

# Missionary Benedictine Sister as an Educator (Formal and Informal)

By: Sister Josefina G. Nepomuceno, OSB

After the extensive presentation of “Benedictine Education, a Gift to the World” by S. Mary John, the logical sequel is the Missionary Benedictine Sister as educator. What characteristics, traits, qualify a person to be the channel, the facilitator of Benedictine education as described in that presentation so that it is truly a gift to the recipients? Who is the Missionary Benedictine Sister (MBS) who can truly be a formator, a facilitator of this kind of education? Can I be one? Am I one? This conference will attempt to provide some points for consideration on this vital subject in our MBS mission activities.

## **Leadership as Service**

The Benedictine Educational Leadership Seminars which were conducted in the ABS schools SY 2012-2013 were designed for all the employees of the schools – administrators, faculty, non-teaching faculty status, office, field and maintenance personnel. The premise is that leadership is a task of anyone who has people under his/her responsibility. The teacher exercises leadership in the classroom. The office personnel within their own area of service. Even the maintenance and field personnel exercise some form of leadership in their own area and are expected to be Benedictine leaders at their level.

Within this broad application of leadership, the concept of Servant Leadership takes on a wide, multi-leveled and rich meaning. Whether in a school or in the social apostolate, retreat or health apostolate everyone is a servant. Everyone is there to offer time, resources, skills, talents, abilities for the needs of the students/clients. This is central to the Benedictine community culture of service which is reflected in different ways in the Rule. It falls on all members of the school, social center, hospital and retreat facility to be well-versed with and strive to interiorize, live and show by the way they relate the Good Zeal described and prescribed by Benedict. It is how Christ will be seen as truly alive when to each other and persons they serve they deal with respect, obedience, patience, humility, compassion and love.

How do we get to this point of service? How will the sisters and mission partners reach this desired level of relating?

## **Qualities of the MBS Educator**

First we turn to MBS, the Missionary Benedictine Sister. How does a MBS attain this level of integration?

### **Prefer nothing to Christ**

Benedict tells us it is first by choosing to make Christ the first and center of life, preferring nothing to Christ, in the striving to live that choice in the details of daily life. To choose Christ after receiving him with fervor in Holy Communion is one thing, maybe the easiest thing. But to make the choice in the details of daily interactions is more challenging specially when the fervor of the morning Communions has diminished. By our vows, however, we can claim the power of

Christ to strengthen our will and support our resolve to walk the path and pick ourselves up when we fail.

### ***Prayer***

The first prerequisite, then, is to gain closeness to Christ through faithfulness to our prayer: the Divine Office, Holy Mass, *lectio* and community devotional practices. We attend to the interior aspect of our relationship with the Lord so that in the long term, its warmth and fervor does not diminish but with the passing of years it grows in depth and in sincerity, as a real longing for intimacy with our Lord whom we profess to be our Beloved. Sister Hilda Buhay once said, “We are professional lovers, we have professed to be lovers of Christ.”

We could test our FQ (faithfulness quotient) on our daily regular prayers:

Do we still “sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices?” (RB 19.7) Or has our participation at the Divine Office become routinary and even mechanical?

Are we on time as for an appointment or do we arrive only after the hymn and so don’t need to make satisfaction?

Does the mystery of Holy Mass still captivate our attention, are we still keenly aware that the Eucharist is the biggest miracle happening in the world right in our presence and before our very eyes? And that we are participating and receiving life in this miracle?

Do we continue to strive at *lectio* to be attentive despite the struggle to be with the word the Spirit speaks to us?

Do we take time to be alone with our Lord to speak to him and let him speak to us?

Do we spend some of our free time and free evening just to be with him?

We know that in prayer we draw the energy, strength and enthusiasm for following the Lord and in doing our part for the transformation of the world into his Kingdom. Our Divine Office, the official prayer of the Church puts us in the service of the entire Church and draws down God’s favor in ways we may never know in this life.

A very important aspect of our prayer time is the schedule that marks our day and builds in us a habit of regularity that supports the development of discipline. Often misunderstood, discipline is necessary for a life of prayer and fidelity in religious life.

As MBS educators prayer, being centered in Christ, is our first priority.

### ***Community Life***

Life in community has to be second priority. It is in the interactions and dealings with each other in community that our resolve to prefer nothing to Christ is tested and proven. We are not alone or unique in having to deal with one another. Married couples vow to love and cherish each other through richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death. The number of separated couples due to failures to love and cherish each other, the dysfunctional families whose children become the continuing concern of our guidance personnel and our own Sisters are a concrete indicator of serious problems in many marriages. If husband and wife who started out being in love with each other reach a point when they feel they can no longer live with each

other, then we Sisters who did not enter community being in love with the members should not wonder that we encounter difficulties with quite different personalities. It is simply a fact of human life.

When the Lord tests our love by letting us get annoyed, irritated, or get into serious disagreement and even quarrel with a Sister, do we remember the vow of *conversatio morum* which calls us to change as silver and gold is purified by fire? Do we then look at ourselves before blaming the other Sister to discover the issue in ourselves that needs to be faced? How do we deal with the temptation to seek a transfer to another community where we might be less stressed? Is the Lord our refuge at such times or do we run and confide more with our other friends? Is our faith strengthened and our vocation confirmed by the course of action we take at such times?

Are we “affirming” persons who are not embarrassed but take pleasure in expressing our appreciation to our Sisters for things they have done? Can we make affirmation a habit rather than be quick to critique and say what could have been done better?

Can we regard with compassion, withholding judgment, the quirks, idiosyncrasies, rigidities, repeated mistakes of some Sisters in the spirit of the Good Zeal, “supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior”? (RB 72.5) Can we imagine the continuing struggle that the Sister is waging to change herself?

To be honest, community life is the most effective and most challenging area of MB life in our pursuit of wholeness and holiness. It is a form of service since we place ourselves at the service of the growth of our sisters and our community. “[Building] a loving, prayerful, compassionate community” is a servant leader’s priority and [in] turn the community should serve the greater community especially the poor and the oppressed.” (Good Zeal, S. Mary John Mananzan, p. 7)

### ***Obedience, Humility, Listening***

Even St. Benedict called it “the labor of obedience” (RB Prologue. 2) acknowledging that it is with difficulty, sometimes with great difficulty that we obey. Almost in the same breath, he refers to “the strong and noble weapons of obedience” (RB Prologue.3) for monastics who are seriously following the Lord Jesus Christ. We MBS count ourselves in that group and would not consider ourselves as consciously or deliberately disobedient. If we look at ourselves more closely, do we not ignore or “forget” such things as asking permission for going out, for keeping things given to us, or more seriously, going against the express decision of the superior or the PG or its assigned committees? We can recite a veritable litany of “little” disobediences, withholding of cooperation with the superior or officials, giving information rather than seeking permission, which on closer examination show that we “have not given up our own will” (RB Prologue. 3) We can go on and on but for our purpose in this conference, it is enough to remind us that obedience could be a moment- to- moment demand on us which we have many ways of circumventing. Could the basic issue be that we still have a long way to go in learning humility, the foundation of obedience? “Listen, ” St. Benedict invites us, “Listen carefully” “ with the ear of your heart” (RB Prologue. 1) with a humble spirit so that the blessing of obedience will be given to us. Let this not be taken as an indictment, but it has been commented that we MBS are not reputed for humility.

### ***MBS as model and example***

In my view, the foregoing make up the basic formation of the MBS to be an educator. Training in teaching skills, expertise in one's area of competence, degrees in administration and the whole array of requirements to be a teacher or an administrator are necessary. Our Sisters are appointed to positions and assignments based on such requirements. We hire teachers and appoint administrators only with such qualifications. But is that enough for us? No. We want more, we expect more and so we require them to go through seminars for their personal, social and above all their faith development. We take pains to work out programs for them to learn how to be Benedictine so that they begin to consider their teaching not only as employment but as a calling. On their part, they look to us to model what we are preaching, to be educators the Missionary Benedictine way.

They look at us and to us to be the example, to preach by our way of living and relating, "to walk our talk", to be witness to what we profess -- our love for others because of the love of Christ. Our formation as MBS articulates our commitment to the Gospel/Benedictine values that we tell them to propagate and integrate in their teaching and school activities. Discipline with compassion, commitment and accountability, power and delegation, faith and trust in the faithfulness of God, simplicity of lifestyle, just to name a few of the Benedictine values.

When an MBS educator believes with her whole being what she communicates she is the most convincing facilitator of learning in any position or any subject. This applies not only to the example of life and behavior but to professional matters as well.

### **MBS and excellence**

Our lay partners are expected to be well prepared for their daily teaching activity. We want them and expect them to be professional and to strive for excellence. We have devised systems to oversee and evaluate their performance. We MBS are expected to be no less professional and to maintain the bar of excellence in our performance in our assignments and positions. The level of our commitment in our assignments should be evident and observable and subject to evaluation. To be less than our lay partners is something we simply cannot afford less we lose out in the respect and esteem they have for us to the detriment of our effectiveness as people committed to the mission of Christ. If we expect them to be masipag, we should be equally if not more so. If we penalize them for coming late, we should be punctual. Our maintenance of discipline for the character formation of our students -- which is often appreciated as a desirable Benedictine policy - should be consistent and with no taint of favoritism. The strict discipline in the past which was so unfeeling and unyielding must give way totally to a process of guiding the erring person to better self-understanding and responsibility for behavior. Thus the MBS educator is true to St. Benedict's way of dealing with mistakes.

The excellence we aim at is not just in academics, it covers all areas of our service in the institution. Then excellence as a social responsibility is not just for good grades as an investment for the future or for outside involvements and advocacies. It is for the here and now in all areas of the school, hospital, retreat house, social center in ways that students, teachers, health service personnel and social apostolate clients can experience and implement. It is for the hidden eyes of our Lord who sees and applauds our efforts often with much sweat and tears. It is a responsibility that in our society Christ's Kingdom be seen, recognized, supported and advanced.

### **MBS advocate for social change**

With our vows we MBS embarked on the journey of self-renewal, ongoing conversion and progress toward the goal of attaining the Kingdom. It's a journey that began in love, is sustained in love and will culminate in love. Love for neighbor, love for the other as Christ has commanded is to evident in our policies, our dealings with students, patients, clients and lay partners in our apostolates. The love Christ commanded has particular application to the poor, the hungry and undereducated, the unjustly treated, the underserved whose rights are ignored, the invisible majority who are minded only during elections. For them, too, Christ gave up his life. He wants us who enjoy the abundant blessings of the hundredfold to involve ourselves in working for changes in our society so that the poor may live a human life and enjoy the blessings of being Christian.

The call to work for a just society, for the dismantling of oppressive systems like the political dynasties, the more equitable distribution of resources for the sustenance of a really human life for all, the increase of opportunities to break the cycle of poverty and to break the strangle –hold of corruption in all areas of life – is directed to the MBS. It's a call not only for the MBS who have opted to be in the social apostolate but for **all** MBS, each in her sphere of mission activity – school, hospital, retreat, social apostolate and immersion communities.

To respond to that call the MBS has to know the social-economic- political situation and how she can actively participate in the changes that need to be made. She herself has to be educated to be an agent of change so that she can challenge and inspire students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, partner in all apostolates to work for change. Do we MBS keep updated on the situation of poverty, unemployment, in our place and our country? Do we discuss how the country situation is affected by world events? Are we aware of the imminent danger to our country from the assertions of ownership of China on the islands within our ocean boundaries? Is our reaction to the pork barrel issue limited to disgust and angry comments, or have we tried to join or at least support those who are seeking ways to improve the allocation and use of our tax money? There are so many points we can discuss but we can take them up in our sharing.

The MBS educator then must be up to date and ready to make a stand and engage employees of our apostolates to be active advocates for changes in our country. Such change should improve the living standards of the poor and make them participate as citizens all the time, not only during elections.

More than that, as MBS educators for social change, the organizations we support should be animated by the love and concern of Christ and should not be what Pope Francis refers to as no different from NGO's. In his mind, our work for improving the conditions of the poor should be Christ motivated and oriented to bring them closer to Christ while they are brought to a better standard of life. Faith development is to be part of our advocacy efforts for the poor. Feed their soul as you feed their bodies. And this is where the MBS educator has the advantage when she and her mission-partners bring to their involvement with the poor not just job skills, income-generating projects, management of livelihood activities but increasing awareness of the love, concern and affection of Christ for each of them and faith in God who does not forget them even when calamities strike and reduce them to dependence on the compassion of others.

In the overwhelming response to the disaster wrought by Typhoon Yolanda in form of donations, assistance by groups that got together spontaneously, the international outpouring of assistance from countries, business establishments and institutions such as our schools, individuals who even refuse to be named, can we not see the providence of God “who heals as he wounds?” When the victims themselves manifest their strong faith in God in calamities that are falling on us so with increasing frequency and magnitude, how does the MBS educator respond?

### **MBS: Christ alive**

Many times we have heard comments on the power of the veil. Our being religious often opens doors and eases restrictions and allows difficult transactions that lay people cannot enjoy. We take advantage of this power when the situation justifies and warrants it. Let us not abuse this consideration to us. On our part, we should be always aware of the responsibility of being religious, commanding so much respect and being accorded so many privileges. It is not the case in other countries. We MBS should be in a continuous, conscious ongoing formation to act, relate, work as religious who reflect Christ’s love and concern and bring him in all our activities.

**“Rediscover, Live, Share Christ”** the year direction of one of our schools, could as well be the focus of the MBS educator who strives to rediscover the Lord Jesus Christ in everyday happenings in community and in the apostolate. Live, love Christ and share him with our lay mission partners and co-educators in prayer, in lectio, in ordinary conversations that convey our unflinching trust in him and our attachment to His person. In Christ the MBS educator finds the solution to issues that the secular world with all its technological advancements cannot provide. This is an education in itself which is animated by Christ and motivated by the urge to proclaim by the way we live and run our institutions the treasure of our Christ-centered Benedictine education. Seeking Christ, honoring Christ, forming Christ, the MBS educator in close cooperation with our lay mission partners is empowered and privileged to offer our brand of Benedictine education as a gift to our students and clients, a gift to the world.

### References:

The Rule of St. Benedict in English. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982.  
Good Zeal. The Spirituality of Benedictine Academic Leaders. Sister Mary John Mananzan. Keynote Speech at the BENET 2013 Conference, St. Scholastica’s College, Manila, Philippines.

### Suggestions for Group Sharing

1. Discuss ways for strengthening the effectiveness of our preparation as MB educators.
2. How is our Philippine brand of socially oriented Benedictine education close to or different from the policies and practices we find in the Holy Rule, and in the tradition of education found in Benedictine monasteries today and in the past centuries?