

Why Benedict?

## Fr Grant Bullen from St Theodoreâ??s Parish, Fullarton, reflects on the theme of his Lenten series for 2021 . . . â??The Way of Benedictâ?•

In 2017 a lively and controversial book hit the streets â?? â??The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nationâ??. It was not exceptional in its scholarship, but the central idea and the context in which it appeared, made it fascinating. Indeed, The New York Times called it â??the most important religious book of the decade.â?• Its author, Rod Dreher, is a well-known conservative commentator in the USA, and part of that coalition of conservative Christians who were so crucial in the election of Donald Trump as President.

In *this* book, however, Dreher broke step with his colleagues by saying that while it *had* been an achievement to defeat the liberal agenda (as represented by Hilary Clinton) in the 2016 election, it was only a short-term victory. For Christianity had already lost the war! America was already a post-Christian nation, and no amount of political action was going to change this. It was a waste of energy for Christians to form coalitions to challenge and change legislation.

Instead, Christians should withdraw from involvement in politics and create a genuinely alternative culture, separate and distinct from secular society. Christians should â??retreat to the marginsâ?? and build new intentional faith communities, built on the foundation of a more regular and disciplined spiritual practice; with a clear sense of moral distinctiveness; with a particular focus on nurturing and educating children in Christianityâ??s distinct and different priorities and demands. Dreher summarised his goal as being to â??embrace exile from main-stream culture and construct a resilient countercultureâ?•. From this position of a renewed and deepened faith, embedded in Christian communities â?? as distinct from what he critiques as the superficial nature of the contemporary Church â?! â??an insipid pseudo-Christianityâ?•â?? Christianity would â??one dayâ?? be able to re-engage with society, and perhaps return to a central and influential position. His strategy is to â??embrace a limited withdrawal from the world so Christians can more effectively show the love of God to it.â?•

So why did Dreher call his book *â??The Benedict Optionâ??*? Because he sees in the Benedict movement of the 6<sup>th</sup> century an historical basis and model for the Christian withdrawal and renewal he advocates.

My theological mentor, Rowan Williams, wrote a typically insightful review of *â??The Benedict Optionâ??* in the *New Statesman* (May 2017) in which he made significant criticisms of Dreherâ??s argument. He parted company with Dreherâ??s *â??limited range of social threats to faithâ?•*, noting that the author seemed unhelpfully focused on what he described as *â??the LGBT agendaâ??*. Rowan Williams does not agree . . . and wonders why the more obvious (and in Williamsâ?? mind more dangerous) threats of a social, economic and political nature went unmentioned. But even more serious for Williams is Dreherâ??s call for Christians to disengage from mainline society. This *â??radical rejection of social involvementâ??* is faithless to a central vocational duty of incarnational Christianity. Williams says we are to be deeply engaged in society at all levels, bringing our unique insight to the debates and policies that shape our world.

And yet Williams admits his attraction to Dreherâ??s idea â?? that it is time for Christians to return to a model of intentional communities of faith and practice that offer a genuine alternative to the secular consumerist trends in western society. He says of â??The Benedict Optionâ??; â??It puts a solid and appealing case for religious communities to be more serious about the disciplines that sustain prayer, compassion and integrity.â?•

And Rowan Williams, himself a credentialed Benedict scholar, does agree there *is* something about the historical â??Benedict movementâ?? that speaks to the contemporary church. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the western empire â?? the Roman establishment within which the Christian faith spread and the Church prospered â?? this economic, political and social order declined, wobbled . . . and then collapsed. The societies of what we now call â??western Europeâ?? were successfully invaded and colonised by â??barbariansâ?? from the north. It was a time of chaos and violence, of economic collapse and mass migrations, and much of what was regarded as â??civilisedâ?? was lost. What history still calls *the Dark Ages*, began.

It was in this world that western monasticism, built on the Rule of Benedict, came to birth and flourished. Small (to begin with) intentional Christian communities, founded on an ordered life of prayer, study, labour and community life â?? all directed by the Christian Gospel â?? spread throughout the west. They became not only little islands of faith in the barbarian flood, but also islands of â??lost civilisationâ?? â?? of books, scholarship, art, crafts and agriculture.

It was in these monastic refuges where the Christian faith was not only protected and preserved â?? but renewed, deepened and re-envisioned. And it was from these monasteries that Western civilisation as we know it, emerged to claim a central place in the culture of the west. (Benedict is sometimes called the *Father of Western Civilisation* and the *Patron of Europe*.) Hence Dreherâ??s attraction to the movement as a model for Christians in our time. In a new age of barbarism â?? as he sees it â?? this is the path for the church to follow.

And for all the reservations Rowan Williams has about *â??The Benedict Optionâ??*, it is an attraction that he (and I) also share.

This yearâ??s Lenten Series â?? The Way of Benedict â?? is the second part of the exploration we began in 2020, for western monasticism grew directly out of the Desert Elders Movement. We will be

looking at Benedict â?? the history, the Rule, and (most particularly) the way of ordered Christian living he articulated as the Way of Christ.

Personally, I found Dreherâ??s take on Benedict somewhat â??thinâ??, and I am persuaded by Rowan Williamsâ??s substantial critique. And yet I remain in strong sympathy with Dreherâ??s underlying question in *â??The Benedict Optionâ??*. Does the Benedict-movement model help 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians re-envision our life as church today?

## **Date Created**

March 23, 2021