



ST BENEDICT ELEMENTARY

Classical education illuminated by the Catholic Faith.

6 MAY 2017

SBE “EPIC GALA” ADDRESS BY GEORGE WEIGEL

We all, I suspect, share a sense of things coming a bit unglued these days: in the country, in the world, even in the Church.

The typical name for this coming-apart at the cultural level is “post-modernism:” that intellectual playpen in which there may be “your truth” and “my truth” but nothing properly describable as *the* truth.

I’d like to suggest a different image for this cultural coming-apart, an image that bears directly on the important work of St. Benedict Elementary.

Seven years ago, *First Things* published a seminal article by the distinguished Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson, with the title “How the World Lost Its Story.” I’d urge all of you to read (or re-read) Dr. Jenson’s article, but let me sum up the situation he analyzes – the situation of a world that has lost its “story” and is thus thrashing about in thrall to various fairy-tales, some of them quite lethal – by identifying three key notions that underwrite our present, postmodern discontents.

The first of these is the idea of *historical disconnection*: the claim that we have no real link to the historical sources of Western culture; the claim that ancient texts, and especially ancient religious texts, are material to be dissected, much as a pathologist dissects a corpse; the claim that we are cut off from our origins and our gaze is locked into the straitjacket of the present.

The second of these ideas is that *plurality is absolute*: there are no bright threads binding together the diversity of human experience; there are none of Henry James’s “figures in the carpet;” we are not only cut off from the past but also radically disconnected from all those in the present who are “other.”

And the third of these ideas is that the life of the mind – and thus the life of the arts and the entire life of culture – is *ineluctably incoherent*: an idea that finds expression in the nonsensical architecture of Frank Gehry, the atonality of so much contemporary music, the absurdity of modern sculpture, and so forth and so on.

Now: put these three ideas into a shaker and, in good James Bond style, shake rather than stir, and what comes out? What comes out is the culturally- dissolving

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cocktail of post-modernism. And when the world drinks enough of that cocktail, it loses, not only its sobriety, but also its story.

Which brings us to the Church, and St. Benedict Elementary School, and the New Evangelization-

Once upon a time, the world told itself its story through schools that taught that story, that history, in linear fashion: the world's story unfolded through chapters like Ancient Civilizations; Greece and Rome; the Middle Ages; Renaissance and Reformation; the Age of Reason; the Age of Revolution; the Age of Science; the Space Age.

Catholic schools, once upon a time, also taught that linear world history; but they also taught that the world's story unfolded under another set of chapter headings – Creation; Fall; Promise; Prophecy; Incarnation; Redemption; Sanctification in the Spirit; the Kingdom of God.

Moreover, Catholic schools taught that these two linear “stories” did not run on parallel tracks that never met; rather, the biblical story – the story of Creation, Fall, Promise, and so forth – unfolded *inside* the “world’s story (Ancient Civilizations, Greece and Rome, etc.), such that the biblical story was the world’s true story, read in its true depth and against its most ample horizon – a story that pointed the world’s story in the right direction, toward the world’s proper end.

This is what St. Benedict Elementary does today.

And in doing so, it offers persuasive and winsome answers to the false notions of post-modernism that have caused the world to lose its story.

To the claim that we have no link to historical sources and our cultural origins, St. Benedict School responds that the origins are present in a living way, because Christ – the fountainhead, the Logos, the Redeemer – is present in the Church through Word and Sacrament. Moreover, St. Benedict’s teaches, the origins are present in the great texts of Western civilization, in which we may find what the Fathers of the Church called *semina verbi*, “seeds of the Word” – for all truths from whatever sources incline, like iron shavings toward a magnet, toward the one Truth who is God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To the claim that plurality is absolute, St. Benedict Elementary teaches and embodies the unity of faith over time and space, and invites all to experience that in the liturgy and in the Great Tradition of Western wisdom.

To the claim of incoherence, St. Benedict School responds by confessing the coherence and faith and the capacity of reason to get at the truth of things and to find the life-giving figures in the carpet that, embraced, make for happiness and genuine human flourishing.

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And in doing all this – in living the truth that there *is* truth and that the Truth has entered creation and history in the person of the Son of God, St. Benedict Elementary School helps rebuild the foundations of our culture, so that the noble experiment of American democracy does not collapse into what Pope Benedict XVI called the “dictatorship of relativism.”

Thus the “Benedict Option” being lived through this school and its people is not a retreat into auto-constructed catacombs. Rather, it’s the creation of a vibrant, Catholic counterculture that aims at nothing less than converting the culture – proposing to the world its true story and inviting the Culture of Me to discover the riches of a culture of knowledge, a culture of encounter, a culture of noble aspiration, a culture of compassion and service: a culture at the center of which is not self-assertion but self-gift.

This is a very important project. It deserves all the support we can give it. Let us all give St. Benedict Elementary School the support it needs and deserves.