

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Thursday, 6th Week of Easter; Feast of St. Bede the Venerable

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Mass for the Academy of Catholic Theologians

Dominican House of Studies

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In many places, we would be celebrating the Solemnity of the Ascension but here we are celebrating Thursday in the 6th Week of Easter and, happily enough, an optional memorial of the Venerable St. Bede. In light of our foregoing discussions, I would like to reflect briefly on the Venerable Bede as one who literally exercised what is today called “the Benedict option”: He withdrew from the world and entered monastic life.

Born in the 7th century, Bede likely hailed from a noble family in the English Kingdom of Northumbria. When Bede was still very young his family entrusted him to the twinned monasteries of Ss. Peter and Paul, in Wearmouth and Jarrow. By all accounts he was a man of great talent and skill. Indeed, he was an early medieval “Renaissance man”, if I may say so. History, theology, philosophy, math, music, grammar – little escaped his capacious mind. One might wonder what he might have done had he not become a monk.

To ask that question, however, is to betray a prejudice, namely, that one's skills and talents are stifled in the cramped environment of a monastery and are much better deployed in the outside world. Yet, the Venerable Bede's life teaches us otherwise. His life illustrates how the monastery influenced the wider culture and it also illustrates how the monastery can be a place of freedom.

Bede spent most of his life in a monastic enclosure yet we know he made good use of the extensive library available to him. He preserved and transmitted vast amounts of

knowledge and culture but he also advanced the treasury of human knowledge through his voluminous writings and correspondence.

Even though he was, as it were, “confined” to a monastery, Bede’s life and work greatly influenced the world around him and contributed to the development of Western civilization – to art, science, language, metrics, to name a few. And it was in the monastic setting that Bede had the freedom for these pursuits, a freedom which he put to very good use. Bede exemplifies how one can withdraw from the world so as to engage it.

Bede’s capacious mind, however, was outmatched by an even more capacious heart. In the monastic setting, he had the freedom to grow in holiness. There he reflected Paul’s apologetic skill in Athens and Paul’s ardent love for the Crucified in Corinth. His writings are those of a true doctor of the Church in whose heart the Gospel found a willing home. It was in the monastery, leading an austere life, following in the footsteps of the One who was poor, chaste, and obedient, that Bede was interiorly free to see with the eyes of faith the Crucified, Risen, and Exalted Lord. Bede exemplifies the magnificence of that interior freedom which belongs to those who follow Christ unreservedly.

In these days you have discussed the Church as a City and as a People of God planted as however, right in the heart of the earthly city with all its mischance and confusion. You have discussed how it is that the Church both challenges and engages the world, how it is that the Church must sometimes withdraw from the world so as to engage it.

Prompted by the example of Venerable Bede, I would say that the worldly engagement of the Church will go awry without the witness of those who live consecrated life in freedom and purity of heart. Pope St. John Paul II spoke of consecrated life as “a transfigured life capable of amazing the world” and Pope Francis has challenged those in consecrated life “to wake up the world.” Those of us not in consecrated life should be careful not to paint an overly idealized picture of life in a monastery or life in any kind of a religious house – but the fact remains that this form of life benefits not only those who live it but also those of us who do not live it. By embracing chastity, poverty, and obedience those in consecrated life

reveal for the rest of us the true meaning of interior freedom – the freedom to love God and others singleheartedly; the freedom to be at one with God's will; the freedom to shed all that might encumber our relationship with God. Without this witness of freedom and joy, it is hard to imagine how the Church's mission of evangelization would advance.

Let us ask St. Bede to pray for us that our lives might be marked as his was by the love of learning and the desire for God. May God bless us and keep us always in his love.