



FATHER JOHN OETGEN ('45) ON

*The Glories  
of a  
Benedictine  
Education*

FATHER JOHN OETGEN ('45), O.S.B., DISCUSSES THE  
CHALLENGES OF LEADING A CATHOLIC COLLEGE IN  
THE CAROLINAS IN THE 1960S, BEING AMERICA'S  
FIRST CATHOLIC COLLEGE TO INVITE BILLY GRAHAM  
TO SPEAK, THE TEN HALLMARKS OF  
A BENEDICTINE EDUCATION AND MORE.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICK SCHNEIDER

LOVE. PRAYER. STABILITY. CONVERSATIO.  
OBEDIENCE. DISCIPLINE. HUMILITY.  
STEWARDSHIP. HOSPITALITY. COMMUNITY.

**T**hese have come to be known as the ten hallmarks of a Benedictine education. So in what ways has Belmont Abbey College uniquely incarnated these hallmarks through the years? How do we stay true to them as we continue to grow?

We couldn't think of a better authority to consult on these matters and more than Father John Oetgen, O.S.B.

To begin with, Father John has been a Benedictine monk at Belmont Abbey for more than sixty years now.

Down through the decades, he has also played many key roles in both the College and the monastic community: distinguished English professor; President of the College (1960-64), Director of the Abbey Players, accomplished actor and poet, beloved priest, confessor and mentor to countless Abbey alums, as well as to the younger monks. And today, at 84 years young, he is still one of the College's most sought-after English and speech tutors.

Recently, Crossroads had the privilege of sitting at the foot of this gentle giant and learning more about the blessings of being Benedictine.

**CROSSROADS:** When did you first know you were going to be a monk?

**FATHER JOHN:** (dramatic pause; said with comic mock sanctimony): Right out of my mother's womb. (Laughter.)

You know I can't put my finger on that. While I was at school at Benedictine [Military School] in Savannah, I had great admiration for the priests...and perhaps that led me on...I don't know. I'd also had relatives who had attended Belmont Abbey - the prep school - in the '20s and '30s. And so I knew of the place, and I think I sort of just drifted into it. There was never a struggle of "should I or should I not."

**CROSSROADS:** What was it about the "Benedictine way" that uniquely called to you - versus, say, the Jesuit way or the Franciscan way?

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, I knew nothing about the Jesuits, really, at that time. I was going to school, of course, and what I liked about the Benedictines in Savannah was they had a very congenial group. They seemed to get along together very well, and there was a sort of happy atmosphere both in the priory and in the school. So it was an atmosphere that I greatly admired.

**CROSSROADS:** Let's fast forward to the year 1960, when you became president

of Belmont Abbey College. What were some of the challenges of being a Catholic college in the Carolinas at that time?

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, by that time, I think the biggest challenge that had confronted the College was sort of over. Because in earlier days, there was great hostility. In fact, when I was a student here, if we walked along the avenue, people would drive by in their cars and shout obscenities, or throw rocks or whatever. Before the Second World War, the Abbey had been looked upon by local people, I think, as sort of an elitist institution. It was a prep school and junior college for "northern students" who came down here and didn't know much about the South. And I don't think the institution made much of an effort to bridge the campus with the town. So I think we were largely responsible... But I think after the Second World War, with the G.I. Bill of Rights, many

local people started coming to college here. That broke down, I think, a lot of misconceptions and whatever hostility might have been there. They found out we really didn't grow horns and, you know, eat babies! So when I became president, there was no longer that sort of challenge.

**CROSSROADS:** In 1961, Belmont Abbey College became the first Roman Catholic college in America to invite Billy Graham to speak on campus, which, of course made a few waves at the time. Was that your idea?

**FATHER JOHN:** Oh, I think it was sort of a group decision that we should do it - although I think Father Cuthbert Allen helped spearhead it.

**CROSSROADS:** Did you take any heat for issuing that invitation?

**FATHER JOHN:** We had criticism from one particular Baptist organization, but it was more directed at Billy Graham than at us, blaming him for coming to a Catholic college to speak. But no, we were praised by others. Most people thought we had done a wonderful thing.

It was, of course, rather early in the "ecumenical movement."

**CROSSROADS:** And did more ecumenical efforts flow from this event?

**FATHER JOHN:** I don't know if it was directly connected to that, but the ecumenical spirit did continue.

**CROSSROADS:** Let's move now to exploring the glories of a Benedictine education. What has having had a

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Benedictine education meant to you in your own life?

**FATHER JOHN:** I think that it's given me an appreciation for and a broad interpretation of, you could almost say, all of creation. Saint Benedict was a very broad-minded person. And I think that those who follow the Rule [of St. Benedict] inherit some of that spirit.

I think that as a result of being at the Abbey as I knew it as a student, and the monastery as a monk, that there is a real sense of ... *family* is the word you'd use. Camaraderie. A brotherly association that permeates one's being, I think. It affects not only the groups you live with, but carries over to persons outside.

Saint Benedict says that guests should be received as Christ. And you know the saying of Christ's that what you do to the least of my brethren you do to me. I think that's at the background of the Benedictine mentality. That you deal with people and recognize that a dignity and a respect is due them. And you try at your best to deal with them on that level.

**CROSSROADS:** Yes, one reads in commentaries that the Rule helps us meet people where they are, including in their weaknesses; and it doesn't expect people to do anything superhuman or heroic. Indeed, in a way, the Rule finds ways to make people stronger *through* their weaknesses. Can the same be said about a Benedictine education in general and specifically the type of education offered here?

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, I think the term that's frequently associated with Benedictinism and the Rule especially is moderation. And you know, that goes back to Aristotelian thought. Avoid extremes of any type. And you're right: St. Benedict does encourage all levels of accomplishment. He says that an abbot should attempt to rule his monastery in such a way that the strong will still have something to strive after and the weak will not be driven away by what's expected of them. So the Rule of St. Benedict places a tremendous responsibility upon the abbot of dealing with each individual according to his



needs. He's to adapt himself to a variety of temperaments. An older translation used to say that he has to adapt himself to a variety of "*characters*" (said with obvious relish and a smile).

**CROSSROADS:** So that approach to dealing with people of all kinds radiates out from the monastery to the College community – to professors, staff, and so on?

**FATHER JOHN:** Yes, I think this is true here in particular and at Benedictine schools in general. I don't think that we would say that enrollment at Belmont Abbey is directed *only* towards the brightest students available. We accept the brightest students available, of course, and they profit from what they get here. But we also have traditionally taken students who are just questionable

maybe, but with the care that they have gotten, they have prospered. So that's an instance of dealing with individuals according to their needs, and accepting them as they are.

**CROSSROADS:** That does seem to be one of the great beauties of this place. It welcomes people of all types *where they are* and then gently helps them to get where they need to go.

**FATHER JOHN:** Yes. Speaking of the scholastic acceptance of the bright and the not so bright... I think that in the community in which a Belmont Abbey student lives there are not only the bright and the not so bright, but we also have students who come here from millionaire families and we have students here on total subsidy. So on our campus, students meet with, deal with and

become acquainted with a wide variety of “characters” that they’ll live with in the world.

So that’s another big advantage that the Benedictine education provides ... that it is not so exclusive that only the greatest minds are accepted, nor does it attempt to deal with only the lower level of academic students. It’s across the board and I think they all profit from it.

**CROSSROADS:** Another good way to explore the glories of a Benedictine education might be to explore what have come to be known as the “hallmarks.”

A document called “Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition” written by the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities says the following about the hallmarks: “Each Benedictine college expresses the hallmarks and plays variations on the theme of the Catholic intellectual tradition in its own way.”

So it might be useful to tease out from you how you think Belmont Abbey College may express or incarnate these hallmarks in unique ways.

As you know, the hallmarks include: love, prayer, stability, *conversatio*, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community.

It’s interesting that the list begins with love. Is that the cardinal hallmark that should be at the heart of a Benedictine education?

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, that should be the cardinal hallmark of any Christian community, don’t you agree? Again, the Rule speaks of welcoming visitors and strangers as Christ present in them. And if there’s going to be that sort of attitude, which I do think is present here constantly – if not always overtly – that has to be founded on love.

The essence of it is concern for others and their welfare...and I think that’s very prominent on campus here with the faculty and the students – and with the monastery. That concern is an expression of love whether you ever say “I love you” or not.

**CROSSROADS:** And that kind of concern could sometimes encompass tough love?

**FATHER JOHN:** Oh, it has to, yes. The abbot sometimes has to mete that out to a monk. And students, too, at times feel that sort of love and profit from it.

**CROSSROADS:** The next hallmark on the list is prayer, which is described by one writer as “a life marked by liturgy, *lectio* and mindfulness.” Is there a way that this hallmark is embodied at the Abbey differently than at some other colleges?

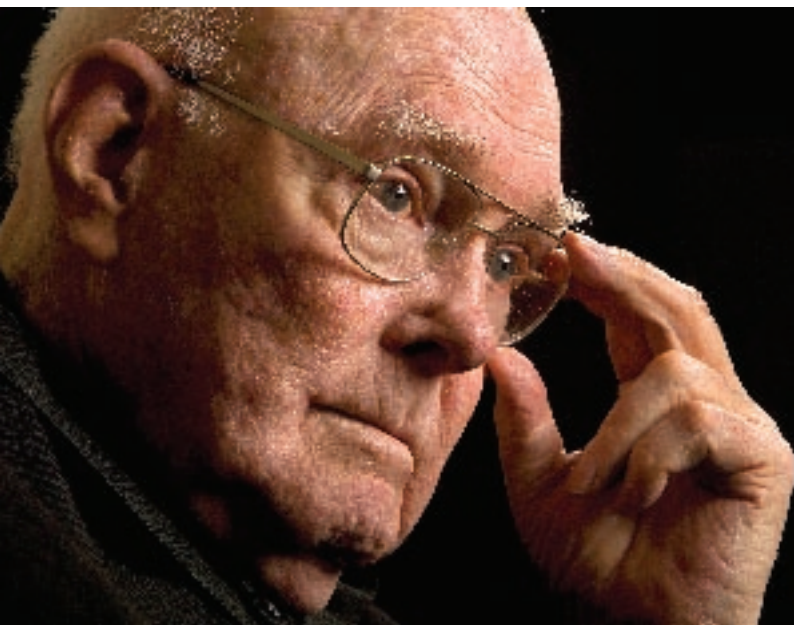
**FATHER JOHN:** An important distinction from most other Catholic colleges is that here on campus, there’s

a monastic schedule that provides throughout the day certain hours in which the monks offer public prayer and worship. And faculty and students are invited, and to an amazing degree, they attend. So the opportunity for prayer is there, and it certainly characterizes the whole life of the monastery. And I think that emanates to and throughout the campus.

Benedictines are very much rooted in the liturgy. Popular sentimental devotions, while good in themselves and very useful to many people, are just not part of Benedictine theology or spirituality. It’s the liturgy, which is the following of the life of Christ throughout the year as reflected in the scriptures and in the liturgical seasons.

**CROSSROADS:** The third hallmark is stability: commitment to the daily life of this place, its heritage, tradition. “Benedictine educational institutions put great energy into cultivating lasting relationships between faculty, students and staff,” the same writer says.

**FATHER JOHN:** Stability of course means that a monk belongs to this community. Unlike other religious orders, he’s not under a superior who can transfer him anyplace in the country. He is stable. And his loyalty and devotion are centered in this community. And I think that’s what contributes to the longevity of the relationships between



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our faculty and our alumni; an alumnus will come back 10, 15, 20 years after graduating and ask for a particular teacher, and he or she is still here! And this stimulates all sorts of reminiscences.

That is certainly an offshoot of stability.

Now for the monks themselves, the vow of stability simply means we're in this family, we belong here, and this is our home for life.

**CROSSROADS:** One commentary says that only through stability, that is, staying in one place, is one really able to change. That if you're constantly moving around from place to place, you can be in a sense running from yourself, and you won't have the stillness in your life that you need to change. Is there something in that which students and others can learn from?

**FATHER JOHN:** I think by being stable, by remaining [in one place], you have many, many helps. St. Benedict speaks of the help of many brethren. You step out of line and in a very fraternally charitable way, someone can call you back quickly. That too is an advantage of stability, I think: that people get to know you, and you get to know them, and you live in a – *hopefully* – harmonious atmosphere.

**CROSSROADS:** What exactly does the hallmark known as *conversatio* mean?

**FATHER JOHN:** There's a long history of *conversatio morum* and what it signified in Saint Benedict's day. I think in present-day Benedictine thought, it is a vow to live a monastic life. To accept and adapt to monastic life as lived in your particular community. There may be a variety of observances, even among Benedictines from house to house, but *conversatio morum* means that you adapt your manner of life to what is expected of a monk.

Now, if we say that *conversatio* means adapting to a monastic way of living, that means you're going to have to move away from the comfortable little niches you tend to put yourself in, and I think that transfers over to the students. There's a certain discipline that is expected of students which they must follow if they are going to be successful.

In earlier years, when we were a prep school and a junior college, the *horarium*

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was much more rigidly designed. You arose at a certain time, you had prayers in the morning, you had breakfast, you had study period, and classes, you had activities on the field in the afternoon. You had dinner in the evening and you had study hall. Everybody was doing the same thing at a designated time [in a rhythmic way]. And that was part of the notion of *conversatio morum*; that is, adapting to what is expected of you as a member of this community, whether it's monastic or collegiate.

Now, the College perhaps no longer has that same sort of rigidity. But generally, it's present. We have hours for class; hours for recreation; hours for prayer [if you'd like to avail yourself of them.] We no longer tell students when to go to bed at night, though!

**CROSSROADS:** Although some parents probably wouldn't mind bringing that back!

**FATHER JOHN:** Right.

**CROSSROADS:** The fifth hallmark is obedience: “a commitment to listening and consequent action... Teaching and learning are impossible without obedience, without listening to others with the awareness that no one possesses all truth,” the same writer we've been citing says.

**FATHER JOHN:** Yes, the Rule, as I'm sure you're aware, begins with the word *ausculta*. Listen. And the Rule emphasizes that it's the role of the subject, if you want, to listen to the master. To be taught, you come to be directed. And that direction is of no use unless you follow it. And you're following it by obedience.

St. Benedict sort of sanctifies that –

because that's not an easy thing to adapt to; I guess it's sort of against all human impulses – you know, “no one's going to tell *me* what to do,” that sort of thing – but St. Benedict says that reverence is given to the abbot because we believe, we have the faith, that he holds the place of Christ in the community. And if one can adopt that attitude, then obedience becomes easier because what is done in obedience to a superior is perfect for the individual in the sight of God. One can never do wrong when a legitimate command is given by a superior and one follows it.

And St. Benedict makes arrangements even for... he says when an impossible command is given to you, speak to your superior and say, “I can't do this. It's beyond my capacity.” And if the superior says, “Well try it, stay with it,” the subject should stay with it and St. Benedict says he'll get God's blessing – I suppose even if he fails.

But that's part of obedience. And I think that unless it is animated by that attitude, that the superior holds the place of Christ, obedience would be senseless.

St. Benedict also says that the monks should be obedient one to another. That's rooted in his attitude that one should do what is of benefit to another rather than to yourself. And I think that can show itself in small ways – in a tv room, for instance, when you want to see one program and someone else wants to see another, you go along with them, you accommodate to the needs and the demands and the wishes of others.

**CROSSROADS:** Yes, and there's this interesting notion fostered by St. Benedict that the community needs to listen especially to the young – to pay special attention to the thoughts of the young.

**FATHER JOHN:** Many of the decisions of the community are made in a chapter meeting, that is, when all of the members of the community gather. And this is what St. Benedict has in mind when a question is proposed to the community about what we should do. The abbot and the community should listen to experienced people, but also to the very young, because he says sometimes they have better ideas. And of course they KNOW they have better ideas. (Laughs.)

**FATHER JOHN:** Absolutely. You know, a teacher will say that you've got to do this term paper by Friday; you'd better get on it [and that's *good* for a student]. And in a family, parents can say this is good for you and you do it.

And you do it because *I say so!* (Laughs.) But you're now freed, because you know what is being asked is the right thing to do.

**CROSSROADS:** The next hallmark

your gifts, as long as you recognize where those gifts come from?

**FATHER JOHN:** Yes, if you don't recognize them, you're not being humble. You're being proud: "I didn't receive this as gift. It's me. It's *mine*."

But humility recognizes that all is gift, and expresses gratitude and thanksgiving for that, recognizing that I have received it.

Take Lucianno Pavoratti [the great opera tenor], who died not long ago. He would have been a fool and certainly a less than humble person if he had said, "Oh, I don't have much of a voice." But instead he said, "I have a great voice that was given to me by God."

That's a humble attitude on his part.

**CROSSROADS:** That's beautiful. Now onto the hallmark of stewardship, "the responsible use of creation, culture and the arts."

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, I think again that ties up with the gifts that are given. To be a legitimately acting steward of your gifts, you use them to the best of your ability.

And in more material ways, the community, for example, has the responsibility of stewardship towards what we have inherited from those who have gone before us: those who have given us the property, those who have built up the buildings and established the school.

We have the responsibility of carrying all of these things on to the best of our ability so that succeeding generations will profit from our care and our stewardship.

**CROSSROADS:** Hospitality, or "openness to the other" is the next-to-last hallmark. They all intersect in some way, don't they?

**FATHER JOHN:** Yes, they do. Well, I think generally, many people almost identify Benedictinism with hospitality.

St. Benedict says, speaking of guests – he's making special arrangements for guests, and he says a monastery is never without them. (Knowing chuckle.) So from the very beginning hospitality was part of monastic living. And again, it's rooted in that notion that guests should be received as Christ. And if that attitude is there, there is a warmth, an affection, a concern.

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**CROSSROADS:** We've touched a little on this already, but the next hallmark is discipline: "a way toward learning and freedom."

**FATHER JOHN:** Discipline really ties up with obedience. You know, from a certain point of view, to subject oneself in obedience to a superior sounds like you're sort of shackling your personality. But in a more fundamental sense, you're freeing yourself. Because if in faith you believe that the abbot holds the place of Christ in the community, what he asks of you in obedience - you can't do anything more perfect. You can do it with an assurance that this is right. So that frees me from the worry of, "should I do this, or should I do that?"

All of this depends a great deal on the prudence of the abbot, which I think is supplied by the grace of office. But the obedience of the monk to the commands of the abbot gives him a freedom of action that without that direction he would not have.

**CROSSROADS:** And within the college that could apply to a student and what his or her teacher is trying to do for him or her?

is humility, perhaps one of the most misunderstood in our culture.

**FATHER JOHN:** That's because I think that popularly, humility is looked upon as degrading oneself: "Oh, I'm no good. I'm a worm and no man."

With Benedict, and I think in solid theology, humility is simply the virtue of recognizing in truth who you are. And it would be a violation of humility for the president of a country to say, "Oh, I'm nothing." Or: "I'm just a little old citizen." He has a certain dignity that he has to live up to. And he has to recognize that is his responsibility, and he is being humble in accepting that.

In the spiritual life I think that it's very important for humility to recognize that we are the children of God. That gives us a dignity.

It not only gives *us* a dignity, but a dignity that is conferred on others. And therefore, you're willing to serve others: "What you do to the least of these you do to me."

Humility is an ennobling virtue, it seems to me. It's not degrading at all. It's truth: who you are and what you are.

**CROSSROADS:** And it's okay to recognize

For many people, this is something new. They've never felt this before.

**CROSSROADS:** And in the context of education, doesn't this mean that there's an especial openness to the other, a welcoming of other points of view?

**FATHER JOHN:** Yes, I think so. Hospitality demands that you accept the individual as the individual. And that's true for students. In any academic community various attitudes and opinions have to be expressed and respected and reasoned about until we can, if possible, arrive at the truth of a situation. And the truth should either accommodate both opinions, or do away with one and reveal what is actually the fact. But that openness, yes, that has to be there.

**CROSSROADS:** So here at the Abbey many are working hard to strengthen the Catholic identity of the College. But how do we celebrate our Catholic identity without somehow making people from other faith traditions feel like "the other"?

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, I think it is the responsibility on the part of a Catholic institution to recognize, identify and to accept its Catholicity. But Catholicity itself means to embrace *all*. You know, it's not an exclusive thing in that you put others aside. The term itself means wholeness and universality. And I think that a Catholic college manifests its Catholicity by simply tying it up with hospitality, if you will. By accepting all views without in any way making those who hold different opinions feel that they are wrong, or that they are somehow hostile to us, or anything of that sort. It has to be a welcoming attitude and a respect for the conscience and convictions of others. And traditionally, I think that has been part of the history of the Abbey.

Now, it may well be that there is presently a larger number of non-Catholics in the student body – and in the faculty, even. And they themselves may feel apart or like "the other," but I don't think that the College or the institution intentionally makes them feel that they are apart.

They may feel that way because they're thinking, "I don't know what

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Mass is. I don't know what they're doing over there." But you see, they're putting themselves apart [if they think that way]. If there's any feeling of alienation or estrangement, I'm afraid it's in the minds of those who think this way. And I don't believe the College or the monastery thinks that way at all.

**CROSSROADS:** The final hallmark is, appropriately enough, community: "the call to serve the common good." There seem to be so many *non*-communities now, that one would think that it would be a special blessing for some students who come from these suburban enclaves where everyone is "cocooning" or cutting themselves off from others with their computers and iPods, to experience what *real* community is like.

**FATHER JOHN:** Again, I think all of this goes back to the spirit of the Rule. I think it has always been the tradition here at the Abbey that we are one community. I think in recent years, something has been spoken of that I believe has been very helpful to emphasize – it may have begun with Abbot Placid, I'm not sure – but the students are encouraged to realize that they're welcomed into the monastery's home; that they've come into a community that's already established, and they're now a part of it. And they are welcomed into a...family. And you sometimes hear them say, "We thank the monks for the sense of community." When the students realize that they are part of a larger community – larger than simply the student body – they get a wonderful sense of being part of a community that is helpful not just now, but for the rest of their lives.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

**CROSSROADS:** This College is in many ways a treasure that has been passed on to us, isn't it? So how do we best protect it, and how do we make it flourish?

**FATHER JOHN:** Here again, the idea of stewardship is important. We have, in the monastery, inherited property that was purchased or given years ago and it's our responsibility to manage that to the best of our ability. And so, it is a policy that we will sell none of the property that we have inherited. And if it is to be developed, it's developed with the understanding that the property remains in the possession of the Abbey. It's not sold. And that has prevented some development, because some companies don't want that sort of arrangement.

So proper stewardship will contribute to what you ask.

**CROSSROADS:** We've been having this conversation under the auspices of a magazine called *Crossroads*. Is there a way in which a Benedictine college like ours acts as a kind of crossroads?

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, I think both in the College and in the monastery, that's recognized. For example, in the acceptance of students, as we spoke of earlier, who are very bright and students who are less bright. I think

they form a sort of crossroads in classwork, and in dormitories on campus. And I think the same thing is true in the monastery. There are some members of the community who are very talented – multi-talented – and there are some who are less talented. And they're accepted equally. And I think that forms a sort of crossroads, as well.

**CROSSROADS:** So what do you think we find again and again at such a crossroads?

**FATHER JOHN:** I think what we find again and again is variety. And to recognize the existence of variety helps us to recognize reality more. Instead of imposing our ideas about what things should be, we discover what things are, and arrive more surely, I think, at the essence of truth.

So the crossroads both in student life and in the monastic life, helps us to see variety, differences: one's going one way, and one's going the other, but they do cross. They meet somehow.

**CROSSROADS:** Last question: do you have a persistent prayer or set of prayers that you pray for the College?

**FATHER JOHN:** Well, I don't know if I should reveal this, but I have a special

prayer for the abbot and for the president: that God will give them wisdom, prudence and courage. Wisdom to know visions, ideas; courage to put them into effect; and prudence to do it in a manner that is going to lead them toward their goals in the best possible way.

In a general way, we pray for everyone in the community at the monastery. But for me, those two are especially objects of my prayer. ■

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**ABBOT PLACID'S COLUMN**  
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

educational tradition, Benedictine colleges see education as a search for the truth through the integration of knowledge gained in all areas of study. The truth perceived in this manner ought to direct our wills to recognize and choose the true good. The ability freely to choose the good is freedom.

At the center of the education offered at a Benedictine college stands the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and endowed with an end which extends beyond the confines of this material world. The education is for a good human life, which includes, but is not limited to, the training of one's talents for a successful and fulfilling career. The Hallmarks are intended to provide this larger context and to help stretch the education offered in our Benedictine schools beyond mere professional training to training for a happy, meaningful and productive life in this world, and in the world which is to come.

I think the values captured by these Hallmarks are the secret to that "something special" you find at Belmont Abbey College. These values have always provided the implicit context of life at the Abbey. It is important today that we make them explicit. As you look through the Hallmarks listed on page 6, I hope you will recognize ways in which these values have shaped your Abbey education. The challenge for us is to seek constantly to make these values part of our life every day. To do so will be to live Belmont Abbey College's motto "That in all things God may be glorified."

