way their community was set apart from the rest of the world. Reminds me of the discussion about the Benedict Option. [...]

#9 Pingback By [L'«opzione Benedetto»](#) | [il blog di Costanza Miriano](#) On March 15, 2016 @ 7:02 pm

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[...] of this blog have likely heard of the Benedict Option, propounded by Rod Dreher as a Christian response to a crumbling society. The thinking behind it [...]

#12 Comment By [Pat_H](#) On June 6, 2017 @ 5:56 pm

If we are Rome, perhaps we should try The Constantine Option:

[2]

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