



## The re-ignition of the Benedictine fire - review at an extraordinarily course

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St. Anselmo, Rome

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### 1. From Idea to Reality

The course, “Leadership and the Rule of St. Benedict” was an interdisciplinary experiment instigated by the faculty of Business and Management at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and the International Monastic Institute at the University of St. Anselmo in Rome. These two institutions could hardly be more different from one another. Whereas the first has received the top ranking by Financial Times for its Master’s degree in Strategy and International Management for three years running, the very specialized focus on monastic theology and philosophy sets the latter apart and makes it a place of international renown. Whereas the one prepares the business leaders of tomorrow, the other has the Catholic and specifically monastic milieu as a target group. Bringing these two worlds and two forms of wisdom together was the exciting challenge which the two universities, represented by Prof. Günter Müller-Stewens from St. Gallen and Prof. Luigi Gioia from St. Anselmo, undertook.

Even the development process has something to teach us. Underlying the whole concept was the recognition of and reflection about the fact that many Benedictine nuns and monks, who take on leadership responsibilities in their communities, do not have the necessary social, economic or organizational skills which are required in our day and age. The spiritual formation which they received throughout their years in the monastery is not sufficient preparation for the fast-paced and ever-changing world in which we live. Based on this analysis of the situation, a vision grew, influenced in part by the experience of Markus Muff OSB from Engelbert, who was a student at St. Gallen, to bring together the learning there with the spiritual learning of his brothers and sisters in the Benedictine order. Over several years, this idea was developed into a two week course “Leadership and the Rule of St. Benedict” which was held for the first time on 16-28 September 2013 in St. Anselmo Rome. **Abbot Primate Notker Wolf OSB** described the concept behind the course in this way: “.... professors of S. Anselmo have been working with professors of S. Gallen to build bridges between three types of wisdom: monastic wisdom, that is the Rule of Saint Benedict; church wisdom, that is the Social doctrine of the Church; secular wisdom, that is leadership and management science.”

Pessimists expected the course to be of interest to a maximum of 10 people. Even the optimists never expected 70 to apply for the course. In the end, 35 monastics, 24 men and 11 women from 5 continents and 18 countries were accepted to take part.

## **2. "Each tree is known by its own fruit" (Luke 6. 44)**

This biblical quotation summarizes the intention of the course. **Fr. Luigi Gioia** offered a useful foundation for the course with his opening statement:

*"We have to reflect on our behaviours, on our practices, on the way we conceptualize our identity and on what we want to achieve so as to seek ways of improving them. For this I propose that we think ... about some key notions:*

1. **performance**
2. **stewardship behaviour**
3. **sustainability**

*...on this basis, we start to reflect on the key **problems and challenges** related to the particular way of how Benedictine monasteries function."*

He reminded participants of the various academic studies which have looked specifically at Benedictine forms of organization and economy. But, as he said, it is not only interesting *"how we are seen from the viewpoint of the science of business and leadership"*. It is even more interesting to consider what we can learn from this new relationship and the challenging new perspectives it brings with it.

That consideration was the basis for the course: first obtaining a wider, broader, more differentiated perspective of the complexity of our Benedictine way of life in the beginning of the third millennium, and then looking more closely at the specific challenges of leadership, of dealing with the world around us and of shaping our organization and improving the relations inside it. As Fr. Luigi summarized it, the course was concerned with: *"flourishing (relations inside the community)"* *"radiance (relations outside the community)"* and *"authenticity (both)"*.

One might ask why the University of St. Gallen would have a special interest in this particular form of collaboration. **Prof. Günter Müller-Stewens** explained: *"We work with many companies whose average age is about 40 years. It is very special for us now to work with monastic organizations who are – as a study in the German-speaking countries tells us – of an average age of 400 years."*

The first questions he posed to course participants were: *"how can you in your monastic communities create a shared understanding of the direction the organization wants to go? How can you find out which steps lead your organization into the decided direction, and how can you actually go this way?"*

The course was divided into four Modules. Each was led by a Professor of the University of St. Gallen and a representative of the Benedictine Order. This combination proved ideal. The scientific knowledge and theoretical approaches were complemented by consideration of the Rule of St. Benedict and practical examples from Benedictine life.

## **3. Foster responsibility, flexibility and competence in monastic communities – A Course Concept in 4 Modules**

*"Shaping relations inside and outside the community"* was the title of the first module which was led by **Prof. Günter Müller-Stewens** of St. Gallen and supported by practical examples given by **Sr. Gisela Happ**, of AIM in Paris. The purpose of this first module was to look more closely at the internal and external partners who are of relevance to those in leadership positions in monasteries. The

business economic term „stakeholder“, which Prof. Müller-Stewens used, was alien to some of the Benedictine course participants. The challenge behind it, however, is one which is well known to everyone with leadership positions in monasteries. Therefore, the first two days were spent identifying monastic stakeholders who were defined as: *“any group which can affect or is affected by an organization’s operations in achieving its objectives.”*

A basic point that was made was that *“The long-term happy survival of an organization is based on ‘healthy’ relationships to its stakeholders”* or, as **Sr. Gisela Happ** said, paraphrasing the concluding verse in the Cellarer’s chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict: *“No one should be unhappy in the house of God”*.

When considering the theme from a practical perspective, the participants contributed their own examples. Be it the co-workers in the hospitals which the community runs in the Philippines, students in a Benedictine high school in Canada, guests in a retreat house in Kenya, the many candidates who want to enter the monastery in Tanzania, the neighborly farmer in Ireland or the elderly brothers or sisters in an aging community, the principle is always: *„to take the expectations and needs of the different stakeholder groups into account in our strategizing and to manage these relationships accordingly“*.

For Prof. Müller-Stewens „humanity is the key of success of communities“. With great understanding for the values and possibilities of the Benedictine way of life, he wanted to give monks and nuns tools to help them deal with and shape the relationships with stakeholders inside and outside the community or, as he put it using the Biblical metaphor: *„to build a house on rocks“*. He reminded participants of the pendulum effect: when a pendulum remains in motion, in other words, when changes and challenges are regularly accepted and responded to, the response of the pendulum is not that extreme. When, however, one waits too long and it stops, the situation becomes much more drastic.

Basic assumptions can play a significant role in this.

*“The worldwide demands of cars will never exceed one million, because of the lack of available chauffeurs”* – this quotation from Gottlieb Daimler in 1901 makes perfectly clear what basic assumptions are and also shows that they may not be valid forever. This being the case, Konrad Lorenz recommends: *“An excellent morning exercise for everybody is to challenge one of our favorite assumptions every day before breakfast.”* What are some basic assumptions which, in the monastic context, were valid for a long time, but may not be helpful any longer? This is a challenging and, for some, even frightening question. But Prof. Müller-Stewens points out: *“When I hear that in the next 10 years in Italy about 90 of the 119 Benedictine monasteries are to be closed, I presume you have a big problem”*. Changes in society are developing exponentially. Globalization and digitalization are well-known terms which stand for growing complexity and increasing speed of transformation processes. Can we interact with the variety and diversity of the environmental changes? Are we even prepared to notice and analyze them? Prof. Müller-Stewens: *“It all starts in our mind”*.

He also pointed out what a strong hold basic assumptions can have on us. Arguments such as: *“we do not have enough people to work differently”*, *“we are dependent on our benefactors and therefore we ourselves do not have the chance to shape the relationships”*, *“it was always like this”* or *“the Rule does not allow this”* are common enough.

However, as Prof. Müller Stewens showed, 'But-statements' like this can corrode any strategic process and frustrate it from the outset. He insisted that the only remedy is a strong shared vision, which can be defined as a "dream with a deadline". Martin Luther's "I have a dream" speech was quoted as the most famous example for the transforming power of a vision. A vision must be ambitious and inspiring. It must offer a reason for getting up every morning and starting the new day in a good mood. It is dangerous self-deception to think of a vision only as an extension of the past.

The second module was led by **Prof. Thomas Eberle of St. Gallen** und **Sr. Ulrike Soegtrop OSB** from Dinklage, Germany. The theme was: "**Understanding and shaping an organization**" and was based on Gareth Morgan's theory outlined in "The Images of Organization". The metaphorical approach is principally a way of conceiving one thing in terms of another and teaches a multi-perspective view on organizations with complementary, connected and intertextual images. The basic assumption is: "Complexity can only be managed by complexity". This module was intended to expand the course members' theoretical and practical repertoire for dealing with complexity by offering four different metaphors of organization. The four metaphors chosen were: structure or machine, organism, political system and cultural system. The method began with a theoretical input given by Prof. Eberle which was followed by practical examples based on organizational developmental processes in Sr. Ulrike's monastery, reflections on the Rule of St. Benedict and the results of the self-reflections and, finally, group work by the participants. This turned out to be a good approach considering the very different backgrounds, expectations and knowledge-bases of the participants. The cultural diversity proved to be a significant and enriching aspect of the module. For example, it became clear that power games are more common in the more expressive or even aggressive cultures of Europe than in the more reserved cultures of Asia, the means of dealing with authority and hierarchy are culturally dependent and therefore expressed differently in Africa and North America and the definition of human resources is bound to be different in Australia than in Cuba.

The objective of this module was to look at organization from the four perspectives, to analyze the distinctive strengths and weaknesses of the structural, organizational, political and cultural perspectives on their own, to learn how to ask the right questions and to find solution-oriented answers and, in this way, to initiate the development of organization. As Prof. Eberle summarized it: "to become a reader and writer of the own organization".

**Prof. Wolfgang Jenewein** led the third module entitled „**Leading People**“. With his youthful, dynamic manner and his contagious energy, he told course participants about the process of the renewal of the German Football League „like a phoenix from the ashes“ who then went on to win the Football World Cup in 2006. Although nuns and monks are rarely endowed with comparable athletic talent as those in this example, the basic questions of competence in leadership are surprisingly similar. Themes of this module included vision and values, differentiation between management („Managers work with things and numbers“) and leadership („Leaders work with people and feelings“), complexity and variety, and leadership style and the shaping of relationship. Quotations such as: "Leadership is not a matter of position, but rather a matter of personality" or „I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people" (Nelson Mandela) resonate with the orientation that St. Benedict offers to the abbot and cellarer.

„Walk your talk“ is a catch phrase which **Sr. Mary John Mananzan OSB**, from the Philippines has made her own. Her concept of „shared leadership“ and a „spirituality of power“ is the result of decade-long engagement for the rights of the poor, especially women, in Philippine society and the

church. Based on the background of her reflections, the course members were able to look at their own specific cases more critically and even look at cases of failed leadership.

The fourth module, entitled „**Project Management**“ was thoroughly practical. As an introduction, **Dr. Erwin Hettich**, of St. Gallen and **Fr. Dr. Ansgar Stüfe OSB** of St. Ottilien Germany, asked course participants to talk about two of the finished or ongoing projects in their monastic communities. Whether it was the planning of a “Jausenstation” (the Tyrol version of a snack bar), the construction of a guesthouse or the planning of an anniversary celebration, the eight steps of project planning remain the same. The two speakers complimented each other well; each theoretical step introduced by Dr. Erwin Hettich was matched with a concrete example from Fr. Ansgar’s endless treasure trove of experience (and anecdotes) as the project coordinator of his congregation.

Of course, none of the four themes could be dealt with exhaustively, but a helpful beginning was made. The exceptional quality of this course structure lay primarily in the ability of the instructors from St. Gallen to express the essence of the theories and present them in a way that was appropriate for the needs and demands of monastic leaders. Additional criteria for its success were the trusting openness of everyone concerned and the sense that, this course was in keeping with the pulse of the age.

#### **4. Supplemental Activities**

On three evenings, the secular and monastic wisdom discussed were supplemented by the social doctrine of the church. **Alexis Caze**, Managing director at Deerfield Institute for Healthcare Research, Lausanne, was invited to offer insights into the „Zacchaeus Journey“, a new spiritual movement which attempts to live out family and work life based on the social teachings of the Catholic Church.

In an evening discussion with **Abbot Primate Notker Wolf** entitled: „To be an Abbot and a Leader: on Vision, Patience and Strength“ it was easy to sense the burning fire of his vision for a Benedictine movement, characterized by a renewed consciousness of community and a joyful and reformed liturgy which radiates into society.

Many religious from Rome joined the course to hear a talk given by **Fr. Anselm Grün OSB** entitled: „To be a Monk and a manager: on prayer, profit and principles“. He openly shared with the audience his own personal experiences of joy and hardship connected with his many years of leadership experience. He emphasized that the Benedictine understanding of leadership requires a person to be deeply rooted in prayer and to aim at the three Christian virtues of faith, hope and love: “For it is a fascinating duty and a constant spiritual challenge which in the end leads more and more to freedom from ego and into God.”

#### **5. Summary**

With 12 workdays consisting of 6 hours of class each, 5 supplemental lectures, a hospitable welcome in the choir and refectory at St. Anselmo, plenty of opportunities for informal discussions and a chance to enjoy the Roman sunshine, the first course „Leadership and the Rule of St. Benedict“ can most certainly be considered a successful experiment. The coordinators in St. Gallen and Rome are already considering the possibility of offering the course again in 2014.

On the last morning of the course, Prof. Günter Müller-Stewens, who conducted the course with personal engagement and empathy throughout the two weeks, summed up his observations in a list

of wishes that he had for the course and its participants. The greatest challenge, as he saw it, was „The re-ignition of the Benedictine fire“. In contrast to the atmosphere of decline, those in leadership positions in monasteries must help create a positive dynamic in the community. He quoted Erich Kästner who said: „We can even build something worthwhile from the stones that bar our way.“ This is possible when we overcome individualism, when we develop a new understanding of the freedom which is the very basis of the Rule of St. Benedict, when we reflect more on the orientation towards “megatrends” in our age, when we display a readiness to look at open questions in the face and when we strive towards a professionalization in our manner of leadership. In conclusion, he offered a word of encouragement:

„And last but not least: Your shared and strong value base, identity and heritage gives you a unique potential to differentiate yourself in all your stakeholder relations: on the spiritual side, you are devoted to finding and following God’s will; in your relationships, love becomes action.“

**Quotations from course participants:**

„Every morning when I start the new day, I will ask myself, why should anybody be led by <u>me</u> ?“
“I have come in touch with my vision of a strong, renewed and attractive Benedictine way of life.”
“I now understand my own leadership style and recognize what I need to work on.”
„I would like to develop more transparence and involve my community more in the decision making process.“
„For me, the word „patience“ was especially important; that and remembering the fact that the church thinks in terms of centuries. That does not mean that everything has to be put off endlessly but does mean that I do not have to implement everything immediately; I can wait sometimes.”
„I would like to look more closely at the gifts my sisters have and to strengthen those in them.“
„I have learned that leading means shaping relationships and I have gained tools for doing that.“
„For me it was especially important to learn how to organize projects.“
„The differentiation between management and leadership was illuminating to me.“
„I now understand much better what happens in the organization of my monastery and how I can help shape it.“
„I take with me the picture of the pendulum; when it does not remain in movement the situation will become critical.“
„The course should be mandatory for everyone in our monasteries who takes on a leadership position.“
„ For me it was the phrase: „Only that which can be transformed can be retained.“