



The Benedictine way of learning

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

Clad in the familiar black robes of his order, Benedictine Father Leonard Vickers sat in his sparsely furnished monastery room and remembered his first attraction to the Benedictine tradition.

It "was the way of life of the monks," he said, their "fulfillment and contentment." It wasn't until later that he grew to understand "their way of life is a way of learning."

Father Vickers is the prior-administrator of St. Anselm's, a Benedictine abbey nestled on a verdant hilltop in northeast Washington, D.C. In an interview, he discussed the special love for scholarship and learning that has marked the entire history of the Benedictine order.

One of the oldest forms of monastic life in the Western Church, the order was founded by St. Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century.

"St. Benedict lived in an age when the world was being torn apart," Father Vickers said. "His first reaction was to turn away from that world. He did and became a hermit."

But he abandoned that life when a number of monks asked him to lead them. Toward the end of his life he wrote a rule for his followers. The Rule of St. Benedict is the earliest rule of religious discipline in Western Europe.

"The first demand of the rule," noted Father Vickers, "is that a monk should truly seek Christ in his life."

Due to that rule, he added, "naturally the monks felt a need to preserve what was good in life. They became the custodians of learning as Europe was torn apart by various wars and invasions. They were the custodians of art,

architecture, agriculture — all aspects of life."

This stress on education and learning has never diminished in the Benedictine order. And, like many Benedictine abbeys, St. Anselm's operates a boys' school.

St. Anselm's was founded in 1924, with close scholarly links to The Catholic University of America. Monks from St. Anselm's have always taught at Catholic University and at other universities and theological schools in Washington.

But, Father Vickers quickly added, learning is not solely an exercise of the classroom.

"Learning is about the whole of life," the priest said. "You can find Christ in all that God created," he said, especially in the

faith of others.

That belief — that Christ dwells in all people — gave rise to another rule of St. Benedict valued in every monastery: the rule of hospitality to all. "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say, 'I came as a guest and you received me,'" Benedict wrote.

"The whole attitude of hospitality is tied in with learning," said Father Vickers, because Christ is discovered in others, in the way they live and love.

At St. Anselm's, guests check in for a few hours or a few days of quiet reflection, prayer or a walk in the shade of towering pines.

Father Vickers is a British priest of the Douai Abbey in Reading, England. He is administrator of St.

Anselm's on a temporary basis.

Asked what he would tell a person who says, "I already have faith, therefore I don't need to exercise my reason," Father Vickers thought momentarily.

"I'd say, 'You can do that, but your life won't be very happy.'"

He added that "learning is a search for truth. Learning isn't finding the answers to everything in life. The great secret of learning is knowing we'll never understand everything."

"Learning is deepening our understanding of what life is all about. Your faith is deepened through knowledge," said Father Vickers.

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

Abracadabra it wasn't

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Mark wanted readers of his Gospel to understand that Jesus was not a good luck charm, a magician, as the following story illustrates:

A religious official falls at Jesus' feet, asking a favor of him. And a curious crowd gathers. Picture the scene:

The official is a desperate father. His little daughter is seriously ill and he will do anything — anything — to save her.

Having heard stories of Jesus' healing powers, the man decides to take a chance. It may be a long shot but, in a case like this, who worries about the odds?

When Jesus and the man set out for his house the crowd follows. In the crowd is a woman who has

been hemorrhaging for 12 years. She has spent all her money on professional healers and has only grown worse. She, too, has heard about Jesus.

Pushing through the throng, she finally gets close to Jesus and cautiously touches his cloak. Is there a strong element of magic in her thinking? Does she suppose that some sort of mysterious power emanates from Jesus, and maybe she can make contact with it?

But the woman has to be careful. According to the law, her malady has rendered her "unclean" and her touch could defile Jesus. Better not to chance detection.

Jesus, however, does find her out, and she is terrified. Falling down in front of him, she blurts out her whole story. But instead of getting a reprimand she hears him say, quite gently:

"Daughter, it is your faith that has cured you. Go in peace and be free of this illness" (Mark 5:34).

It was faith, not superstition, that brought the transformation.

The woman had to establish a relationship with Jesus. Mere physical contact was not enough.

Faith is not some sort of abracadabra. It involves a free, accepting relationship with Jesus, an intelligent act which transcends naked intelligence and engages the whole person.

Now, when Jairus, the anxious father, sees this remarkable cure, his hopes rise. The odds are now on his side.

It is precisely at this point that messengers arrive to tell him his daughter has died. His hopes dissolve.

Sensing this, Jesus tells him: "Fear is useless. What is needed is