

Living Our Vocation While Avoiding Burnout

What the Rule of St. Benedict and our Catholic Faith Can Tell Us

By Pamela Patnode, Ed.D., ObISB

Burnout. Have you experienced it? According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, burnout is defined as “physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion, accompanied by decreased motivation, lowered performance and negative attitudes toward oneself and others.” Recent headlines suggest that many educators have experienced (or are currently struggling with) burnout.

As the demands for school leaders, teachers and staff continue to increase, while one’s personal, family and relationship needs have not diminished, we might find ourselves asking, “How do I find balance in life?” Living our vocation as Catholic school educators while avoiding burnout is a challenge. However, there are some practical steps teachers can take to minimize stress and overwhelm.

The Benedict Option for Finding Balance in Life

The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation by Rod Dreher was published in 2017 and quickly became a New York Times bestseller. As a Benedictine oblate, I wondered if the popularity of the book was due to an increased interest in Benedictine spirituality, or if it was due to a desire to escape — which some people equate (wrongly, I would argue) with “the Benedict option.”

The director of the Benedictine oblate program at St. Benedict’s monastery in St. Joseph, MN told me that people who inquire about the Benedictine oblate program often say that “they are looking for something more.”

As Catholic school educators, many of us can relate to this search for “something more,” which is intimately connected with our vocation. Many Catholic school educators seek mission, meaning and God’s will in their lives. It is possible that those who purchased Dreher’s



Reflecting upon his transition from diocesan priest to bishop, Williams stated that he begins each day in contemplation, and he has discovered freedom within this Benedictine structure. He is not alone. Margaret Nuzzolese-Conway, director of campus ministry for St. John's University, observed in *Abbey Banner* (Winter 2022-2023): "I have come to understand "Benedictine" as a lived way of being. ... Between the dedication to some task ... and the consistency of the "Work of God" (prayer), the *ora et labora* rhythm animates all other values. This way of being is grounding for me. It brings me peace and stability, focus and assurance, amid a hectic life."

For Catholic school educators who are mission driven and tirelessly strive to serve their students, it is necessary to remember that work, as important as it is, does not top the list of priorities.

book were searching for these things as well — and they wondered if St. Benedict's Rule had something to offer.

Despite having been written nearly 1,500 years ago, there are many lessons in the *Rule of St. Benedict* that can be helpful to those working in the world of Catholic education today.

Interestingly, many of the practices of Benedictine spirituality (such as establishing order in the day, prayer, work and the value of community) are recommended by medical experts as healthy ways to live.

Prayer and work — ordering our priorities and our days

Ora et labora is the common Latin expression that is associated with the Benedictine way of life. *The Rule of St. Benedict* orders the day of the monks and religious sisters around prayer, work and study. This ordering of the day is important. For St. Benedict, prayer was the *Opus Dei*, the work of God, and nothing was of higher priority.

A commitment to daily prayer is consistent with our vocation. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* discusses different kinds of vocation. Interestingly, our primary vocation as baptized Christians does not relate to our work in the classroom. Rather, our primary vocation is to grow in holiness (CCC 1, 358, 825, 1700). This call to growing in holiness (which requires daily prayer, regular participation in the sacraments, regular reading and study of Scripture

and service) is an important reminder for Catholic school educators.

As Catholic school educators, daily prayer and structure are necessary. In a recent retreat, Bishop Joseph Williams of the archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis said that, although he is not a Benedictine, he does implement a Benedictine structure to his schedule.

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Fr. Arnold Weber, OSB, a Benedictine priest and monk for more than 60 years, routinely reminded parishioners that one's priorities in life should be (in this order):

1. God
2. Spouse
3. Family
4. Work

Maintaining the proper order of these priorities can help guard against burnout — but it does require discipline, obedience, humility and (at times) sacrifice.

Being committed to our primary vocation as baptized Christians while establishing structure and boundaries that keep priorities in order is important. It is also necessary to practice health and wellness.

Health and wellness

Mr. Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing, gave a keynote address titled “The Seven Keys to Great Teaching.” Among his seven tips was the reminder that teachers must focus on their own well-being. Pudewa noted that student-centered learning is important, but not to the detriment of the teacher's well-being. Few would disagree that if the teacher is not well in body, mind and spirit, then they cannot serve their students to the best of their ability.

Maintaining wellness in body, mind and spirit has been discussed by researchers, medical doctors, mental health experts, educators and theologians for decades. Many of the recommendations are consistent — yet, putting them into practice can be challenging. In a very succinct list, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, in his 2021 book *Keep Sharp: Build a Better Brain at Any Age*, notes the importance of:

1. movement,
2. nutrition,
3. discovery,
4. relaxation, and
5. social connections.

Daily exercise and healthy eating are topics that have been in the news and medical journals for years. Most adults, whether they practice these recommendations or not, recognize the importance of nutrition and exercise for maintaining health, avoiding illness and disease and improving overall energy, flexibility and performance.

It is worth noting, however, that discovery, relaxation and social connection are also on Dr. Gupta's list. Often overlooked in the realm of discovery and relaxation is the value of true

leisure. Archbishop Fulton Sheen observed, “Never before have men possessed so many time-saving devices. Never before have they had so little time for leisure or repose. Yet few of them are aware of this: advertising has created in modern minds the idea that leisure and not working are the same.” Indeed, leisure and not-working are *not* the same.

Josef Pieper is well-known for his writings on leisure. To practice leisure, Pieper recommends three key steps:

1. listening within silence,
2. fasting from visual noise, and
3. being active in artistic creation and discovery, which can include creating art, reading great literature and poetry, listening to and creating beautiful music, dancing, gardening, enjoying nature, ongoing learning, cooking, playing games as a family, lectio divina and intentional conversations that build relationships (Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, 1988).

Finally, in addition to movement, nutrition, relaxation and ongoing learning; social connections are important — and this can include asking for help. Fr. Spencer Howe, pastor of Holy Cross Catholic Church and School in Minneapolis, asked parishioners during a Sunday homily, “Are you willing to let people into the messiness of your life?” Fr. Howe invited parishioners to ask for help when needed.

This is imperative for Catholic school educators whose to-do list seems to continually grow. Tapping into social networks, making connections and seeking help and guidance from colleagues, mentors, family, friends, medical professionals, mental health professionals and spiritual directors can improve our well-being and help to avoid burnout.

The work of the Catholic school educator reaches into eternity. This truth is both a privilege and a responsibility. Through daily prayer, proper ordering of one's priorities, a commitment to health and wellness and a willingness to ask for help, Catholic educators can touch lives while finding balance, mission, meaning and God's will in their lives.

(Please note: This article is not intended as personal medical advice. If you are feeling ill, anxious, depressed, or suicidal, seek immediate help from your personal physician or licensed counselor.)

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