



10 YEARS AFTER

Br. Dietrich's vision and spirit live on in the Benedictine Institute

“The Benedictine Institute furthers Saint John’s University’s commitment to the Catholic intellectual tradition, and it perpetuates the hallmarks of a Benedictine education: love, prayer, stability, conversation, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community. This dynamic relationship creates arenas for vital Christian living and service, each following the venerable Benedictine tradition of being a seedbed for social and cultural renewal.” –Br. Dietrich Reinhart '71, OSB, former Saint John’s University president

By Dana Drazenovich

Saint John’s University’s strong sense of community drew visiting assistant professor Hassan Hussein to the Global Business Leadership faculty in fall 2017.

He soon learned through the Benedictine Institute that community was one of the hallmarks of the Benedictine tradition upon which Saint John’s was founded.

The Benedictine spirit is so integral to SJU’s culture that we often say “it’s in the water.” The Benedictine Institute was created 10 years ago to keep that spirit flowing and help employees like Hussein understand the religious values and ethos that characterize a Saint John’s education.

“Part of the history of the Institute is how do we keep this in the water?” said Institute director Rodger Narloch '91. “And when there are fewer monastic members directly involved in the academic institution so that it just sort of filters through the entire culture, somebody has to be more intentional in helping to ensure that happens.”

The Institute offers a variety of ways for faculty and staff to experience and learn about Saint John’s Catholic Benedictine tradition. Hussein signed up for the Benedictine Education Program to learn more about Catholicism, rare in his home

country of Egypt. It proved to be a valuable social agent, and more.

“It affects everything I’m doing in class,” he said.

Keeping the spirit flowing

The Benedictine Institute is one of the many ways Saint John’s continues to feel the ripples of the visionary leadership of former President Br. Dietrich Reinhart '71, OSB.

The Board of Regents established the Institute in October 2008 to honor Br. Dietrich upon his retirement after 17 years as president. He died two months later.

A decade after its inception, the Institute continues to carry out the mission to strengthen the Catholic and Benedictine character of the University.

“Dietrich really was a true visionary,” said Gloria “Chick” Hardy, the Institute’s recently retired assistant director. “He set the sail and the winds of the sail in a certain direction. We’ve had to pare it down a little bit from his original vision, but the sails are still open and I think we’re being effective.”

You don’t have to be Catholic or Christian to fully tap into the Benedictine wisdom and lifestyle, Hardy explained. The



Benedictine Institute founder and Saint John's University President Dietrich Reinhart, OSB (right) and Abbot John Klassen, OSB (left) presented Sister Wendy Beckett with the Colman J. Barry Award for Distinguished Contributions to Religion and Society Jan. 30, 2006 at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, England.

Benedictine Institute strives to help employees of all religious backgrounds understand Benedictine character and adopt or integrate elements of it into their work as they choose.

“You can understand what’s going on in the Rule (of Benedict) with respect to hospitality even if you’re not Christian — it makes sense,” said Abbot John Klassen ’71, OSB. “You can understand what Benedict is saying about leadership even if you’re not an abbot, but if you’re a dad or a mom, in terms of ways you want to raise your kids.”

Learning Benedictine principles can have a dual benefit – what Fr. Hilary Thimmesch ’50, OSB, former Saint John’s president and the Institute’s first director, described as “a kind of combination of thoughtfulness – interiority – and community awareness.”

The principles of community, hospitality and stewardship prompted Hussein to adapt his instruction to better address his students’ different learning styles.

“I should accommodate everyone so everyone feels part of the community, everyone feels important, every voice counts,” Hussein said. “Changing or diversifying my teaching methods was one way to accommodate everyone.”

Ideally, employees who take part in the Institute’s programs

will help keep the Benedictine spirit circulating.

“It’s about understanding what the hallmarks are,” Narloch said, “seeing them in their day-to-day lives and then thinking ‘How can I facilitate this in a more intentional way?’ ”

Going to the source

When Fr. Hilary took the Institute’s helm in July 2009, he had only a few of Br. Dietrich’s correspondences to guide him. He knew one important piece would be Benedictine Heritage Tours, which were established by interim Saint John’s President Dan Whalen ’70. Whalen and his wife Katharine also funded the tours from 2009-14.

The tours offer faculty and staff full immersion into Benedictine history through a 12-day journey following Saint Benedict’s footsteps in Italy and visiting SJU’s and CSB’s founding monasteries in Metten and Eichstatt, Bavaria.

“I could still feel like a visitor in this setting, not having the Catholic tradition or family history in the area,” said academic advisor Theresa Anderson. “One of the things the Heritage Tour did for me is help me feel like I can more genuinely be a part of this community.”

Participants first study the history of the sites they will visit and then take the tour as a group, living and learning Benedictine values such as listening and community and sharing their own expertise or experiences as equals.

“One of the really impactful pieces was being with colleagues,” Anderson said. “All of the people on that trip came from different perspectives, I think, which made for interesting conversation and really good humor.”

A donor has funded another trip for May 2019, and Narloch hopes to continue to offer Heritage Tours periodically as donations permit.

Branching in new directions

The Benedictine Institute continues to evolve as it enters its second decade.

Fr. Hilary started with Heritage Tours and significant speakers, and new programs took shape under the leadership of Fr. Mark Thamert '73, OSB, Br. David Paul Lange, OSB, and then Narloch.



Events such as Lunch and Learns, which feature members of the monastic community and others presenting Benedictine-related topics, have swelled from 10-12 attendees to more than 100.

The Benedictine Education Program, introduced in spring 2016, features four conversational sessions on each campus, led by members of the communities of both monasteries and focused on Benedictine principles.

“It was a discussion, it was a gathering, it was a learning

process — and eating,” Hussein said. He appreciated the social aspect of sharing meals in the monks’ own dining room and experiencing their daily rituals.

More recent additions that will continue into the coming year include Building Community, an informal gathering Friday mornings in rotating locations (including a new one at CSB), and Lectio in the Library, weekly lunchtime contemplative readings of the Scriptures in Alcuin and Clemens libraries.

A decade after the Benedictine Institute was founded, Hardy thinks Br. Dietrich would be pleased.

“One that it’s still going,” she said, “but two that we really have had an impact on especially employees, and hopefully that carries over into the students, too.”

A complete list of 2018-2019 Benedictine Institute events is available at csbsju.edu/benedictine-institute ▶

Dana Drazenovich is a former journalist and public relations practitioner who teaches Communication and First Year Seminar at CSB/SJU.



Above: CSB/SJU academic advisor Theresa Anderson (third from left) was part of the Benedictine Heritage Tour that in May 2013 visited Subiaco, Italy – site of Saint Benedict’s three-year hermitage during the fifth century in which he established the groundwork of the Rule of Saint Benedict.

Above left: Fr. Mark Thamert shared his final reflections on life during a Benedictine Institute “Lunch and Learn” session April 5, 2017 at the SJU Quad’s Centenary Room. Fr. Mark died 24 days later.