# The Legacies of Benedict and Polding

*Clare Condon SGS* , The Good Oil - July 2014

Each year, on July 11, the Church celebrates the Feast of St Benedict. I did so last week in Rome at the end of an international conference about the Catholic Church's policies and practices for safeguarding children.

For most Catholics in Australia, this feast day comes and goes unnoticed. A Catholic with an interest in Church history might be aware that Benedict established western monasticism in the fifth century across Europe and is now the patron saint of Europe; though neither of these facts is likely to have an impact on one's everyday life.

Yet the influence of Benedict and his spirituality – that is, his way of living a Gospel-inspired life – has been strong and profound (though probably somewhat understated in Australian Catholic life) since the early days of British occupation.

The first Catholic bishop to Australia, John Bede Polding, was a Benedictine monk of Downside England. He came to the colony with a spirituality founded on the Rule of Benedict and with an uncompromising missionary zeal. Polding had great dreams of establishing a Benedictine monastic church in the great south land. His dream was not to be fulfilled as he foresaw it.

But his values and profound humility, honed from his life as a monk and follower of Benedict, influenced his life, his focus on healing the wounds of the injured, and his way of relating to others and to God. These qualities, together with the energy with which he pursued his call as bishop of this vast land, are the legacy he bequeathed to Australia.

So what are some of those values which he endeavoured to pass onto others, particularly to the congregation of religious women, the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, which he founded? Values relevant to living in twenty-first century Australia, bequeathed to us by Polding and Benedict, are respect for the integrity and dignity of all, openness to hospitality, especially to the stranger, and humility to learn from the stories and the pain of others, and so work for healing of spirit and mind.

First and foremost, Polding valued the dignity and integrity of every human person he encountered. He did so in a spirit of humility. He stood strongly, both in word and action, for those in the penal colony who were oppressed: the men and women convicts; the women on the streets of Sydney who suffered abuse and neglect; the original inhabitants of the land, the Aboriginal people; and the far-flung settlers who sought a new life away from the harshness and brutality of nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland.

Benedict's Rule had formed Polding to honour every human being with the respect of God. He understood what it meant to see Christ in the other, which is so strongly emphasised in the Rule of Benedict. Benedict would have you see Christ in the sick, in the guest, in prayer and even in the Abbot – yes, in everyone and everything. He believed that every human person and encounter has the potential to bring the divine into one's relationships.

These are powerful learnings for our time here in Australia. A different set of values, often founded on arrogance, seems to dominate our public discourse and political agendas in so many social issues.

State governments with exaggerated law and order policies are forcing the overcrowding of prisons by using the prison system to deal with social issues of breakdown, such as violence and youth unemployment, rather than attending to the causes of social disadvantage and inequality within the broader community

In New South Wales, the prison population in March this year reached its highest ever number of 10,917 prisoners. Young Indigenous people form, by far, the greatest percentage of people in the prison system, and are usually imprisoned for petty crimes and disorderly behaviour. They continue to be oppressed.

Asylum seekers who, because of civil war and unrest in their countries, attempt dangerous journeys to seek a new life in Australia, are turned away and rejected, treated with scorn and derision. They are demonised rather than welcomed as our fellow human beings who deserve to be treated with respect.

Those sexually abused by trusted people, including clergy, have had their dignity and integrity torn apart, not only by the abuse, but by the inability to have their story believed by Church and other leaders.

It seems that, when we don't have that fundamental respect for the humanity of the other, he or she is treated as a feared stranger. There is a great need today to re-awaken a generous hospitality to the stranger which is founded on humility and equality in our common humanity.

We might ask why key people in society, and indeed, parts of the Church, seem to have lost these human values, emphasised so powerfully by Benedict, when they are faced with critical and ethical decisions affecting the well-being and basic human rights of people.

I have been at an international conference of Church personnel who are seeking to respond to the child sexual abuse crisis across the Western world as a healing and compassionate people. The words of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin from Dublin in opening the conference spoke to me of these same values of respect and welcome.

He said:
*"The art of healing is learned only in humility. Arrogance is never the road towards healing. Healing is not something we can package and hand over safe and sound to someone else and then we can go off safely and happily on our own way. Healing involves journeying together. The healer needs humility and personal healing if he or she is to journey really with those who are wounded. The duration of the process of healing is not measured by the time on our watch, but by the watch and the time of the other."* (Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin, Opening Address at the Anglophone Conference, July 2014)

As some of us celebrated the feast of the great man Benedict, we were again reminded of the core values which his Rule proposes. In living these values, we too have the opportunity to bring the art of healing to one another through the gift of humility, rather than inflicting further pain and injury through a stance of arrogance and disrespect.