

American Benedictine Academy President's Talk
Board Installation
Sr. Jeana Visel, OSB
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Hello! For those who don't know me, my name is Sr. Jeana Visel. I am honored to serve as the incoming president of the American Benedictine Academy. I am a Benedictine from Monastery Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand, Indiana. I work at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology overseeing the non-seminary programs and teaching spirituality. I would like to take this time to give you a little sense of what I see at this point regarding where the Academy might be headed.

Many of you might have questions about this in view of the many changes in the monastic world. The American Benedictine Academy generally hosts a convention every two years. The convention of 2020 was held online at the start of the pandemic. In 2022, an in-person convention was planned but held online due to low enrollment. Our 2024 in-person convention was cancelled for the same reason. COVID certainly played a part in this, but it is also true that the average age in most Benedictine monasteries and some oblate groups has risen, making it difficult to participate in the kinds of activities the ABA has traditionally offered. It is clear that the ABA, like many institutions, is at a turning point. Through the collaboration of the officers and board you have elected, the membership and other supporters of the ABA need to chart a course forward in the coming years. We are an able team, and ready to undertake this work.

It may be reassuring that, over the decades, the organization has nearly ended multiple times. I'd like to take us through some of that history for the sake of context.

In the June 2000 issue of the *American Benedictine Review*, Sr. Alberta Dieker wrote an article recounting the history of the American Benedictine Academy. In it she explains that the American-Cassinese Congregation had started a National Benedictine Education Association in 1918 for the purpose of keeping monastic educators aware of educational standards and trends.

By 1947, though, a new organization was proposed as a successor, to serve as "a medium of contact and stimulation among American Benedictine scholars."¹ The first official meeting of the American Benedictine Academy took place in December, 1947, where monastic leaders and representatives made final revisions to the constitutions and bylaws, and appointed an executive board. This board met for the first time in February, 1948. It designated eight sections covering a range academic areas: Sacred Sciences, Philosophy, Social Sciences, Education and Psychology, Language and Literature, Natural Sciences, Fine Arts, and Library Science. In its early pre-Vatican II years, the ABA was an active force in the Benedictine world. It published several books, and the 19-volume series *Benedictine Studies*, which was a prelude to *American Benedictine Review*, started in 1950.² In 1958, the ABA established the Benedictine Institute of Sacred Theology at the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, to make serious theological study available to sisters. Two years later, the ABA sponsored an Ecumenical Colloquy at St. John's Abbey, a first attempt at ecumenism, which gave rise to the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's.³ This was ground-breaking service to the Church.

Yet even in the early years of the 1950s, the question emerged about whether the focus of the ABA might broaden beyond specialized topics to address themes of interest to all Benedictines, including

¹ Alberta Dieker, "Ideas and Ideals: The American Benedictine Academy, 1948-1998," *American Benedictine Review* 51:2 (June 2000): 169, quoting *Newsletter of the American Benedictine Academy* 1 (June 1, 1948) 1. See also Joel Rippinger, "50 Years of the American Benedictine Review: A Retrospective" *American Benedictine Review* 51:3 (September 2000): 318.

² Dieker, 174, 176-77; cf. Rippinger, 319.

³ Dieker, 175-76.

sisters teaching at the elementary and high school levels.⁴ The constitution described the ABA's purpose as both “to stimulate and promote the interests and activities of American Benedictines, and to cultivate and transmit the best traditions of Benedictine life and scholarship.” As Dieker describes it, a core question emerged: “Was the focus to be upon **Benedictine interests and activities** or upon **scholarship**?” As the founding members weighed in on the question at the time, scholarship was most important.⁵

This question arose, in part, due to changes in the educational environment. Educators, beginning in the late 1950s, needed to belong to other professional organizations. Supported mostly by sponsoring monastic communities, the financial burden of running the ABA and the *American Benedictine Review* (which were one organization at the time) fell unevenly among communities. The scholarship being shared was not always of the highest quality. But the Academy and the *Review* provided space for Benedictines to cooperate in scholarly efforts.⁶ Boards at the time revised the constitutions and reduced the number of sections; the work carried on.⁷

After Vatican II, Benedictine-run colleges went through many changes, affecting the commitments of many monks and sisters. The Academy reconsidered limiting membership to those with advanced degrees.⁸ By the 1970s, membership had dropped significantly, from almost 800 in 1970 to 91 in 1976. President Fr. Bede Ernsdorff attributed this shift to a change in the interests of American Benedictines, especially sisters, from academic to more social apostolates.⁹

By 1978, under the leadership of the late Fr. Colman Grabert of Saint Meinrad, the Academy shifted its overall focus to Benedictine studies, though academic disciplinary sections remained.¹⁰ In 1984 the Academy started an essay contest to promote serious scholarship among young Benedictines. Through the 1980s and 90s, the ABA focused increasingly on current and future issues of Benedictine life. The Proceedings of those years reveal there were some strong conventions and some more disappointing years. By the 50th anniversary of the organization in 1998, membership had risen to 200. Some special interest groups were encouraged, including a group for archivists, a visual arts group, and a monastic researchers group that put out their own newsletter to keep each other updated about their studies. Dieker states that, though the identity of the ABA had shifted a bit from the vision of its founders, the organization was fairly healthy at the time of her article in 2000.¹¹

This history gives us a bit of context for where we stand today. In 2024 our current membership stands at 114, including 61 monastics, 4 other religious, 18 oblates, and 31 others. We have 14 sponsoring monasteries supporting the organization. The number of non-retired monastics is declining across the country, and some monasteries have ceased to receive new members. Vowed Benedictines know we are in a moment of demographic contraction, even as religious life is alive and well and growing in certain pockets of American life. At the same time, the number of oblates is constantly increasing, as is interest in and publication about monastic and Benedictine spirituality.

All this said, human and financial resources are not infinite, and we stand in a delicate moment. We need to steward well what we have been given, and to discern the future wisely in light of current demographics. For every organization, but especially those in times of stress, knowing one's mission and purpose is critical. Why waste energy doing things that are not core to one's purpose? In looking at the

⁴ Dieker, 179.

⁵ Dieker, 182-83, emphasis mine.

⁶ Dieker, 183-84.

⁷ Dieker, 185-86.

⁸ Dieker, 187.

⁹ ABAA, Ernsdorff, Report to Council (May 20, 1977), as cited in Dieker, 190.

¹⁰ Dieker, 190-91.

¹¹ Dieker, 192-96.

history of the ABA, it strikes me that this question of core purpose has arisen multiple times as the reason for our being has shifted with the times. We started as an organization for Benedictine academics of various stripes. When they were able to go to their own professional societies, we focused more on monastic studies. Sometimes the academy has had a more academic bent, and sometimes it has been more open to anyone interested in monastic topics. This core question of “Benedictine interests and activities vs scholarship” keeps coming back.

I think a big part of the challenge is the fact that we call ourselves an “academy.” What is an academy? The Oxford Dictionary has defined an academy as “a place of study or training in a special field,” or “a society or institution for the cultivation and promotion of literature, of arts and sciences, or of some particular art or science or branch of these.”¹² Scholars participate in an academy to help uphold standards of excellence. An academy is a space in which research can be shared, ideas can be tested, and connections can be made. To be useful to scholars, an academy needs to be a gathering of peers in the field. As we have seen in our own history, an academy can foster and support new research and writing with the presence of a journal, the undertaking of collaborative publishing projects, grants that support travel or other costs of research, and essay contests that encourage new voices to foray into the field.

We also have to be honest about why scholars might *not* join an academy. If their true peers are not there, or if there aren’t enough scholars to warrant such an organization, things can stagnate. If the cost to participate isn’t worth the return in terms of things learned, publications written, or useful contacts made, one might abstain. If the mission of the organization isn’t clearly set on fostering quality scholarship, it might not be worth an academic’s investment. We have to ask whether we are offering what is needed today.

These are hard questions, but they are realities we need to address honestly. If the ABA exists to foster exchange on “Benedictine interests and activities” more broadly, for anyone who is interested, that is one purpose, and perhaps a noble one. The Benedictine order is by its nature decentralized, so maintaining some kind of central space to foster conversation about Benedictine topics is a challenge but important. The advent of the “Being Benedictine” gathering a few years ago seemed to represent a yearning for this kind of service, but as yet I don’t believe the movement has continued in any stable way.¹³

As important as that kind of exchange may be, if the ABA exists to be a true “academy” focused on promoting monastic studies scholarship at a high level, this may be a different mission. An “academy” cannot simply be a catch-all. I think we need to take some time to clarify our mission so that we can steward our resources well. If we don’t need to be an “academy” *per se*, but something else, perhaps it’s time to change our name. If we are to be an “academy,” we may need to focus our energies a bit more specifically. Given demographic realities, it may also be that the American Benedictine Academy has fulfilled its mission and is no longer needed at this time.

It is important to note that since 1975, *American Benedictine Review* now stands as a separate organization.¹⁴ Within the life of the journal, editor Sr. Colleen Maura McGrane continues to bring forth high quality issues with scholarly writing from both established and newer academics, both Benedictine and secular. I believe the *American Benedictine Review* continues to do fine work and is in many ways a space of true meeting of scholarly voices, even if it doesn’t happen in person. Also within the American monastic tradition, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* likewise provides peer-reviewed monastic scholarship.¹⁵

¹² See Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/oedv2/00001038>.

¹³ See Judith Valente and Linda Romey, “Being Benedictine on the cusp of a new era for monasticism,” *Global Sisters Report* (Sept. 21, 2021), <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/religious-life/being-benedictine-cusp-new-era-monasticism>.

¹⁴ Rippinger, 324, 326-27.

¹⁵ Cistercian Studies Quarterly, <https://www.cistercian-studies-quarterly.org/About>.

It is important, too, to recognize that Benedictine and monastic studies scholars also have the opportunity to meet up in other organizations and in other places: at the Kalamazoo International Congress on Medieval Studies¹⁶ and the Center for Cistercian and Monastic Studies,¹⁷ the Leeds International Medieval Congress,¹⁸ the American Academy of Religion, the Monastic Institutes at Sant' Anselmo,¹⁹ Mepkin Abbey,²⁰ or St. John's School of Theology-Seminary,²¹ the Catholic Theological Society of America,²² the Benedictine Pedagogy Conference of the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities,²³ and other groups and seminars focused in specialized areas. We exist against a wider horizon of academic Church life, and it is important to take these elements into account.

As we go forward, I would like to put these key questions before us:

- First, does the ABA need to continue to exist?
- If so, how can we focus its core mission so as to serve our constituents well? Do we need to update our name and constitution?
- Moreover, if the ABA should continue, should it continue to offer in-person conventions, or is it time to offer other kinds of opportunities to connect with people and content? What kinds of services would be most helpful?

In order to discern well, we will need to take steps to survey our members, monastic leadership, monastic scholars, and others. What are your needs and desires for this organization? What seems to be the wisest course of action at this time? Once we have good data, the board can meet and begin to make decisions on how to proceed.

These are not easy questions, but as a board we have a responsibility to steward this organization as well as possible, in light of the tradition we have been given, the current realities we face, and needs of those who are yet to come in Benedictine life.

¹⁶ International Congress on Medieval Studies, hosted by the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University, <https://wmich.edu/medievalcongress>.

¹⁷ Center for Cistercian and Monastic Studies, <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cistercian/>.

¹⁸ Leeds International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, <https://www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/>.

¹⁹ Monastic Institute, Sant' Anselmo, <https://www.anselmianum.com/moodle/mod/page/view.php?id=84&lang=en>.

²⁰ Monastic Institute, Mepkin Abbey, <https://mepkinabbey.org/2022-mepkin-abbey-monastic-institute/>.

²¹ Monastic Institute, St. John's School of Theology and Seminary, <https://www.csbsju.edu/sot/lifelong-learning/monastic/>.

²² Catholic Theological Society of America, <https://ctsa-online.org/>.

²³ American Benedictine Colleges and Universities, <https://www.abcu.info/>.