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BEGINNING WITH BENEDICTA

It was in connection with President John F. Kennedy's death that I first heard Stephen Spender's poem entitled, "I Think Continually of Those Who Were Truly Great". Since then it has often occurred to me how fittingly these lines describe my deep admiration for Mother Benedicta Riepp, the woman who is the foundress of the Benedictine sisterhood in the United States and the person for whom this very building was named. Here is how Spender says it:

I think continually of those who were truly great.  
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history  
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,  
Endless and singing . . .

The names of those who in their lives fought for life,  
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.  
Born of the sun, they traveled a short while toward the sun,  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

The vivid air of our campus is indeed signed with the honor of Benedicta Riepp. Who among us sitting in this beautiful building, the Benedicta Arts Center, can deny this? Perhaps we even recall some of the reasons why the air here is signed with her honor. We remember her as the one who longed to come and personally establish the first Benedictine women's monastery here in Minnesota. Unable to do so herself she sent other nuns to make the first foundation in St. Cloud. Some will recall the unusually courageous steps she took to make possible self-governance in these Benedictine women's communities. The tragedy of her death of tuberculosis at age 36, only 10 years after her arrival in America, remains with many of us. The story of her life has found its way into a set of volumes called NOTABLE WOMEN OF AMERICA. Our own Sister Emmanuel Renner is the author of this entry. Today forty motherhouses of Benedictine

women in the United States, now numbering at least 4,000 women, look to her as as their American foundress. The recognition that every year there are women from these communities who make a pilgrimage to her grave in our convent cemetery keeps reminding us that this campus is indeed signed with her honor.

I titled my talk "Beginning with Benedicta" because I want to devote the first part of my presentation to looking at what Benedicta began and particularly to how she began it. During the last part of my talk I would like to look at how all of us present here can begin the 1992-1993 school year with some messages from Benedicta's life.

Benedicta Riepp was born in Germany on June 28, 1825. Baptized Maria Sybilla Riepp, she was the oldest child of Johann Riepp, a glassblower, and Katherine {Mayr} Riepp. When she was nineteen she entered the cloistered Benedictine convent in Eichstaett, a community eighty miles from her home. She received the habit and the name, Benedicta in August, 1844. She made her final vows at age twenty-four and shortly after that she became a teacher and the director of novices.

Around this time, Boniface Wimmer, a German monk who had recently led the first group of Benedictine men to the United States, visited her community to describe the plight of the German immigrants in America and to ask these Benedictine women to send some Sisters to this country. The prioress of the community asked for volunteers and found the twenty-seven year old Benedicta among those willing to go. She appointed her leader of the group of three women who left for the United States on the steamer, Washington, on June 18, 1852. They disembarked in New York harbor on July 4, amidst the bewildering noise and celebration of Independence Day.

When they arrived at their destination, St. Mary's, Elk County in

northwestern Pennsylvania they found an isolated and poor community of German farmers. A group of Redemptorist priests and a community of Notre Dame Sisters had already attempted a settlement there and decided against it. Their first house was a dilapidated building that gave inadequate protection against the Pennsylvania winters. Benedicta and her companions, Walburga Dietrich and Maura Flieger accepted with amazing resolution the hardship, poverty and inconvenience which faced them on all sides. They arranged their new home as best they could and within two months they opened a free school for girls receiving for their work a combined salary of twenty-five dollars a month from the public tax. Several months after their arrival Benedicta wrote a letter to German Bishop friend in which she expressed in clear terms the "two-fold mission" for which they had come, "namely, to instruct young girls, and to spread the Benedictine Order in this part of the world". Mother Benedicta found that the poverty of the people hampered their efforts to teach the children, for the children cannot learn if they are cold and hungry. She wrote to King Ludwig of Bavaria and asked that he send her assistance through his well organized missionary foundation. She explained that "the children come to school half clothed and stiff from cold, forced to sit all day with nothing to eat but a piece of black bread". Despite hardships, however, Benedicta's community at St. Mary's prospered. They maintained a monastic observance which as nearly as possible duplicated the one they had come from at Eichstaett. In a letter to King Ludwig early in 1953 Benedicta reported that 60 to 80 girls were attending their school. Three years after their arrival in America, she writes that they have 21 novices and 7 candidates.

Wimmer tried to assist the rapidly growing community wherever possible. But the abbot's assistance was accompanied by jurisdictional claims. He expected them to submit to him for approval any decisions they made concerning their community. He changed their daily schedule to suit his view of the kind of monastic observance they should follow. He selected candidates for

their novitiate and vetoed those of whom he disapproved. Such interference with the internal workings of the community had not been a part of Benedicta's previous experience in Europe. It appears that beginning about 1855 she began to look for ways to escape the abbot's intrusions into the affairs of the community. In June of 1856, Mother Benedicta sent Sisters to Erie, Pennsylvania to begin the first daughterhouse of the American Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary's.

It was at the time of her fifth year in the United States (May 1857) that Benedicta wrote a letter to Abbot Wimmer requesting permission to go to Minnesota. In the letter she explained, "it is not possible for me to remain here since contentment and inner peace are lacking . . ." When the move to Minnesota planned by Benedicta was to take place she accompanied the group of Sisters as far as Erie from where they were to continue on to Minnesota. She herself did not, however, accompany them any further. Instead with the permission and encouragement of Bishop Young of Erie she proceeded to Europe to collect funds and to ascertain with Rome the extent of her authority and that of Abbot Wimmer in The American foundation from Eichstett. Diplomatically, she presented her complaints in the form of questions. She asked {1} whether the Abbot had the right to decide which candidates could enter the novitiate in Benedictine convents in the United States, {2} whether he had the right to decide which novices might make final vows, {3} whether solemn vows for the Sisters were compatible with conditions in America, {4} whether Wimmer or the Sisters themselves had the right to choose superiors in the American convents, and finally {5} whether he or the convent chapter had the right to control the Sisters' financial affairs.

Abbot Wimmer was called to account by Roman authorities and asked to respond to Mother Benedicta's charges. He replied that they were "fables" and "coarse lies". He countered Mother Benedicta's complaints with accusations of insubordination and he petitioned

the Vatican to place all Benedictine Convents in America under his authority. In December, 1859 the Roman judges published their decision concerning the American Benedictine sisters. All of Wimmer's major petitions were denied. Henceforth jurisdiction over Benedictine women in America would rest not with Wimmer but with the bishops in whose diocese the sisters had settled. In addition, the sisters would no longer be bound by solemn but rather by simple vows. This decision settled the question of cloister and the obligation to pray the divine office, for as simply professed religious they would not be obliged to observe either.

The Roman authorities made it clear, however, that they did not support the action of Mother Benedicta, even though their decision implicitly acknowledged the correctness of her position. They censured her for her obstinacy, and ordered her to return to Eichstaett. By now, however, her health was rapidly deteriorating, and a long journey was out of the question. Learning that she was in the final stages of tuberculosis, Bishop Thomas Grace of St. Paul petitioned Rome for a suspension of the order for her return and it was granted. Mother Benedicta was allowed to remain in the St. Cloud convent. This was where the Benedictine Sisters settled in Minnesota before they established their motherhouse here in St. Joseph.

Three month before her death Benedicta wrote a letter to her confessor in which she acknowledges the pain of the controversy. She asks her confessor to request pardon for her of Wimmer, "for all the disagreeableness he received on account of me." Sister Incarnata Girgen in her book, BEHIND THE BEGINNINGS, comments on this request for pardon. She says, "Some might view this as an apology or an acknowledgement that she was wrong. Instead, is it not a sign of her greatness that she could acknowledge the pain which differnces in vision can cause while still holding and pursuing as she did, her vision for a congregation of Benedictine Sisters in America." Benedicta Riepp died on March 15, 1862, at

the age of thirty-six. Hers was the first death among the small band of nuns settled here in Minnesota at the time. Joseph O'Connell's poignant sculpture of her death scene can be viewed in the Gathering Place on the right as you enter. Her ten years in the United States had been full and tumultuous, and though she had suffered what to all external appearances seemed defeat, she had nevertheless succeeded in founding communities which in later years would grow and thrive beyond the expectations of most and in the process she established the principle that American communities should be independent of abbatial control and possess the power to order their own lives.

In 1957 when the community here at St. Benedict's celebrated the centennial of its beginnings here in Minnesota, the woman who was then the Abbess at Eichstaett came to be present with us for the festivities. In her message to our community she shared the following:

I have been told, when Mother Benedicta Riepp did not know where she stood and when deep darkness had set in all around her she had a most beautiful dream. She saw a large tree growing up, covered all over with beautiful white blossoms. She took the tree as a symbol of her future community. She did not see much of that tree in her lifetime. It is a rule that the pioneers always shed their blood only into the foundations and they seldom see much growth.

Now that we have looked at what Benedicta began in the United States and particularly what she began in Minnesota, I would like to suggest a message from her to us as we begin the 1992-1993 school year. It seems clear to me that her life was not a particularly happy one, but that it did have deep meaning. In that final letter to her confessor before her death she says, "I consider myself fortunate, and the dear Lord may let me live or die. I am able to look into the future in peace." We have noted in Benedicta's life a meaning so profound and enduring that it

stretches through the 130 years since her death to all of us who occupy this campus at this moment in history as well as to those who have been here before our time.

I believe Benedicta would urge us not to wear ourselves out looking for happiness. Instead she would have us search ardently for the meaning of our life. It is meaning and purpose that makes life worth living. What might that mean for you students gathered on this campus this fall. Meaning can be sought and found particularly in the liberal arts education which you have deliberately chosen by coming to these two colleges. The Core Curriculum which is designed as a foundation for every student who comes to St. Benedict's and St. John's is described as addressing the fundamental and recurring questions about our own existence and our role in this world. These courses are so important that we won't let you get out of here without taking them. Each of you, however, has a set of courses which are electives -- that is they are your choice. In choosing these you want to be sure to use them to assist you in your personal search for meaning. Try to resist the temptation to use up your electives by taking only courses related to your major. Such options are likely to be more concerned with making a living than with living a life.

In my experiences with advising students, I often hear them say, "I have always wanted to take a course in art, or music, or Scripture, or theater, or history, or philosophy, or ceramics, or poetry, or geology, or chemistry, or literature, or theology, etc.". I believe these choices have much to do with those particular students' search for meaning. To you students here I would advise, don't let anyone talk you out of these longings. Do also think particularly about philosophy and theology courses as a help in your efforts to focus in on the meaning of life. In Jung's COLLECTED WORKS {1958}, he claims:

Among all my patients in the second half of life -- that is to say over 35 -- there has not been one whose problem in the

last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that everyone of them fell ill because he [she] had lost what the living religions of every age have given their followers, {p. 334}.

What does the centrality of meaning which we have focused on in Benedicta's life have to say to the non-students here -- the faculty, the staff, the support staff and all our friends who have gathered here with us this morning? Perhaps her message to us would be concerned with the obstacles in adult life that can wash away or gradually destroy the meaning we had garnered for ourselves in the course of becoming adult. Among the worst forms of erosion of our carefully acquired life meanings are power, prestige and possessions. While we all have a normal hunger for these conditions they can turn on us, become overly important or all consuming and thus gradually blot out the meanings which were once central to our lives. Luckily most of us do not have to set out to wage an intentional battle against these conditions. Usually all we have to do is accept and work with the set-backs and failures that are a part of ordinary human living. The painful happenings that enter all of our lives sooner or later have a way of diminishing our prestige, our power and frequently even our possessions. The catch is that we have to be willing to grow in the midst of that suffering. In an article on prayer in a recent AMERICA magazine William O'Malley says "Wisdom does not come simply from suffering -- it comes from suffering reflected on, accepted, assimilated." Maria Boulding has a great book with the enigmatic title, GATEWAY TO HOPE: EXPLORING FAILURE. Her major thesis is that the central paradox of adult life is that failure can be the gateway to new life, to another kind of success. Looking at Benedicta's life helps us note that failure or suffering or tragedy can be the gateway to renewed meaning.

As I close I would like to recall for you again the fitting description of Benedicta as found in the words of Stephen Spender.

The names of those who in their lives fought for life  
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.  
Born of the sun, they traveled a short while toward the sun.  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

Sister Linda Kulzer, OSB  
All-College Convocation  
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College of St. Benedict  
St. Joseph, Minnesota