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Introduction: Brother David Steindl-Rast

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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Patrick Henry: Brother David Steindl-Rast has been a prominent figure in the Benedictine world for a long time. I think I first met at him at the Gethsemani Encounter in 1996 and I am pleased and honored now to call him a dear friend. His biographical information, like that of so many others, is at the end of the book: Monk of Mount Savior Monastery in New York and most recently, the originator of gratefulness.org. He tells us that it was attracting a lot of attention before last Tuesday [September 11] and since then, the server has almost broken down because it cannot carry the load of hits that it is getting. So David has been a key figure in Benedict's Dharma. As you know, he wrote the conclusion, which he says is only a beginning. We have asked him to get this conference started by some further reflections on the conclusion that is a beginning.

Brother David Steindl-Rast: Thank you Patrick and thank you to all those who brought this meeting about, brought the book about, brought the meeting about, brought this wonderful translation to us. Special thanks to all of you who come here. When I think of the many who had signed up and didn't come, I feel so grateful to you who did come and I want to applaud them but I already applauded Sister Meg so strongly that [the picture of] Buddha fell off the wall [laughter]. I don't want to cause any further upheaval here, but in my heart, I applaud all of you for coming here. I do think that this gathering marks the fulfillment of what I felt after I had read the manuscript of the book I wrote afterwards, this book is really a beginning. It is only a beginning and what we are doing together, how we are taking up this book now and what we are making of it, is the beginning after the



Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, is a Benedictine monk at Mount Saviour

book.

I think that the discussions that we will be having in the next two days will be extremely important, not just for the history of the book but for the history of the dialogue between East and West on the basis of the Rule of St. Benedict and possibly even for the future understanding of St. Benedict and the Rule. Originally, this meeting, at least how I understood it, was to be something quite different from what it is now turning out to be. I thought of this with a certain amount of disappointment, because when we met in San Francisco and had such real fun that Patrick was referring to, it was just such a circus, that we decided we didn't want to stop. So it was not difficult to convince our whole group to do this again. I think that others understood it in the same way. But at any rate, I understood that we'd just get together and have the same fun and let a couple of other people look on and join in. It was supposed to be sort of a fishbowl type thing. I was all set for that until some of the fish jumped out of the bowl [laughter]. We also thought that we had so much to learn, we learned so much from one another in that situation, that this discourse was by no means ended and we should go on and continue it.

But now I am less disappointed because I think it is really important that this goes to all of you. I think it is quite providential that it goes to all of you. And particularly to the lay practitioners in this gathering, because, as I also said, in reflecting on the book, it is today, and I think Father Patrick referred to it already, the laypeople who are running away with the ball. That is also true in this country, where several books in recent years, certainly the most read ones about the Rule of St. Benedict, were written by laypeople and by women, and some of them not even by Catholics, although I would prefer to write catholic with a small-case C and then they were catholic indeed.

But, it is now up to laypeople to take up the practice of the Rule and that practice is our common ground. Common ground is always found in practice, on all levels. If we speak about what we experience, if we speak about how we deal with our experience, if we act towards one another as one acts towards one another, if one belongs together, then we find our common ground. If we allowed this experience to crystallize

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into some statements, our statements will bang against one another and we will not find common ground. It is the experience that is our common ground, it's the practice that is our common ground. In that respect, the Rule is eminently practical. It is not practical only in the sense that it gives practical advice. It would be rather dangerous to get stuck over how many ounces is a hemena or how many psalms are to be said at what time, and so forth. What I'm thinking about such practical things as St. Benedict saying we ought "to have death at all times before our eyes."

This is a very personal thing for me because when I first read the Rule of St. Benedict, it was just at the end of World War II, and I was still a teenager. Some friends of mine had found this Rule of St. Benedict somewhere and we were just reading it together. That was the one passage that most struck me, "to have death at all times before your eyes." The reason was this: We had grown up in Austria under Nazi occupation having death at all times before our eyes. That wasn't just a nice phrase for us. Every year the graduating class in our school was taken into the army and another year later they were gone, they were dead. We had big masses for the people who had been in our school, it was a Catholic school, and then when the Nazis came they sort of went underground, we had these weekly masses and practically everyone of them was a requiem for somebody who had died and this went on and on and on. Now, the war was over suddenly and there I was, it was the happiest time of my life and I was in Salzburg, which is a beautiful city in Austria. We had all the music in the world and I had a very lovely girlfriend, and everything was just perfect. I suddenly realized that, from here on, it could only go downhill unless I had death at all times before my eyes. Because we lived so intensely because we had death before our eyes. It made us alive. I realized suddenly, having just read the Rule of St. Benedict, if I forgot this, I would not be much alive anymore.

That is actually what determined me to look for a monastery, sort of half-heartedly, because I liked the idea but I didn't like the practice [laughter]. It took me from that point on seven years to get caught up. I found an alibi again, studying more and getting another degree. Finally, I even left Austria and went to the United States, never

thinking that this was a place where you would find a monastery. One of the reasons why I didn't want to join a monastery, and I was very impressed by them and had many friends among the monks in Austria, Benedictine monks and Cistercian monks, was that I felt the tradition over 1400 years had accumulated to such an extent that it wasn't the Rule of St. Benedict; and it was the Rule of St. Benedict when we read it as teenagers that so inspired me. I even compared it. I said it was like for somebody who really loves music to read the score of a symphony that has never been performed. And I thought it had never been performed, maybe a little like it, but it had never been performed as far as I understood it. And I told this friend of mine, a priest, after I came to the United States, and he said, "Well, I have heard of a monastery that has just been founded. And this is exactly what they want to do, they want to live exactly according to the Rule of St. Benedict." So, my ears stood up a little bit and I asked where it was and he said he couldn't remember much but he thought it was somewhere near Elmira, New York.

I called up the bus station and asked if they had buses to Elmira, New York and I went there and spent less than 24 hours there and that was almost half a century ago and I joined and I'm still a member of the community. All I asked them was, "Do you really want to live according to the Rule of St. Benedict, strictly by the letter?" And they said yes. (They said yes, that one monk, I only met this one monk. [laughter] I wasn't there long enough, I never met the abbot, I never met the novice master. I was just put to work planting squash that afternoon. The other question was, "Do you have lay brothers? Is everyone to become priests or do you honor that a monk is a monk and you don't have to be a priest?" And they said yes, we do. That was enough, I went home. My dedication and my conviction was expressed by the fact that my mother said, "Did you leave a donation?" "Yes." "How much did you leave? Why did you leave them so much?" I said, "I'm going to join them. It will all be mine again." [laughter]

But it is in this sense of being practical, having death at all times before one's eyes for instance, that the Rule is a trellis, which is so important, the word *regula* is a translation of the Greek word *karnon*, and *karnon* means a trellis on which you plant plants, they lean against it, you tie

them to a trellis, that sort of thing. This is so different from rules and regulations, and I find it always so difficult when you tell people, especially young people today, that you are enthusiastic about the Rule of St. Benedict. They think it's something like a rule book of what monks are to do and not to do. Yes, to a certain extent it is, but I like to think of it as a trellis and it still has power, it still has enormous power. The first conclusion that I drew from the book when I summarized it was that the Rule of St. Benedict still has fire in it.

That shows itself ever so much at this very moment in history, if you think for instance of all St. Benedict has to say about peace and making peace. So much so, that pax is the motto of the Benedictines. That means a peace which we very urgently need today. I do realize that terrorism is a danger in the world and we all do, but I cannot help feeling that the means, the violence with which we try to overcome terrorism is as far removed from peace as terrorism itself. That is a reason for breaking up the very word of the Rule, *obsculta* has been translated as "wake up" . This is a time for us to wake up to the fact that one cannot fight violence violently.

I was in Europe on September 11 and I was flying back and of course every little, tiniest corner of the suitcase was rummaged through and eventually they found a pair of tweezers in my toiletry kit that was about three inches, not even a file, but just tweezers, so the tweezers were confiscated. Then I flew in this airplane and each seat had a little television screen in front of it and as I looked at these many television screens, each one could put on their own little film. This is what they have now on transatlantic flights. Everyone had another film with violence. Every scene, violence. Well, we can confiscate an awful lot of tweezers if we let violence infiltrate our minds. People fill our minds and the minds of our children with violence, and we think we can, on the surface, somehow, by some control, control violence with violence, that's going to be what it ends up doing.

I still belong to that dinosaur generation that Abbot Patrick spoke about, and the Rule for me is in Latin. And every time I read a translation, and I told you already that I was quite enthusiastic about this translation, of course, but still when you read it in English and you

are used to Latin, you feel very uncomfortable about some passages. One of my pet peeves, is in the prologue where St. Benedict speaks about how we should open our eyes to what he calls the *deificum lumen* and that is literally “the light that makes divine.” I have not yet found any translation of the Rule, including this one, in which—this is a beautiful translation—I think “the light that leads us to God” is the translation here—but it doesn’t have the power of “the light that makes us divine.” St. Benedict’s text still belongs to a very early Christian tradition because, before baptism was called baptism, it was called *fortismos* and the literal translation is enlightenment. We open our eyes in baptism and in baptism we are opened to the light that makes us divine. And that light is light of breaking the cycle of violence, the light of peace. Blessed are the peace-makers for they will be called children of God, sons of God, as St. John says in the prologue to his gospel, to all those who believe in Him, He gave power to become children of God, sons of Gods, gave power to become what he is and Christ lives in us.

We have been received here as Christ, that is very Benedictine, and very practical and very much along the Rule. If we receive one another as Christ, we will become Christ. We will become peace-makers and we will become children of God as the son of God, in Him, and through Him, and with Him. This is ultimately the task of what we are doing here. That is why we have set up this meeting in ways that will practically lead us to dialogue, to peace-making, I think, in the end. That’s the goal. I want, again, to thank all of those who set it up, and thank all of you, in advance already, for entering into this process. Let us hope that after every thing is done and we go home again, we will go a little more as peace-makers, a little more with this motto, “peace,” stamped on our hearts and little more truly Christ-like.

Continued in **Introduction: Responses from the Audience (Benedict’s Dharma, September 2001)**
