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Playing by 'The Rule'

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NEWARK, N.J. — After race riots tore Newark, N.J., apart in the summer of 1967, nothing in the city was ever the same again.

White flight and the declining industrial base were already causing a drastic rise in poverty levels and civil unrest.

When a black man was beaten by police following a minor traffic violation, the city exploded. Twenty-six people died, 725 were injured, and Newark burned.

It never really recovered. Approximately one-third of the population now lives below the poverty line. It has the seventh-highest crime rate in the United States. Its political history is mostly notable for its corruption and fractiousness. Thousands of at-risk youth crowd a school system that struggles to educate them while also dealing with the challenges of poverty, joblessness, crime, gangs, drugs and shattered families.

From its founding in 1868, [St. Benedict's Prep](#) was the place where generations of Catholics, many of them immigrants, sent their boys to be educated. It was a “white working man’s prep school in a white working-class city,” according to Tom McCabe, author of a history of the school called [Miracle on High Street](#) (Fordham University Press, 2010). Run by monks of the Order of St. Benedict, it was both a school and an abbey. Over time, the composition of the city changed. The white Catholic population fled the city. The black population increased. Enrollment dropped from 814 in the early 1960s to the low hundreds after the riots.

The school could no longer function as it had, so the monks began recruiting black youth from the neighborhood, with benefactors providing their tuition. Many of the students were capable, but they came from family and education backgrounds that didn’t provide them with the tools to succeed.

Some of the monks were uncomfortable with the change and shocked by the decline of the city, particularly after

the riots. Benedictine Father Edwin Leahy, the headmaster, was a young monk at the time, and he said that many of his brothers were “petrified,” wondering if the blacks “would do to us what we did to them.”

The monks were divided. Some wanted to close the school and relocate the abbey. Others, many of whom had been educated at St. Benedict’s and found their vocations there, resisted. They felt this was where they needed to be. As Father Leahy said: “What I had gotten I wanted other kids to have.”

When the abbot failed to get the two-thirds vote needed to relocate the monastery, he closed the school in 1972. A lot of factors went into the closing, from declining enrollment to cost, but McCabe has said, “I would argue that the school closed over race.”

Rebirth

Some of the monks immediately set about planning to reopen the school to cater to the primarily black and Latino population. At that point, 14 monks packed their possessions in a van and left. Many of those who remained continue to work at St. Benedict’s today.

What emerged in the four decades since these upheavals is something extraordinary, which is chronicled in a new documentary called *The Rule*, by Newark filmmakers Jerome and Marylou Bongiorno. It has already been broadcast on PBS and screened at film festivals. It is calling attention to the unique monastic approach that has

contributed to the school's success.

The film takes its name from [The Rule of St. Benedict](#) and the effective way Benedict of Nursia's 1,500-year-old monastic rule has been applied in a modern, urban educational setting. The same rule that helped preserve Western civilization in Europe now changes the lives of many of the most at-risk young men in Newark.

The Bongiorno first heard about St. Benedict's from author McCabe while working on [Revolution '67](#), their award-winning documentary on the race riots that occurred in Newark in 1967.

"We visited the school, and we were impressed," said Marylou Bongiorno, "but we were really blown away when the monks showed us the 24/7 student residence called Leahy House. That clinched our involvement. As Newarkers, we see the devastation around us in Newark, and experiencing Leahy House, coupled with SBP's rates of college acceptance and college graduation, we detected tangible hope and instantly knew there was a powerful film here."

Leahy House, which provides a home for approximately 60 students, offers a safe haven and support for young men who all too often have neither.

The Bongiorno's films are two halves of a whole: *Revolution '67* documents the problem, while *The Rule*

documents a solution. They also are working on a narrative feature film about the school called *Monks in the Hood*.

An Educational Success Story

The city of Newark spends \$1 billion annually to educate children, but only 32% of high-school students can pass a basic proficiency exam. St. Benedict's, by contrast, has a college acceptance rate of close to 100%.

Much of that success is attributed to The Rule of St. Benedict, a basic guide to monastic life that provides order and inspiration for the school's entire program. The film breaks the school's unique approach into 12 categories that act as chapters for the film: counseling, history, adaptability, commitment, hope, connectedness, trust, leadership, community, perseverance, spirituality and stability. Each of these is inspired by St. Benedict and grounded in the driving goal of the monks to "give kids what they need."

Often, this means giving them an environment where it's safe to learn. Many of the children come from broken homes and backgrounds that impact their ability to perform. School runs for 11 months a year, and if a home environment is not conducive to learning, the young man can live in Leahy House. Freshmen go through a boot camp, including a 50-mile hike on the Appalachian Trail. Much of the campus is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Most impressive is the way the monks build up the boys, giving them confidence and responsibility. Boys take on leadership roles, with the student body broken into various smaller groups of about 30 students, led by boys in turn. These groups handle encouragement, discipline and organization. The goal is to train them up to be men and realize that “a man helps someone in need.”

All of this is inspired by Benedict’s Rule.

“The Benedictine monks in Newark have been faithful to their core tenets — two of which are stability and adaptability — and this has been part of their secret formula,” said McCabe. “Plus, they have been able to build community in an often-fractured city and held high expectations for young men when so little is all too often expected of them. Put simply, the school cares and walks alongside young men as they navigate their way to manhood.”

Although the school has cordial relationships with the public and charter schools in the city, which often send them at-risk students, the monks are on their own financially. The tuition of \$9,700 a year doesn’t even come close to covering the cost to educate each student. In addition, about 80% of the students require financial aid to even pay that much, which means the school has to raise \$5 million every year. (Go to <https://my.sbp.org/donate> to donate.)

“That’s the bad news,” said Father Leahy. “The good news is that it’s working. We’ve been doing it for years, and it has been working. It’s a testimony to the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.”

St. Benedict in the City

It’s also a testament to the power of prayer and the monastic rule that orders the lives of both monks and students.

St. Benedict’s is still an abbey, and as Benedict counseled, they are dedicated to *ora et labora*: prayer and work. The monks begin their days early, attend Mass and pray five times a day.

What makes the school special is that the monks have invited people into this world — and not just any people, but many youth from poor and struggling families or other troubled backgrounds. And in keeping with the order to work, the students run their own company that gets paid to clean the school.

While St. Benedict’s is a success story, the larger question remains if its methods can be replicated elsewhere.

Marylou Bongiorno thinks so and is working with Teacher’s College at Columbia University to create a guide for putting the lessons of St. Benedict’s and *The Rule* into action. The takeaway, she said, is that “the larger community of policymakers, educators and all citizens must put aside self-interest, as the monks have done, and

give inner cities what they need — because, in doing so, drastic improvement can be achieved.”

Benedictine Father Albert Holtz, religion teacher and former dean of faculty, is more measured when considering whether the methods can be applied elsewhere:

“What makes the school work is the entire school culture, not just a few individual programs. Underlying the techniques are the principles. The techniques will not transplant easily into an environment of authoritarianism, teacher indifference, student apathy, etc. Yet I’m sure that some of them, such as student leadership, can be adapted for use by other schools where the environment is suitable.”

It has been a long road from burning Newark and frightened monks to this.

“There’s no way,” Father Leahy said, “when we began in ’72 that you could have pictured what has happened. God is a God of surprises. We’re now sitting on about 13 acres in the middle of downtown Newark. We’ve got 13 buildings, swimming pools, athletic fields and all kinds of things going on for these kids — and it’s happening 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It’s like a diner in the middle of Newark. Kids and adults are in and out all the time, so it’s become a real refuge for a lot of people.”

And yet it’s more than a refuge: It’s a witness.

As Father Leahy said, “It’s a sign of faith. The signs of faith are unity and love, so creating a community that’s present in the middle of the city — the monks and those who work with us — creates this community of believers that may give other people courage to do what the Lord says: They’ll know you are Christian by the way you love one another. Hopefully, we can continue to create this community that continues to demonstrate those signs of faith and bring other people to the faith, to enable them to believe.”

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