The Benedict Option

A STRATEGY FOR CHRISTIANS IN A POST-CHRISTIAN NATION

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SENTINEL

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Let us arise, then, at last,

For the Scripture stirs us up, saying,

"Now is the hour for us to rise from sleep." (Romans 13:11)

—Rule of Saint Benedict

CHAPTER 7

Education as Christian Formation

In the mid-1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalization within his own country inspired the same loosening of restrictions in the Warsaw Pact nations, including Czechoslovakia. With the dawn breaking from the long Communist night, Václav Benda reflected on what he and his allies in the dissident movement had accomplished to that point. Benda was disappointed by their failure to establish much of a parallel *polis*, but one failure he described as catastrophic: their inability to establish a schooling system that would provide an alternative education to the state's.

As a Christian, Benda wanted to create a counterculture that would defend and restore authentic moral and religious values to Czech society and to reknit the bonds between Czechs and their past severed by the Communists. As a university professor, he believed that education was the most important means of doing that.

Why had they failed? Their efforts had been too exclusive, and the forms too flawed. Even as it loosened the bonds in other areas of civic life, the Communist state kept its iron grip on education. And, said Benda, the destruction of the Czech family under Communism made it difficult for any educational reform to succeed.

Poland, with its thick Catholic culture, came much closer than the Czechs to realizing a parallel *polis*. From Catholic Poland came the sparks—in the form of the Solidarity labor movement and Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II—that ignited the fire that burned Communism to the ground. And yet today Poles like the Catholic philosopher and former dissident Ryszard Legutko lament that the faith and culture his people preserved through the dark night of totalitarianism are dissolving thanks to the solvent of Western-style secular liberalism (which includes hedonism and consumerism).

We traditional Christians in America can learn from both Eastern European examples. We face nothing so terrible as the Czechs did under Soviet domination, of course, but the more insidious forces of secular liberalism are steadily achieving the same aim: robbing us and future generations of our religious beliefs, moral values, and cultural memory, and making us pawns of forces beyond our control.

This is why we have to focus tightly and without hesitation on education. We have far more freedom than Benda and his colleagues did, and our people, though under strain, are far less demoralized than the Czechs were.

"Education has to be at the core of Christian survival—as it always was," says Michael Hanby, a professor of religion and philosophy of science at Washington's Pontifical John Paul II Institute. "The point of monasticism was not simply to retreat from a corrupt world to survive, though in various iterations that might have been a dimension of it," he continues. "But at the heart of it was a quest for God. It was that quest that mandated the preservation of classical learning and the pagan tradition by the monks, because they loved what was true and what was beautiful wherever they found it."

As crucial as cultural survival is, Hanby warns that Christians cannot content themselves with merely keeping their heads above water within liquid modernity. We have to search passionately for the truth, reflect rigorously on reality, and in so doing, come to terms with

what it means to live as authentic Christians in the disenchanted world created by modernity. Education is the most important means for accomplishing this.

"Retaining the imagination necessary to see or to search for God is going to be an indispensable element in the preservation of true freedom and Christian freedom when our freedom under law becomes more and more limited," Hanby says.

Today, across the Christian community, there is a growing movement called classical Christian education. It is countercultural in both form and content and presents to students the Western tradition—both Greco-Roman and Christian—in all its depth. Doing it right requires a level of effort and commitment that contemporary Americans are not accustomed to—but what alternative do we have?

If you want to know how critical education is to cultural and religious survival, ask the Jews. Rabbi Mark Gottlieb says, "Jews committed to traditional life put schooling above almost anything. There are families that will do just about anything short of bankrupting themselves to give their children an Orthodox Jewish education." Christians have not been nearly as alert to the importance of education, and it's time to change that.

To that end, one of the most important pieces of the Benedict Option movement is the spread of classical Christian schools. Rather than letting their children spend forty hours a week learning "facts" with a few hours of worldview education slapped on top, parents need to pull them from public schools and provide them with an education that is rightly ordered—that is, one based on the premise that there is a God-given, unified structure to reality and that it is discoverable. They need to teach them Scripture and history. And they should not stop after twelfth grade—a Christian plan for higher education is also needed.

Building schools that can educate properly will require churches, parents, peer groups, and fellow traveler Christians to work together. It will be costly, but what choice is there?

Give Your Family a Rightly Ordered Education

For serious Christian parents, education cannot be simply a matter of building their child's transcript to boost her chance of making it into the Ivy League. If this is the model your family follows (perhaps with a sprinkle of God on top for seasoning), you will be hard-pressed to form countercultural Christian adults capable of resisting the disorders of our time.

The kind of schooling that will build a more resilient, mature faith in young Christians is one that imbues them with a sense of order, meaning, and continuity. It's one that integrates knowledge into a harmonious vision of the whole, one that unites all things that are, were, and ever will be in God.

Every educational model presupposes an anthropology: an idea of what a human being is. In general, the mainstream model is geared toward equipping students to succeed in the workforce, to provide a pleasant, secure life for themselves and their future families, and ideally, to fulfill their personal goals—whatever those goals might be. The standard Christian educational model today takes this model and adds religion classes and prayer services.

But from a traditional Christian perspective, the model is based on a flawed anthropology. In traditional Christianity, the ultimate goal of the soul is to love and serve God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, to achieve unity with Him in eternity. To prepare for eternal life, we must join ourselves to Christ and strive to live in harmony with the divine will.

To be fully human is to be fully conformed to that reality—as C. S. Lewis would say, to the things that are—through cooperating with God's freely given grace. Drawn forward by the love of God, we stagger along the pilgrim's path rejoicing, filling our minds with knowledge of Him and His Creation, and allowing our hearts to be converted by radical surrender to His love. To be humanized is to grow—by contemplation and action, and through faith and reason—in the love

of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. These are all reflections of the Triune God, in Whom we live and move and have our being.

To compartmentalize education, separating it from the life of the church, is to create a false distinction. Saint Benedict, in his Rule, called the monastery "a school for the service of the Lord." This was no mere figure of speech. Benedict believed that discipleship was a matter of pedagogy, of training both the heart and the mind, so that we could grow beyond spiritual infancy. In Chapter 7 of the Rule, in an instruction on humility, Benedict told the brothers to remember that nothing is hidden from God, citing the Psalmist's description of God as a "searcher of hearts and minds."

In the Benedictine tradition, learning is wholly integrated into the life of prayer and work. Being a faithful monk required being able to read, obviously, but the ability to write was critical to the monastic life. Monasteries became places in which countless monks undertook the painstaking work of copying by hand Holy Scripture, prayer books, patristic writings, and literature of the classical world. These men of God laid the foundation for a new civilization, and they did it because they loved God.

Today our education system fills students' heads with facts, with no higher aspiration than success in worldly endeavor. Since the High Middle Ages, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake has been slowly separated from the pursuit of virtue. Today the break is clean.

Educator Martin Cothran, a national leader in the classical Christian school movement, says that many Christians today don't realize how the nature of education has changed over the past hundred years. The progressivism of the 1920s involved using schools to change the culture. The vocationalism of the 1940s and 1950s tried to use schools to conform children to the culture. But the traditional way of education, which reigned from the Greco-Roman period until the modern era, was about passing on a culture and one culture in particular: the culture of the West, and for most of that time, the Christian West.

"The classical education of the pagans that was transformed by the

church attempted to inculcate in each new generation an idea of what a human being should be, through constantly having examples of ideal humanity set in front of it, and by studying the great deeds of great men," Cothran told me. "This was a culture with a definite and distinctive goal: to pass on the wisdom of the past and to produce another generation with the same ideals and values—ideals and values based on its vision of what a human being was.

"That's what education was for over two millennia," he continued. "It is now something that retains the old label, but is not the same thing. It is not even the same *kind* of thing. It has been abandoned in the modern school—including many Christian ones. Even many Christian parents who do not accept the political correctness of today's schools have completely bought into the utilitarian concept of education."

To be sure, there is nothing wrong in principle with learning something useful or achieving excellence in science, the arts, literature, or any other field of the intellect. But mastery of facts and their application is not the same thing as education, any more than an advanced degree in systematic theology makes one a saint.

The separation of learning from virtue creates a society that esteems people for their success in manipulating science, law, money, images, words, and so forth. Whether or not their accomplishments are morally worthy is a secondary question, one that will seem naïve to many if it occurs to them at all.

If a Christian way of living isn't integrated with students' intellectual and spiritual lives, they'll be at risk of falling away through no fault of their own. As John Mark Reynolds, who recently founded Houston's Saint Constantine School, puts it, Christian young people who have had a personal, life-changing encounter with Christ, and who know Christian apologetics but have not integrated them into their lives, are more vulnerable than they think. They have to learn how to translate the conversion experience and intellectual knowledge of the faith into a Christian way of living—or their faith will remain fragile.

If it's true that a simplistic, anti-intellectual Christian faith is a thin reed in the gale of academic life, it is also true that faith that's primarily intellectual—that is, a matter of mastering information—is deceptively fragile. Equipping Christian students to thrive in a highly secularized, even hostile environment is not a matter of giving them a protective shell. The shell may crack under pressure or be discarded. Rather, it must be about building internal strength of mind and heart.

Teach the Children Scripture

Because Scripture is the living word of God, creating educational models for our children that integrate Bible knowledge and meditation into their lives is key. Unfortunately, at this point we're letting our children down.

At dinner a few years ago with three professors from a conservative Evangelical college, I mentioned how much I, a non-Evangelical, admired Evangelicals for educating their youth so well in Scripture.

The professor on my left said that I had a romanticized or at least outdated view of Evangelicals. "You would be surprised by how many of our students come here knowing next to nothing about the Bible," he said sadly.

This stunned me. I told the professors that I was used to hearing this complaint from Catholic college professors, but could it really be true of Evangelicals too? At a conservative college?

I looked around the table. Every head nodded in the affirmative. The professors explained that even though most of these kids came out of church and youth group culture, their theological background was shockingly thin. "We do the best we can, but we only have them for four years," said one professor. "You can't make up in that short time for what they never had."

Since that night, I have made a point of asking professors at every Christian college that invites me to lecture to assess the Christian

knowledge of their undergraduates. In almost every case, whether the college is Catholic or Evangelical, the answer is the same: they are theologically illiterate.

"A lot of our students come here from some of the most highly regarded Catholic schools in this region," said one professor. "They don't know anything about their faith and don't see the problem. They've had it drummed into their heads that Catholicism is anything they want it to be."

None of this is a surprise to anyone familiar with the social science literature documenting the widespread ignorance among Americans of Christian basics. After all, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism comes from somewhere.

Parents looking to counteract MTD and teach their children Scripture can find a good example in Benedict. The Rule prescribes set daily times for monks to engage in *lectio divina*, the Benedictine method of reading Scripture. The saint also commanded his monks to engage in other forms of reading and study to enrich their studying of the Bible. During Lent, for example, the Rule directs each monk to receive a book from the monastery's library and read it. The Rule instructs monks to read not only Scripture but the works of the Church Fathers and the lives of the saints, for these are "tools of virtue" for the one who wishes to build a house of faith with a firm foundation.

Not only will study of Scripture lead them to God, but it will bind young Christians together in a way that helps them stand against the onslaught of secularism. Again, we can learn from Jewish education here. Charles Chaput, the Catholic archbishop of Philadelphia, witnessed the power of Orthodox Jewish education on a 2012 visit to Yeshiva University. After observing students studying Torah as part of the university's basic coursework, Chaput wrote how impressed he was by "the power of Scripture to create new life."[1]

"God's Word is a living dialogue between God and humanity. That divine dialogue mirrored itself in the learning dialogue among the students," the archbishop wrote in *First Things* magazine. "The

students began as strangers, but their work in reflecting on Scripture and in sharing what they discovered with each other created something more than themselves: a friendship between themselves, and beyond themselves, with God."

The Orthodox Jewish students study Scripture not with an academic's distance but as the bread of life and the sinews that bind them together as a community. Achieving this level of devotion in education sounds like an unrealistic goal for Christian schools and colleges, but shouldn't we try? If Rabbi Gottlieb is correct, the survival of authentically Christian culture requires this or something close to it.

Immerse the Young in the History of Western Civilization

Education not only has to reset our relationship to ultimate reality, it also must reestablish our connection to our history. That is, education is key to the recovery of cultural memory. The deeper our roots in the past, the more secure our anchor against the swift currents of liquid modernity. The greater our understanding of where we came from, the more securely we can stand in the post-Christian present, and the more confidently we can chart a course for the post-Christian future.

Christianity emerged from the confluence of Hebrew religion, Greek philosophy, and Roman law. The forms and content of Western civilization come from the same roots, as well as from the encounter of the Christian faith with various European peoples. To be clear, Jesus Christ—not Aristotle, Aquinas, or Augustus Caesar—is the savior of mankind. Still, Dante's *Divine Comedy,* the medieval masterpiece and one of the pinnacles of Western civilization, shows imaginatively how God used people from the West's pagan past to prepare souls for the coming of Christ.

Classical Christian education proceeds from the conviction that God is still doing that through the art, literature, and philosophy of

the past, both Greco-Roman and Christian. We cannot understand the West apart from the Christian faith, and we cannot understand the Christian faith as we live it today without understanding the history and culture of the West. If future generations fail to learn to love our Western cultural heritage, we will lose it.

Consider the recent lament of Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen. In an essay published in an online education blog, Deneen said his students are nice, pleasant, decent young men and women, but they are also "know-nothings" whose "brains are largely empty" of any meaningful knowledge. "They are the culmination of Western civilization, a civilization that has forgotten nearly everything about itself, and as a result, has achieved near-perfect indifference to its own culture," he wrote.[2]

These kids aren't stupid. Deneen, who taught at Princeton and Georgetown before arriving at Notre Dame, pointed out that none of these universities are easy to get into. These students test well and know what they must do to make good grades and "build superb résumés" that propel them upward through the meritocracy. "They are the cream of their generation," he wrote, "the masters of the universe, a generation-in-waiting to run America and the world."

However intelligent and accomplished they may be, these young people could be one of the last generations of this thing called Western civilization. They don't even know what they don't know—and they don't care. Why should they? As with their scant knowledge of the Christian faith, they are only doing what their parents, their schools, and their culture have taught them.

To be sure, this is not a new crisis. In 1943, a *New York Times* story lamented the woeful ignorance of U.S. students on historical facts. The angry secular prophet Philip Rieff, surveying the wreckage of universities in the wake of the counterculture's protests, unleashed a thundering jeremiad against the higher educational establishment back in the 1970s. In his 1973 book *Fellow Teachers*, Rieff, also a college professor, excoriated educators for acquiescing to trendy student de-

mands for "relevance." In Rieff's jaundiced view, they surrendered their magisterial authority and abdicated their responsibility to pass to the next generation their civilizational inheritance. "At the end of this tremendous cultural development, we moderns shall arrive at barbarism," Rieff wrote. "Barbarians are people without historical memory. Barbarism is the real meaning of radical contemporaneity. Released from all authoritative pasts, we progress towards barbarism, not away from it."[3]

I am a college-educated American. In all my years of formal schooling, I never read Plato or Aristotle, Homer or Virgil. I knew nothing of Greek and Roman history and barely grasped the meaning of the Middle Ages. Dante was a stranger to me, and so was Shakespeare.

The fifteen hundred years of Christianity from the end of the New Testament to the Reformation were a blank page, and I knew only the barest facts about Luther's revolution. I was ignorant of Descartes and Newton. My understanding of Western history began with the Enlightenment. Everything that came before it was lost behind a misty curtain of forgetting.

Nobody did this on purpose. Nobody tried to deprive me of my civilizational patrimony. But nobody felt any obligation to present it to me and my generation in an orderly, coherent fashion. Ideas have consequences—and so does their lack. The best way to create a generation of aimless know-nothings who feel no sense of obligation beyond themselves is to deprive them of a past.

In the twentieth century, every totalitarian government knew that controlling the people's access to cultural memory was necessary to gain dominion over them. Today in the contemporary West, our cultural memory has not been taken from us by dictators. Rather, like the comfortable, pleasure-seeking drones in *Brave New World*, we have ceased caring about the past because it inhibits our ability to seek pleasure in the present.

It is not enough to present students with facts about Western civilization—the civilization that is the father and mother of every

citizen of the West, whether their ancestors immigrated from Africa or Asia, and even if, like me, their Christian confession is Byzantine. Reynolds, a veteran Christian educator and founder of Biola University's Torrey Honors Institute, says that teachers have to move beyond mere data, integrating history and culture into the students' moral imagination. "You can't just say, 'Here is the glory of Christian civilization! Stare at it, and enjoy it,'" Reynolds says.

That is, it is not likely to be love at first sight for today's students. The material may seem distant to them, especially because they have been formed by a culture that stresses contemporaneity (that is, "relevance") and that incentivizes them to be passive test-taking conformists.

In the face of those obstacles, classical Christian educators have to practice the ancient art of intellectual seduction, one perfected nearly 2,500 years ago in Greece. "You have to be more Socratic," says Reynolds, "to draw students into it, and make it part of their identity. This is the kind of education that produced C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Why would we want less for our kids today?"

Pull Your Children Out of Public Schools

Because public education in America is neither rightly ordered, nor religiously informed, nor able to form an imagination devoted to Western civilization, it is time for all Christians to pull their children out of the public school system.

If those reasons weren't already enough, the corrosive effect of the toxic peer culture found among students in many public schools (as well as private ones) would confirm the case. It's true that nationwide trends on teenage sexual activity and drug and alcohol use have been moving in a positive direction. The teen pregnancy and abortion rates have declined markedly, and the number of kids having sex before the age of fifteen has gone down slightly. But the numbers are still trou-

bling to many Christian parents. After all, is it really all that comforting to learn from the Centers for Disease Control that just over 20 percent of twelfth graders smoke pot at least once per month? That nearly six in ten high school seniors report having had sexual intercourse?[4]

Plus, public schools by nature are on the front lines of the latest and worst trends in popular culture. For example, under pressure from the federal government and LGBT activists, many school systems are now welcoming and normalizing transgenderism—with the support of many parents.

Theologian Carl Trueman discovered this when he tried to rally moms and dads in his suburban Philadelphia school district to oppose a proposed transgender policy that he contended would erode parental rights and harm women's sports.

"I was amazed that parents either saw no problem with the policy or thought it a positive good. Nobody seemed to grasp that the issue was bigger than helping a child genuinely struggling with identity issues," says Trueman. "They simply could not see that the proposals involved setting a significant precedent for the expansion of the power of schools at the expense of the rights of parents. Needless to say, the policy passed without significant opposition."

Anecdotally confirming what seems to be a trend, a woman in suburban Baltimore said to me, "All those people who say you are alarmist about the Benedict Option must not be raising children." She went on to say that at her daughter's high school, a shocking number of teenagers were going to their parents telling them that they think they are transgender and asking to be put on hormones.

What do the parents do?

"You'd be surprised how many of them do it," the woman said. "They are so afraid of losing their kids. And this is how our culture tells them to react. Parents like this become the fiercest advocates for transgenderism."

Three months after our conversation, that woman's daughter came

home from high school with the news that she is really a boy, and demanding that her family treat her as such.

A reader of my blog said she sees the same sort of thing watching her daughter navigate from junior high to high school. "There's nothing like having your twelve-year-old come home from school and start ticking off which of her classmates are bi," the reader said. "I told my daughter it was statistically impossible for there to be that many bisexual students in her class, and that for most girls—and they were all girls—seventh grade was entirely too early to make pronouncements on their sexuality. In return, I got a lot of babble about gender being fluid and nonbinary."

The reader called a friend with a daughter in the same class and asked her what was going on. "Where have you been?" she laughed. "At least a third of these girls are calling themselves bi."

Few parents have the presence of mind and strength of character to do what's necessary to protect their children from forms of disordered sexuality accepted by mainstream American youth culture. For one thing, the power of media to set the terms of what's considered normal is immense, and it affects adults as well as children. For another, parents are just as susceptible to peer pressure as their children are.

"People rear their children the way their friends and neighbors are doing it, not the way their parents did it," says psychology researcher Judith Rich Harris, "and this is true not only in media-ridden societies like our own."[5]

This kind of thing is why more and more Christian parents are concluding that they cannot afford to keep their children in public schools. Some tell themselves that their children need to remain there to be "salt and light" to the other kids. As popular culture continues its downward slide, however, this rationale begins to sound like a rationalization. It brings to mind a father who tosses his child into a whitewater river in hopes that she'll save another drowning child.

Parents may try to counteract the effects of secular education with church, Sunday school, and youth group, but two or three hours of

religious education weekly is unlikely to counteract the forty or more hours spent in school or school-related programming. Nor is it a good bet that such limited measures can compensate for the anti-Christian hostility, both active and passive, faced by young believers growing up in a post-Christian world. If we want our children to survive, we must act.

Don't Kid Yourself About Christian Schools

There is no such thing as a completely safe space.

When one single dad, an Evangelical and former public school teacher, became fed up with his ninth-grade daughter being teased for declining to celebrate a lesbian classmate's coming out, he transferred her to a private Christian school. The father, who asked to remain anonymous, says it has only been a partial solution.

"My daughter went from a public school where she had no believing Christian friends to a Christian one where only fifteen or twenty percent of the students seem to have any real faith life," he said. "It's better than what she had before, and at least she's getting a Bible class."

Even in many Christian schools, Christianity is a veneer over a secular way of looking at the world. It's not strong enough to withstand the onslaught of secularism. Too many parents use Christian schools as a way to shield kids from the more harmful defects of public schooling but have only a nominal interest in their receiving a Christian education.

Years ago a Christian friend in Dallas refused to consider sending her children to a couple of the most elite Christian schools in the city. As a newcomer to the city, I assumed that the high tuition cost was the reason. Not at all, she said; she did not want her kids absorbing the materialistic, status-conscious culture within the schools.

The principal of one Christian high school told me that he and his

faculty are constantly battling parents who find the serious moral and theological content of the curriculum too burdensome for their children. "All they think about is getting their kids into a top university and launching them into a good career," he said. Another principal, this one at a pricey Christian academy in the Deep South, said, "Our parents think if they've paid their seventeen-thousand-dollar tuition bill, they've done all that's expected of them about their child's religious education."

In the South, some Christian schools carry a racist legacy that unfairly (but understandably) makes African Americans and others suspicious of Benedict Option education initiatives. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as racial integration came to public schools, some white parents created all-white private schools that became derisively known as "segregation academies." Shamefully, more than a few of these schools claimed a Christian identity.

Though times have changed and many churches have as well, the stigma remains. Benedict Option schools would be wise to make special efforts toward racial reconciliation by recruiting black families, especially given that public schools are effectively resegregating. Additionally, the future of Christianity in America, both Catholic and Evangelical, is going to be a lot more Hispanic. So should the future of Christian schooling.

In any case, if a Christian school is so immersed in the world that it perpetuates the poison of secular culture and cuts students off from historic faith, it will fail the children. In those cases, even when students at Christian schools do learn the basic truths of their faith, the shallow understanding they gain doesn't do them much good in the long run. They remain what Saint Paul called "infants in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:1). In fact, the trite theological education many received at Christian school will serve more as a vaccination against taking the faith seriously than as an incentive for it. Pull your kids out.

Fortunately, there's a good alternative to both public schools and mediocre Christian schools: classical Christian education. It's built by marrying the Greco-Roman ideal that the purpose of education is to cultivate virtue and wisdom, to the traditional Christian worldview. The CiRCE Institute, a North Carolina–based Christian organization that trains teachers in the classical model, proclaims: "The classical Christian does not ask, 'What can I do with this learning?' but 'What will this learning do to me?'"

Like the Benedictine monastery, the classical Christian school orders everything around the Logos, Jesus Christ, and the quest to know Him with one's heart, soul, and mind. Classical education accepts the Great Tradition's fundamental understanding that all of reality is grounded in transcendental ideals—in fact, in the One in Whom we move and live and have our being.

All Christian schools should take as part of their mission the cultivation of personal devotion to Christ within the hearts of their students. Classical Christian education takes a more comprehensive and universal approach. In this model, a searching love of Christ undergirds and harmonizes all classroom learning. The end is to nurture graduates whose hearts desire truth, goodness, and beauty and who use their minds to discover these things.

Classical Christian education takes a Great Books approach to the curriculum. It presents the canonical Western texts and works of art to students, using a medieval structure called the Trivium, which, as Dorothy Sayers argued in her 1947 essay "The Lost Tools of Learning" (the founding document of the current classical education movement), corresponds to the mental capacities of young people at certain ages of development.

Typically, a student's classical school career begins with the Grammar school, in which she learns and commits to memory basic facts about the world. The second part of a child's experience is the Logic

school, which corresponds to the middle school years. This is when students learn how to use reason to analyze facts and discern meaning from them. The third and final stage is the Rhetoric school, which focuses on abstract thinking, on poetry, and on clear self-expression.

The classical approach presents the Western canon in a systematic fashion that's deeply integrated into a Christian anthropology and a comprehensive vision of reality. There is no more powerfully countercultural way to cultivate resilient Christians from their youth.

Not everybody has the opportunity to send their children to a full-time classical Christian school. Fortunately, the world of classical Christian homeschooling is burgeoning, with more teaching resources becoming available with each passing semester. There are also hybrid schools, such as the one my children attend, Baton Rouge's Sequitur Classical Academy.

Sequitur's model gathers students for half a day and counts on parents to complete the educational equation. My wife and I find that this hybrid approach retains the best of homeschooling while giving our three children an even more comprehensive education, as well as the advantages of building a community of students and families committed to the same educational mission.

A good classical Christian school not only teaches students the Bible and Western civilization but also integrates students into the life of the church. At the newly opened Saint Constantine School in Houston, a classical Christian school in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, president John Mark Reynolds's model integrates the school as much as possible with families and churches. He calls it a kind of "new monasticism" that seeks to harmonize church, school, and family life for its students.

"In the past, schools have functioned fairly independent of the family and the church. That was defensible when our culture was more Christian, but it's not really true anymore," he says. Believing that the school must reinforce the life of the church if parishioners and students are to grow in their faith, the school works around the church sched-

ule, making sure that students have time and space on the calendar for their spiritual lives.

The spiritual results of this kind of integration are tangible. A classical Christian school headmaster in the Southwest told me that these schools are often surprised to discover themselves leading Christian families and churches back to tradition. "Though we are the only one of those three not ordained by the Bible to form our children, this is how it's turning out in lots of places," he said.

School-church integration in a post-Christian age also has a practical benefit. Existing under the umbrella of a church offers legal protection not available to other Christian schools. Legal experts say that Christian schools facing antidiscrimination challenges in court have greater protection if they can demonstrate that they are clearly and meaningfully guided by established doctrines of a particular church and can demonstrate that they enforce these doctrines.

At the same time, it's important to recognize the ways that classical Christian schools can boost a healthy ecumenism in the face of a common enemy. While there are benefits to establishing a school under a particular tradition, there is also wisdom in taking a broad-tent approach, as long as the school remains under one of the ancient creeds. "The good news is that these kinds of schools have the real opportunity to heal the old divisions, because the old divisions are dead," says the Saint Constantine School's Reynolds.

Sequitur Classical Academy is small "o" orthodox but interdenominational. Most teachers and students are Evangelicals, but my Eastern Orthodox wife teaches there, and our Eastern Orthodox children attend there. There are also traditionalist Catholics in the school community. Co-founder Brian Daigle, born Catholic and later moving through Reformed churches, says his own journey within the Christian tradition has taught him a love and respect for what each of the faith's branches brings to the school.

"Being a part of that kind of Christian academic community has given me stronger convictions in some areas and more humility in

others," he says. "And it has made me a better scholar, able to read more widely across denominational lines, understanding the importance of an author's theological nuances to their literary decisions, for example."

Daigle says that intellectually honest fellowship and collaboration among orthodox Christians in schools should strengthen the witness of the local churches in these more militantly secularizing times. He is confident that studying together within the Great Tradition will forge bonds of friendship and spiritual solidarity that will stand students in good stead in the days to come. "The benefit, I hope, for our students is that we are preparing them not for jobs which don't yet exist, but for a church which doesn't yet exist," says Daigle.

The advantages of allying a classical school to a particular church can be seen in the story of St. Jerome Academy in Hyattsville, Maryland—arguably the most famous classical Christian school in the nation.

In 2010, the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., was moving forward with plans to shutter the school attached to St. Jerome Parish in the Maryland suburb. Enrollment at the school, which goes from pre-K to eighth grade, was way down, and the school was debt-ridden. Local Catholic businessman Chris Currie, Catholic University philosophy professor Michael Hanby, and other parents approached the school's leaders and proposed a Hail Mary pass to save it: turn it into a classical school.

Principal Mary Pat Donoghue came on board with the plan. The parish pastor, despite his reservations, decided they had nothing to lose. The archdiocese gave the go-ahead for the experiment. In response, Currie, Hanby, and others hammered out a curriculum, parents and the parish raised enough money to pay off the fading school's $117,000 debt, and they hired eight new teachers committed to the classical approach.

Today the little Catholic school that was at death's door is bursting at the seams and has become a national model for using the classical

model to revive declining parish schools. Currie says that the reform and rebirth of St. Jerome's would never have happened in a rich exurban Catholic school. They happened in the inner-ring suburban parish because of necessity: it was change or die.

And it started with ordinary lay members of the parish taking the initiative. As orthodox Catholics, the St. Jerome team made a point of submitting to the authority of the parish pastor and the local bishop—and were fortunate that church officials let the visionaries have free rein to try something radically different.

"You have to change the way you teach, and that means throwing out a lot of the textbooks and resources your school is used to," Currie says. "And classical education can't be a gimmick to boost enrollment. You have to have a strong connection to mission in everything you do. That's the only way to make it effective and desirable to outsiders."

The new St. Jerome Academy made a priority of reaching out to parents and involving them in the life of the school and its classical vision. And the team followed a small-c catholic educational vision, rejecting the idea that classical education was only for highly intentional Catholics.

"This doesn't mean you accept anybody into the school," says Currie. "There are some kids who may not be able to profit from a classical education and will disrupt others in their classes. But that number is very small. We're very diverse and have students from every racial and socioeconomic group. Once parents see the difference it makes in the kids, they're sold. The way we see it, this education is for people from all walks of life."

Is starting a classical Christian school in your community possible? Through its Web site, the Association of Classical and Christian Schools (accsedu.org), an orthodox Protestant organization with members in forty-five states and four foreign countries, offers a how-to package, including a series of questions local communities should ask themselves before starting this journey.

The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education (www.catholicliber

aleducation.org) is a resource-rich organization for Catholics and includes on its Web site the educational plan of St. Jerome Academy. (In fact, Mary Pat Donoghue, the principal who oversaw the Hyattsville school's transition, now works as a full-time consultant for the institute.)

No Classical Christian School? Then Homeschool

There has been an explosion of resources to help classical Christian homeschoolers. The CiRCE Institute is a major hub, through its Web site and conferences, as is the Society for Classical Learning. The Classical Conversations method is one of the most popular programs.

Schools like Baton Rouge's Sequitur Classical Academy and North Texas's Coram Deo Academy, which both provide classroom instruction supplemented by homeschooling, are also growing in popularity.

Many Christian parents find that reliably orthodox Christian schools are either unavailable locally or unaffordable. So they turn to homeschooling—a strategy that can extract meaningful costs in an economy where most families depend on two incomes.

A Silicon Valley Catholic mom I'll call Maggie told me that she and her schoolteacher husband decided to homeschool in part because they believed they could do better than the local public school. Private school was out of the question, and her experience as a student in local Catholic schools demolished her trust in them.

Though accounting for only 3.4 percent of the nation's schoolchildren, homeschooling is growing in popularity, having increased its numbers by 62 percent from 2003 to 2012, according to the U.S. Department of Education.[6] But as any homeschooling parent will tell you, it is not for everybody. It requires particular skills—organizational savvy, for example—as well as intelligence and an extraordinary capacity for patience. Plus, you need to have a two-parent family and the ability to get by on a single income—factors that put homeschooling out of reach for many families.

But it is possible for some, provided they are willing to live ascetically. Maggie added that she and her fellow homeschooling moms are surrendering careers, success, and given the local cost of living, significant material wealth for the sake of their children.

Even though her family has to make ends meet on one salary—and that of a schoolteacher—Maggie believes it's worth it. So do the other moms in her homeschooling circle, she says.

"We just can't be sucked into the vortex that whirls madly around us, and we don't want our children sucked in either," she said. "We don't want our children to think that their only purpose in life is to get accepted to Stanford and make their first million before the age of thirty. We need to serve something—I believe, God—greater than ourselves, and schools of any stripe, at least here, do not teach you to do that."

The Benedict Option and the University

The need for committed orthodox Christian peers does not end at graduation. College is also a time of moral and spiritual challenge, and not all young believers make it through with their faith intact. Christians must not only find ways to help students navigate the existing university system but also look for ways to reinvent the university.

In 2016, at a closed-door discussion among conservative Evangelical academics, I listened as college administrators and professors spoke frankly about how their students, including seminary students, are having their convictions waylaid by progressive sexual ideology—and this is affecting their sexual behavior.

More broadly, the dramatic decline in faith among young adults (35 percent of whom identify with no religion or religious tradition at all) means that student believers face more social pressure than any previous generation to abandon Christian orthodoxy. Where can they look for hope?

Most immediately, students can join or begin Christian associa-

tions on campus—essentially finding ways to live in Benedict Option communities there.

Catholic students at non-Catholic universities often turn to their campus Newman Center, typically the nexus of college ministry. Not all Newman Centers are reliably orthodox, but St. John's, the one at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, has a reputation for being a place of solid Catholic teaching, Bible study, retreats, and fellowship for the estimated ten thousand Catholics on campus.

St. John's Newman Center also pioneered Catholic communal living on public university campuses. Its Newman Hall is a modern student residence offering housing to six hundred Catholic students, in an environment led by full-time priests and pastoral staff, with a chapel open around the clock. In 2013, Catholic leaders in Texas and Florida opened two residence halls—one at Texas A&M, the other at the Florida Institute of Technology—based on the St. John's model.

Ryan Mattingly credits his experience at St. John's for renewing his Catholic faith and helping him discover his priestly vocation. Now a seminarian scheduled for 2018 ordination, Mattingly told the *National Catholic Register* that living in that student community drew him closer to prayer and the sacraments and away from the party lifestyle. Said Mattingly, "It gave substance to my faith—just living out the faith in an everyday manner at a large, secular university, where the faith isn't that encouraged."[7]

Father Bryce Sibley, who directs Catholic campus ministry at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL), told me that the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), a growing national campus ministry that has a chapter in over one hundred universities, including ULL, has been key to building strong intentional Catholic student communities among Millennials.

"These young Catholics are orthodox. They want confession, they want the sacraments, they want formation," Father Sibley said. "We're not just about pizza and having fun. As a result, in the past six years, we've had almost fifty people enter seminary or religious life."

Unlike Catholic campus ministry when he was in college a generation ago, said Father Sibley, FOCUS concentrates intensely on discipleship through prayer, study, and worship—often in small groups—and preparing students for evangelization. "You talk to most Catholic campus ministers today, we're really hopeful," said Father Sibley. "These kids want the real faith, not a watered-down version. If you want to evangelize, things will change."

On the Evangelical side, the Christian Study Center movement offers a countercultural community for young believers. It began in 1968, when a group of Evangelical leaders and students at the University of Virginia started an informal association to promote Christian intellectual and cultural engagement on campus. Inspired by the L'Abri Fellowship, the international network of Evangelical study centers founded by Francis and Edith Schaeffer, the Charlottesville group eventually bought a house on Chancellor Street near campus and set up headquarters.

Though the organization went through a few name changes over the years, it's now called the Center for Christian Study. The house on Chancellor Street is a busy hive of student activity, with Christian students studying in its impressive new library, meeting in small groups, and attending lectures and Bible studies. The center also serves as headquarters for various parachurch ministries on campus.

To think of the big house on Chancellor Street as a clubhouse for Christian college students would be to vastly undersell the center. It is a vital and deeply impressive hub for serious artistic and intellectual life and fellowship among UVA's Evangelical community and anyone who wishes to drop by. The center takes applying Christian discipleship to the life of the mind seriously, and it shows.

There are now over twenty affiliated Christian Study Centers at campuses around the United States, all modeled on the original one at UVA. A phenomenon that holds great promise for building deep Christian community on campuses nationwide has emerged out of the UVA center: a network of private single-sex group housing for Christian students there.

Within easy walking distance of the center are over twenty residences where college men and women live in various forms of community during their undergraduate years. There is no Rule covering all the houses, and some houses have no Rule at all; they're just Christians living together. What they all do is build mutual support and obligation among the students who live there.

Sitting around a table in the center one autumn afternoon, I spoke with current and former residents of the Christian houses. All of them spoke with genuine warmth and affection of how life in the houses had stabilized them and deepened their faith commitment at UVA. Said one young man, "I found people who told me stories that helped me know who I am, and to make sense of the world."

Some of those present were so marked by their years living there that they stayed on in Charlottesville after graduation, finding jobs and deepening their relationship with friends they made in residence.

Sam Speers and Jed Metge are two such UVA graduates. In 2011, they were founding members of Chancellot, a male undergraduate intentional community in a house next door to the center. The men told me their community came together with around twenty guys active in the campus's InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

The house Rule is simple. It's a community of Christian men, active in InterVarsity, committed to rooming together in a spirit of discipleship and mutual support in living out high moral standards. It is intentionally structured to include men from each year's class. The house brotherhood is "tight but welcoming," meaning that their purpose is to serve and to evangelize the broader UVA community.

The two men recalled an undergraduate who lived next door that first year. The undergraduate started spending more time in the Chancellot living room than in his own group house. They finally asked him why he hung around so much.

"He said, 'There's a different feeling about how you guys are with each other,'" Metge remembered.

The undergraduate talked about how he and his housemates were

always fighting over dirty dishes and other domestic dramas. He wanted to know what made such a difference in the Chancellot men's common life.

"We told him it was Christ," said Metge. "We told him he could have that same peace too. Another housemate and I prayed with him, and we led him to Christ."

The house Rule developed over time. They tried different things out. Morning prayer together was hard to stay committed to, but evening prayer was easier. They engaged in mutual confession of their sins to the community, so they could help each other with personal struggles. ("We didn't call it confession at the time," says Speers. "We called it accountability, which was more kosher to Evangelicals.") And they required sustained group engagement in theological conversations and study.

There were small but strict rules too. No girls in private rooms with closed doors. No alcohol except in the rooms of those of legal drinking age. Some men who struggled with pornography would leave their laptops out in the common room so they would not be tempted.

It worked wonders. Metge said that life in Chancellot gave him a level of emotional and spiritual health and stability that he had never experienced. "When I reflect on my college years, my joy was so high, and it was hugely due to this house," he says. "It expanded and deepened my vision of what depth of commitment is possible for others as a Christian. Going out of that community and into the local church, and into adulthood, it helped me to see that deeper community is possible no matter what circumstance I found myself in."

While groups like Metge's will help students retain their faith in college as it is now, they may be even more vital in the future. If the much-feared attempts to strip academic accreditation from Christian colleges and universities on antidiscrimination grounds materialize and succeed, there will be many fewer places for believing students to go and for faithful professors to teach.

Christian graduate students in the humanities tell me that they

can read the handwriting on the wall in academia and see no future for themselves as college professors. In the fall of 2016, some younger members of the Society of Christian Philosophers publicly assailed Richard Swinburne, one of the most eminent living philosophers, as a bigot for briefly defending the orthodox Christian teaching on homosexuality. Prominent non-Christian philosophy professors from Yale, Columbia, and Georgetown piled on, insulting Swinburne and his defenders in lewd, profane terms. This kind of thing is why one Christian Ph.D. candidate in English literature at a prestigious American university confided to me that the total left-wing ideologization of literary scholarship caused him to give up plans for an academic career.

The ground is moving swiftly and decisively under our feet. It's time for Christians to recognize the danger and begin creating a Christian academic counterculture. John Mark Reynolds is preparing for that shift. When he left the provost's job at Houston Baptist University a few years back, he was offered the presidency of a college. He turned it down, even though it was a prestigious job that paid much more money than he's making as head of the Saint Constantine School, the classical Christian academy he founded.

He wears a number of hats at the fledgling Houston school—even part-time janitor. It's a bit of a blow to his pride, but he says it has been good for him to realize how coddled he was in conventional Christian academia—and how much it made him dependent on a higher education model that he believes is financially unsustainable, and will collapse.

Reynolds explains that even Christian colleges are living on the edge of a financing bubble that is bound to burst. When he was a Christian college provost, less than one-third of the school's budget went to academics.

"College as we know it must die," he says. "I'm not willing to have an inner-city kid come to school and borrow a hundred thousand dollars to get a baccalaureate degree that may or may not lead to a job,

where they don't see a full-time professor for two years. That's the real world."

The Saint Constantine School model will eventually include a four-year liberal arts college. The school is tied tightly into local churches, and its college component, when launched, will be closely affiliated with the King's College, a Christian institution in New York City. The reason, according to Reynolds: "Those Christian institutions that were accredited before the troubles that are coming will be the last to be challenged."

The Saint Constantine president reports a surfeit of excellent résumés on file, including a number from master's degree and Ph.D. holders. "There are lots of smart, conservative, orthodox Christian teachers out there who need work," he said.

Anthony Esolen agrees. A well-known literature professor, Dante translator, and orthodox Catholic, Esolen came under intense fire in the fall of 2016 within his own school, Catholic-run Providence College, for speaking out against what he believed was the administration's attempt to gut its Catholic identity for the sake of multiculturalism.

"It's long past time for administrators at Christian colleges to abandon the hiring policies that got us in this fix to begin with," Esolen told me. "We *know* that there are plenty of excellent young Christian scholars who have to struggle to find a job. Well, let's get them, and get them right away. *We* should be establishing a network for that purpose."

Esolen is right, though he is also, alas, justified in his skepticism that most Christian colleges and universities will have the good sense to do this. Even so, classical Christian schools should take advantage of this opportunity, pooling their resources and starting a job bank so talented Christian academics willing to teach in elementary and secondary schools will know where the jobs are. Christians cannot expect quality teachers to do it for pennies. Aside from parents being willing to pay tuition rates that enable schools to pay qualified teachers competitive wages, wealthy Christians should redirect some of their polit-

ical contributions to classical Christian schools. They are essential to the future of Christianity in America.

Go Back to the Classics and Forward to the Future

Christians today are experiencing birth pangs of that future church—and it can be frightening. Even as old certainties are collapsing, new opportunities are emerging. Those who try holding on to pedagogical forms—public, private, and parochial—that can no longer shape the hearts and minds of the next generations in an authentically Christian way risk damaging their kids by leaving them morally and spiritually vulnerable.

Classical Christian education is the new counterculture. In just over a century, Christians have gone from the center of American culture to its margins. Let's own our status and be proud of it. "A dead thing goes with the stream, but only a living thing goes against it," said G. K. Chesterton.

That quote from *The Everlasting Man* is the motto of the Scuola libera G. K. Chesterton, the community school of the Tipi Loschi, the Catholic lay community in San Benedetto del Tronto, Italy. The school started because Marco Sermarini and his wife Federica had the courage of their countercultural Christian convictions.

Almost a decade ago Marco and Federica began to worry that the state schools and the local Catholic high school would undermine the work of Christian formation that their children received at home and within the Tipi Loschi community.

In June 2008, Marco heard a lecture by Father Ian Boyd, an American priest and Chesterton expert visiting Italy. Father Boyd said that the problem we face today is standardization by low standards. What's more, people have no time to do creative things—but they must make time, because going with the mainstream means spiritual death.

When he returned home, Marco told his wife they had to start a school. They had three months to do it. "Many people thought I was crazy, and maybe I am, but we started on the fifteenth of September," Marco said. They had four students, two of them Sermarini children. Today there are seventy students in both a middle school and a high school.

The success of the Chesterton school inspired the Tipi Loschi to dream big. "When we discovered that we could do one strange thing, we started to think about how many things we could do in an unconventional way," says Sermarini. "We knew that we couldn't live a regular life with a Christian coating, but had to change the roots."

Going against Italy's educational stream, the Tipi Loschi found not only success with their school but inspiration to be countercultural Christians in many other ways.

"Many times in this life you will think it's impossible to have any other kind of order," he continues. "But if you start changing things, and moving things where they are meant to be, and if you put God over all of it, then you will be amazed by how many things fall into place."

Building a new Christian education system will be costly and risky. It is a scary thing to challenge the status quo, I told Sermarini, especially if you aren't sure if anybody will stand with you.

"Grande Rod!" he blurted, slapping the air. "Nobody should be afraid. Have faith! We are Christians! We know that with God, all things are possible."

That's true. Christian educators, both in the home and in the classroom, need that kind of faith to keep us going when we hit the wall. It's important to remember, though, that hope has to be grounded in reality.

Years ago my friend Mitch Muncy mentored male undergraduates at the University of Dallas, a Catholic liberal arts school with a strong

focus on the Great Books tradition. Back then Mitch told me that it made him happy to see how excited these young men would get about art, books, ideas, and the faith. But he had to remind them constantly of an unromantic reality: that they could not fulfill their calling to raise a family and serve God and the church in the ways they dreamed of doing if they had no ambitions beyond reading and talking about Great Books, or skills with which to realize them.

This truth ought to keep Benedict Option educational visionaries clear-sighted. Peering into the near future, the world of work looks uncertain for everyone, especially for Christians. The practical challenges facing us are unlike any that most believers in this country have ever dealt with. Schools and colleges—morally, spiritually, and vocationally—will have to prepare young believers for some increasingly harsh realities.

Because of florists, bakers, and photographers having been dragged through the courts by gay plaintiffs, we now know that some Orthodox Christians will lose their businesses and their livelihoods if they refuse to recognize the new secular orthodoxies. We can expect that many more Christians will either be denied employment opportunities by licensing or other professional requirements, because they have been driven out of certain workplaces by outright bigotry or by dint of the fact that they cannot in good conscience work in certain fields. What will they do?

As you are about to learn, it is not too early for Christians to start asking that question and making plans.

CHAPTER 8

Preparing for Hard Labor

Growing up in Texas, Brother Francis Davoren assumed he was going to be a man who labored primarily with his mind. He was a good student, intellectually inclined, and gifted in math and science. In college, he studied physics but switched to theology when he began to wonder if God was calling him to live as a priest or a monk. He didn't realize it until later in life, but for much of his life, Brother Francis thought those who did intellectual work were better than those who worked with their hands.

Today, at forty-three, Brother Francis has a new respect for physical labor, thanks to the hard work he has to do at the monastery, such as lugging heavy sacks of grain and maintaining plumbing. "It has been great for me, because it helps me remember that the human person is body and spirit, not just a spirit," he says. "There needs to be an integration of body and soul. You can use that body to be sanctified through work. It's great to learn that you don't have to just think about things, but actually do them."

Brother Francis also takes satisfaction knowing that his labor is vital to the overall success of the monastery and its mission. Says the monk, "That's my little part in the Church. Each person has a role to hold the whole thing up."

In the age now falling upon us, Brother Francis and the Benedictine model of sanctifying ordinary labor will be a model to traditional Christians in our professional lives, in important ways. First of all, the Benedictine model reminds us that work and worship are integrated and that our careers are not separate from our faith. Second, it reminds us that manual labor is a gift—a gift that Christians may have to rediscover if post-Christianity squeezes us out of the professions. Finally, we see work as a gift given back to God and to the community. If Benedict Option communities are to survive, they're going to have to recover this kind of solidarity, not only on a "merely spiritual" level but on a practical one as well.

What Work Is For

Most Christians still use the word *calling* to refer to a conviction that God is inviting a man or a woman to full-time ministry. Roman Catholics tend to use the word *vocation*—from the Latin word *vocare*, "to call"—to refer to a calling to the priesthood or to monastic life. In the secular world, the word *vocation* has fallen out of common use, except as a synonym for job.

It wasn't always like this. In 1603, the early English Puritan theologian William Perkins delivered a sermon in which he defined *vocation* as "a certain kind of life ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good."[1] Perkins explained that every man—king, pastor, soldier, husband, father, and so on—has a God-given vocation. He likened the symphony of vocations in society to the working of a clock, each gear turning in harmony for the common purpose of keeping time.

In this older understanding, says political theorist Patrick Deneen, we see one's work not as chosen as much as received from God, for the benefit of all. A person's labor is, in ways sometimes mysterious, part of a greater undertaking, in the economy both secular and divine.

"In spite of the contemporary usage of the word 'vocational' to mean narrow training in a job choice," writes Deneen, "the origin of the term points to the way that one's work connected not only to other activities in one's life paths—one's 'career'—but, more comprehensively, how one's work related to a larger whole outside and beyond one's own life."[2]

This is a profoundly Benedictine insight. A monk learns to do the task given to him for the greater glory of God and for the support of the community of believers. In the Benedictine tradition, our labor is one way we participate in God's creative work of ordering Creation and bringing forth good fruit from it. When undertaken in the right spirit, our labor is also a means God uses to order us inwardly.

Balance is key. There's a reason why the Rule prescribes labor for only certain hours of the day. Work is a good thing, even a holy thing, but it must not be allowed to dominate one's life. If it does, our vocation could become an idol. Recall that if an abbot sees that a monk craftsman is taking undue pride in his work, the Rule requires the abbot to reassign him. It's a harsh penalty, but one that reminds all Christians that our labor derives its ultimate value only from the role it plays in God's economy.

Work is good, but it is only good relative to its participation in the unfolding of God's will and for the benefit of others. In workaholic modern America, we have lost this sense of vocational meaning. Ironically, it is still practiced, if only by custom, in secularized Europe.

Deneen's father-in-law is a small-town butcher in southern Germany and a believing Catholic. He told his American son-in-law that he thanks God for Germany's strict laws mandating shop closing times. These laws make life less convenient for consumers, the butcher conceded, but without them he would never have been able to run his mom-and-pop business while raising a family. Without the protection of that regulation, only big stores with a large number of employees could thrive. In this sense, Germany's consumer culture manages to cultivate more balanced, integrated lives for the German people.

The most important labor lesson of the Rule, though, is that a Christian must carry out work, and all other things he does, as a gift to God—as participation in His ordering of Creation. This is as true of the carpenter and the accountant as it is of the minister and the schoolteacher. If we think of work as its own end, disconnected from God's purposes, or as merely something we do to pay the bills, we put ourselves at risk of rationalizing anything to keep our jobs.

Burning Incense to Caesar

The temptation to sell out the faith for the sake of self-protection is by no means an abstract threat. We may not (yet) be at the point where Christians are forbidden to buy and sell in general without state approval, but we are on the brink of entire areas of commercial and professional life being off-limits to believers whose consciences will not allow them to burn incense to the gods of our age.

The workplace is getting tougher for orthodox believers as America's commitment to religious liberty weakens. Progressives sneer at claims of anti-Christian discrimination or persecution. Don't you believe them. Most of the experts I talked to on this topic spoke openly only after I promised to withhold their identities. They're frightened that their words today might cost them their careers tomorrow.

They're not paranoid. While Christians may not be persecuted for their faith per se, they are already being targeted when they stand for what their faith entails, especially in matters of sexuality. As the LGBT agenda advances, broad interpretations of antidiscrimination laws are going to push traditional Christians increasingly out of the marketplace, and the corporate world will become hostile toward Christian bigots, considering them a danger to the working environment.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, a powerful LGBT pressure group, publishes an annual Corporate Equality Index. In its

2016 report, over half of the top twenty U.S. companies have a perfect score. To fail to score high is considered a serious problem within leading corporations.

Among the criteria the foundation used in its 2016 evaluations was that "senior management/executive performance measures include LGBT diversity metrics." A company that wants to win the foundation's seal of approval will have to show concrete proof that it is advancing the LGBT agenda in the workplace. The "ally" phenomenon—straight people publicly declaring themselves to be supporters of the LGBT agenda—is one way companies can both demonstrate progress to gay rights campaigners, as well as identify dissenters who may stand in the way of progress.

I have talked to a number of Christians, in fields as diverse as law, banking, and education, who face increasing pressure within their corporations and institutions to publicly declare themselves "allies" of LGBT colleagues. In some instances, employees are given the opportunity to wear special badges advertising their allyship. Naturally if one doesn't wear the badge, she is likely to face questions from coworkers and even shunning.

These workers fear that this is soon going to serve as a de facto loyalty oath for Christian employees—and if they don't sign it, so to speak, it will mean the end of their jobs and possibly even their careers. To sign the oath, they believe, would be the modern equivalent of burning a pinch of incense before a statue of Caesar.

It will be impossible in most places to get licenses to work without affirming sexual diversity dogma. For example, in 2016 the American Bar Association voted to add an "anti-harassment" rule to its Model Code of Conduct, one that if adopted by state bars would make simply discussing issues having to do with homosexuality (among other things) impossible without risking professional sanction—unless one takes the progressive side of the argument.

Along those lines, it will be very difficult to have open dialogue in many workplaces without putting oneself in danger. One Christian

professor on a secular university's science faculty declined to answer a question I had about the biology of homosexuality, out of fear that anything he said, no matter how innocuous and fact-based, could get him brought up on charges within his university, as well as attacked by social media mobs. Everyone working for a major corporation will be frog-marched through "diversity and inclusion" training and will face pressure not simply to tolerate LGBT co-workers but to affirm their sexuality and gender identity.

Plus, companies that don't abide by state and federal antidiscrimination statutes covering LGBTs will not be able to receive government contracts. In fact, according to one religious liberty litigator who has had to defend clients against an exasperating array of antidiscrimination lawsuits, the only thing standing between an employer or employee and a court action is the imagination of LGBT plaintiffs and their lawyers.

"We are all vulnerable to such targeting," he said.

Says a religious liberty lawyer, "There is no looming resolution to these conflicts; no plateau that we're about to reach. Only intensification. It's a train that won't stop so long as there is momentum and track."

David Gushee, a well-known Evangelical ethicist who holds an aggressively progressive stance on gay issues, published a column in 2016 noting that the middle ground is fast disappearing on the question of whether discrimination against gays and lesbians for religious reasons should be tolerated.

"Neutrality is not an option," he wrote. "Neither is polite half-acceptance. Nor is avoiding the subject. Hide as you might, the issue will come and find you."[3]

Public school teachers, college professors, doctors, and lawyers will all face tremendous pressure to capitulate to this ideology as a condition of employment. So will psychologists, social workers, and all in the helping professions; and of course, florists, photographers, bakers, and all businesses that are subject to public accommodation laws.

Christian students and their parents must take this into careful consideration when deciding on a field of study in college and professional school. A nationally prominent physician who is also a devout Christian tells me he discourages his children from following in his footsteps. Doctors now and in the near future will be dealing with issues related to sex, sexuality, and gender identity but also to abortion and euthanasia. "Patient autonomy" and nondiscrimination are the principles that trump all conscience considerations, and physicians are expected to fall in line.

"If they make compliance a matter of licensure, there will be nowhere to hide," said this physician. "And then what do you do if you're three hundred thousand dollars in debt from medical school, and have a family with three kids and a sick parent? Tough call, because there aren't too many parishes or church communities who would jump in and help."

In past eras, religious minorities found themselves locked out of certain professions. In medieval times, for example, anti-Semitic bigotry in Europe prevented Jews from participating in many trades and professions, shunting them off to do marginal work that Christians did not want to do. Jews entered banking, for example, because usury was considered sinful by medieval Christianity and was kept off-limits to Christians.

Similarly, orthodox Christians in the emerging era will need to adapt to an era of hostility. Blacklisting will be real. In Canada, the legal profession is trying to forbid law graduates of Trinity Western University, a private Christian liberal arts college, from practicing law—this, to punish the school for being insufficiently progressive on LGBT issues. Similarly, an LGBT activist group called Campus Pride has put more than one hundred Christian colleges on a "shame list" and called on business and industry not to hire their graduates. It is unwise to discount the influence of groups like this on corporate culture—and that, in turn, will have a devastating effect on Christian colleges.

"The challenges to Christian education—especially higher education—are about to be aggressive," one legal scholar said. "Degrees from unaccredited universities, or universities that can't place graduates or receive federal research dollars, are of very low value."

Does this mean that no Christian should go to medical school or law school or enroll in professional training to enter other fields? Not necessarily. It does mean, however, that Christians must not take for granted that within a given field, there will be no challenges to their faith so great that they will have to choose between their Christianity and their careers. Many Christians will be compelled to make their living in ways that do not compromise their religious consciences. This calls for prudence, boldness, vocational creativity, and social solidarity among believers.

Be Prudent

Not every challenge in the workplace is a hill worth dying on. Not every office is the Roman Colosseum.

David Hall, a federal employee in Illinois, put his job in danger by repeatedly refusing his employer's request to watch an LGBT diversity training video. Hall, a Christian, told his agency that signing a statement acknowledging that he had viewed the clip would be "an abomination."

Though Hall must ultimately obey his own conscience, it's hard to sympathize with someone willing to sacrifice his job over something so trivial. Signing a statement affirming one has seen a training video is not the same thing as signing a statement affirming homosexuality.

Christians must exercise wisdom in these cases. Life is full of compromises, and not every one turns a believer into Judas. Claiming religious persecution unnecessarily will not help the cause. Instead, it will provide the secular left with grounds for claiming that all concern for religious liberty is a sham.

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men," instructed Saint Paul (Romans 12:18). Christians should not seek conflict and instead should submit to their workplace and legal authorities as much as possible. The lesson for believers today? Silence does not always mean acquiescence, and in some cases it may be a wiser and more loving approach. In the end, we may be required to lose our jobs and even, alas, more. But aggressive workplace challenges to our faith can sometimes be deflected or stalled by a saintly exercise in prudence. Silence can be a shield.

Christians should never deny their faith, but that doesn't mean they are obliged to be in-your-face about it either. "I do think one can be a Christian and avoid falling into traps, as long as we have the right to remain silent and exercise it prudently," says a law professor. A Catholic doctor advises Christian physicians not to go out of their way to provoke confrontation.

"If someone voices an opinion contrary to your beliefs, including a patient, but you're not actually being asked to violate your conscience, let it go," he says. "Build for the future. Develop alliances, garner goodwill, quietly educate, seek out offices, practices, and systems that you can work in without controversy."

Maintaining a Christian witness with your colleagues while avoiding religious conflict wherever possible can also be an act of love. "The more scared and paranoid we are, the harder it is to make connections and relationships with people who need Jesus," says one Christian who works in human resources at a Fortune 500 company. "If we're always on war footing, they're going to sense that."

This HR facilitator, who asked to remain anonymous, counsels Christians to lead with compassion and empathy, erring on the side of nonjudgment. He has developed friendships with LGBT colleagues, who know he's an orthodox Christian but who also understand that he doesn't wish to demonize them. This kind of friendship can give a believer valuable insights into the real-life struggles these colleagues face and let them know that they are loved by their Christian co-workers.

"What excites me about the Benedict Option is that we're maintaining a culture, so that when this social experiment in sexuality we have going on fails—and it will—these people are going to have to have someplace to go," he says. "We can't have people thinking that they shouldn't go talk to the Christians. There can't be any positive ending in that."

Be Bold

Of course, there's a time where prudence must end and boldness begin. In some situations, if Christians are courageous enough to speak up they may be able to gain time for religious liberty. "I am a sinner who is far from perfect, but I refused to be a closeted sinner," says Stephen Bainbridge, a UCLA law professor and Catholic. "I am going to go on having a picture of Saint Thomas More in my office. And I'm going to go on pushing back when people infringe on freedom of speech and religion, especially on campuses.

"And if my colleagues don't like that, all I can say is, 'Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough,'" Bainbridge continues. "After all, if I may be forgiven for quoting the great reformer, 'Here I stand; I can do no other.'"

What are some workplace issues on which a believer cannot compromise? On which "personally opposed, but" is no excuse? A Christian doctor must always and everywhere refuse to take innocent life; abortion and euthanasia are forbidden. Christian teachers in public and private schools must not acquiesce to teaching as normative the new gender ideology, as some school systems are beginning to mandate. Participating in the direct making and distribution of pornography is yet another. And any job, no matter how benign, that compels one to affirm (as distinct from withholding approval of) something un-Christian and untrue is not worth keeping, no matter what the cost.

Recognizing these challenges, Christians need to ask themselves

some tough questions: *Am I called to work in this industry? If so, how do I live faithfully within it? If not, can I find a safer line of work?*

A young friend of mine, a brilliant medical student in her mid-twenties, was well on her way to becoming a research scientist. She was working on her medical degree and interning at one of the nation's top laboratories. She is also a believing Christian, but the kind of behavior she observed in the lab, as well as the research projects she expected to have to work on in the future, made her doubt her career prospects.

My friend had long wanted to be a medical scientist, but having been raised in a devoutly orthodox Christian home, and certain of her own faith convictions, she discerned that she could not in good conscience continue down this path. She changed tracks to study hospital administration instead.

"It just wasn't worth it to me," she told me at the time. "I didn't want to get far down that road, then be faced with a choice that could blow up my career or violate my conscience. And seeing how cutthroat scientists were in the lab, only to get ahead in their careers, made me afraid that if I stayed in that culture, I might become the kind of person who does the same thing and doesn't even notice a problem."

Be Entrepreneurial

Now is the time for Christians whose livelihoods may be endangered to start thinking and acting creatively in professional fields still open to us without risk of compromise. The goal is to create business and career opportunities for Christians who have been driven out of other industries and professions.

"Our churches need more entrepreneurs, and we need to teach our children how to think entrepreneurially about their futures," says Calee Lee, an Eastern Orthodox Christian in Irvine, California.

"The key to work life under the Benedict Option is no different

than today: identify a need in your community, develop an excellent product or service that fills that need, and then 'work at it with your whole heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,'" Lee says, quoting Colossians. "We need to develop good business sense, not be afraid of profit, and understand that by building something valuable, whether it is a gasket or a gardening service, we are bringing a good thing to the world."

Lee started her digital children's book company, Xist Publishing, because she saw a need. Xist pairs authors with illustrators to produce the kinds of books Lee wanted her children to read. Today Xist has more than two hundred books in its online catalog and provides income to writers and visual artists—all working outside traditional publishing.

Though she did not start her company because of anti-Christian persecution or harassment in the workplace, Lee cites it as an example of how believers driven out of certain professions can take advantage of the Internet economy to support themselves in ways that are not morally compromising.

She points to the success of companies like LuLaRoe, a clothing manufacturer started in 2012 by DeAnne Stidham, a Mormon stay-at-home mom who saw a need for modest yet attractive fashions for women like her. By selling through a nationwide network of over twelve thousand consultants—usually stay-at-home moms—LuLaRoe turned itself into a niche powerhouse.

"I could decry big publishers for not putting out books I write or things I want for my children to read, or I could do it myself," Lee says. "You can be frustrated with the fashion industry, or you can *be* the fashion industry. That's the approach Christians are going to need to take when things get tough in the workplace. For example, teachers who don't want to teach in the public school system can start their own tutoring companies."

The times are going to be more difficult for orthodox Christians in the workplace, Lee acknowledges, but it's not the end of the world.

It means they have to become more commercially innovative and independent-minded.

Buy Christian, Even If It Costs More

They are also going to have to start building the Christian community's businesses through disciplined shopping—that is, by choosing to direct their patronage to Christian-owned enterprises.

Richard Starr has been a member of Grace Bible Chapel, a large Evangelical church in the northern corner of Maryland, for the past decade. The church publishes a directory of its members and their businesses, in case others in the congregation care to patronize them.

"When my water pump went out one year, and I didn't have the two thousand dollars handy to fix it, McDowell's Plumbing let me pay over two months. When I needed two new tires, I went to Steve Foster, who put on four, called me, and said 'Your girls drive this car, and I think you need them for safety. Pay me when you can,'" Starr says.

"And yeah, Foster's Auto costs a little more money than other shops, but in the long run it's worth it, not just economically, but to support a business that treats folks that way."

Nevertheless, says Starr, as a general rule, "We should commit ourselves to finding out about what good businesses are owned by our brothers and sisters in Christ, and then patronizing them." Everyday commerce conducted within the community builds social capital.

Build Christian Employment Networks

Christians also have to become far more intentional about hiring workers from within their own church community. Many churches already have informal internal networks that help members find jobs with employers that are within the community or are known to other

members. For the Benedict Option to work, this approach is going to have to become more formal and sustained.

Andrew Pudewa, the homeschooling instructional guru who runs the successful Institute for Excellence in Writing (IEW), employs members of his traditionalist Catholic agrarian community in Oklahoma. Not only does IEW publish highly regarded educational material for homeschoolers nationwide, but the rapid, Internet-driven growth of IEW's publishing business provides a livelihood for a number of families in Pudewa's church circles.

Similarly, Reba Place Fellowship in suburban Chicago, a Mennonite intentional community active since the 1950s, has spun off several businesses that began as church ministries, including a bicycle shop and an Amish furniture store.

"I've patronized or known of these businesses and the real impact they provide for the community," says Chad Comello, who lives in a Reba-owned apartment. "They employ a lot of Reba's covenant members and other Reba-adjacent young people like me, for small jobs but also steady employment. Those jobs kept me afloat when unemployed and gave me some purpose during some aimless times."

Were Starr to lose his job, he is certain that he could count on the Grace Bible congregation for support until he could find another one, and that they would all help on the job search. That's the kind of Christians they are: believers who live in such close community that when one falls on hard times, the others take up the slack as much as they can.

In Italy, the Tipi Loschi created three business cooperatives to provide employment both for its members and for rehabilitated drug addicts and former prisoners. As enthusiastic supporters of Distributism, an economic model based on Catholic social teaching and favoring small cooperatives and family businesses, the Tipi Loschi hope to create more local co-ops as they grow.

Reba Place, the Tipi Loschi, and similar initiatives offer examples of how churches and other Christian associations can build economic

enterprises to sustain their own communities—just as Benedictine monks have been doing for centuries. Today the changing cultural and legal climate means all Christian communities of any size must start thinking of these initiatives as central to their mission.

Beyond the local level, Communion and Liberation (CL), a global Catholic movement based in Italy, manages the Company of Works, a nationwide Italian network of small and medium-size business, charities, and nonprofit organizations. They are all run by CL members and dedicated to cooperation for the sake of living out Catholic principles in economic life. Leaders in orthodox Christian life in the United States should consider forming a similar association of businesses, for the sake of mutual support and collaboration.

Rediscover the Trades

For some Christians, the transition will be as radical as the one Brother Francis made: shifting from working with one's mind to working with one's hands. And it might be more spiritually profitable too.

Sam MacDonald is a Catholic who oversees the parochial school system in rural Elk County, Pennsylvania, two hours northeast of Pittsburgh. Though the county is not the industrial powerhouse it once was, there are still significant manufacturers there.

Elk County (population 31,479) is heavily Catholic and culturally conservative. MacDonald, a son of Elk County, was one of the good students encouraged by the culture to leave and make his way in the outside world. After earning a Yale degree in the mid-1990s and working as a journalist in Washington, D.C., he eventually returned with his wife and kids. Today he is an education innovator, working to introduce some of the county's Catholic schools to the classical model.

"I'm going to have a classical academy that builds die-setters. That's where we're headed," he says. "If you go back fifty years, the Catholic kids around here were all taught by the nuns. They were all

die-setters who learned Latin and who could do trigonometry like nobody's business."

If you have a strong work ethic, can pass a drug test, and can be trusted to show up on time, Elk County has a job for you. Its local manufacturers know that within ten years, they will need ten thousand workers to replace the skilled laborers who are retiring. Too many of the current county residents who would normally fill those jobs are too dysfunctional to do them or have moved away. Rather than look at relocating the factories a decade from now, the Elk County industrialists are considering a campaign to draw good workers to the area.

"They want to hire and build up a workforce of citizen-workers," says MacDonald, "people who are not only going to be reliable employees, but who are also going to be good citizens, who go to church, and who get involved with the community."

MacDonald says there's already a good basis for a Catholic Benedict Option community there. There are plenty of churches, a great Catholic school system that's improving, and a culturally conservative ethos that's family-friendly. Plus, it's affordable: you can get a good house for around sixty thousand dollars, which is not much more than many skilled laborers make in a year.

The catch is that you have to work in a factory, though that's a much more appealing alternative these days than in decades past, when factory floors were grimy. And you have to live in a place MacDonald describes as "in the middle of nowhere."

It's a matter of priorities.

"If you're in a place in your life where you decide that you can't work for your company because you can't be an ally, Elk County might make sense," he says. "Nobody's going to ask a die-setter to be an ally. They don't care."

Tradition-minded Christians who have immersed themselves in the writings of Wendell Berry should understand that agrarianism is no panacea. "You can't make a living as a farmer, but you can make

a living as a die-setter," says MacDonald. "Industrialism is the new agrarianism. It's not back to the land, but back to the trades."

The challenge for some Benedict Option Christians will be to find and relocate to the Elk Counties all over America—faraway places on the margins of the Empire. Funny thing is, the "margins of the Empire" could be as near as the boundaries of what is acceptable employment in one's social class. Faithful Christians who foresaw a professional career for themselves or their children will need to give the trades a second look. Better to be a plumber with a clean conscience than a corporate lawyer with a compromised one.

Prepare to Be Poorer and More Marginalized

In the end, it comes down to what believers are willing to suffer for the faith. Are we ready to have our social capital devalued and lose professional status, including the possibility of accumulating wealth? Are we prepared to relocate to places far from the wealth and power of the cities of the Empire, in search of a more religiously free way of life? It's going to come to that for more and more of us. The time of testing is at hand.

"A lot of Christians see no difference between being faithfully Christian and being professionally and socially ambitious," says a religious liberty activist. "That is ending."

True story: a couple in suburban Washington, D.C., approached their pastor asking him to help their college student daughter, who felt a calling to be an overseas missionary.

"That's wonderful!" said the pastor.

"Oh no, you misunderstand," said the parents. "We want you to help us talk her out of ruining her life."

Christians like that couple won't make it through what's to come. Christians with sacrificial hearts like their daughter's will. But it's going to cost them plenty.

A young Christian who dreams of being a lawyer or doctor might have to abandon that hope and enter a career in which she makes far less money than a lawyer or doctor would. An aspiring Christian academic might have to be happy with the smaller salary and lower prestige of teaching at a classical Christian high school.

A Christian family might be forced to sell or close a business rather than submit to state dictates. The Stormans family of Washington state faced this decision after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a state law requiring its pharmacy to sell pills the family considers abortifacient. Depending on the ultimate outcome of her legal fight, florist Barronelle Stutzman, who declined for conscience reasons to arrange flowers for a gay wedding, faces the same choice.

When that price needs to be paid, Benedict Option Christians should be ready to support one another economically—through offering jobs, patronizing businesses, professional networking, and so forth. This will not be a cure-all; the conversion of the public square into a politicized zone will be too far-reaching for orthodox Christian networks to employ or otherwise financially support all their economic refugees. But we will be able to help some.

Given how much Americans have come to rely on middle-class comfort, freedom, and stability, Christians will be sorely tempted to say or do anything asked of us to hold on to what we have. That is the way of spiritual death. When the Roman proconsul told Polycarp he would burn him at the stake if he didn't worship the emperor, the elderly second-century bishop retorted that the proconsul threatened temporary fire, which was nothing compared with the fire of judgment that awaited the ungodly.

If Polycarp was willing to lose his life rather than deny his faith, how can we Christians today be unwilling to lose our jobs if put to the test? If Barronelle Stutzman is prepared to lose her business as the cost of Christian discipleship, how can we do anything less?

We will be able to choose courageously and correctly in the moment of trial only if we have prepared ourselves in every possible way.

We can start by thinking of our work as a calling, as a vocation in the older sense: a way of life given to us by God for His own glory and for the common good. There is no reason why we can't serve the community and our own desire for professional excellence as doctors, lawyers, teachers, or almost anything else—as long as we know in our hearts that we are the Lord's good servants first.

We have talked so far in this book about what it means to create the structures and take on the practices that train our hearts to be the Lord's good servants first, even to the point of sacrifice. This is what the Benedict Option is supposed to do: help us to order all parts of our lives around Him. None of these strategies will work, however, unless Christians think radically different about the two most powerful forces shaping and driving modern life: sex and technology.

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Chapter 6: The Idea of a Christian Village

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