



It's Hard to be Saints in the City
*A new documentary shows how
Benedictine monks make men out of
Newark's boys.*

STEVEN MALANGA

2 September 2014

<http://www.city-journal.org/2014/bc0902sm.html>



Photo by [St. Benedict's Prep](#)

As a high school student, I took a bus every school day for four years into the center of Newark, New Jersey, passing neighborhoods that bore the scars of the July 1967 riots

and the spreading urban decay that followed them. I was headed to a century-old, all-boys Catholic high school, St. Benedict's Prep, which my parents had determined I would attend no matter how much the inner core of Newark was changing. The school had been founded in the nineteenth century by Benedictine monks to provide an education for the sons of Irish and German Catholic immigrants, who were not always welcomed in the local public schools. Many graduates went on to successful lives. Over time, wealthy alumni started sending their kids to the school. But St. Benedict's Prep nevertheless maintained its reputation as "the white workingman's prep school," educating the sons of successive generations of immigrants through the early and mid-twentieth century.

Then, about a year after I graduated, the monks who ran the school announced that they were shutting it down and closing up their home, Newark Abbey. The shock to the school's community—students, parents, and alumni—was profound. Some wealthy alumni pledged to do anything necessary to save the institution, but nothing seemed to move the monks. Later we learned of a rift within the Abbey. Some of the monks wanted out of Newark. They left, but a core group stayed and reopened St. Benedict's within a year with a new mission—principally to serve Newark's minority children. It seemed like a quixotic task. As Newark deteriorated around them, the monks took on the job of educating teenage boys growing up in a chaotic urban environment. Many students were products of a collapsing public school system that would one day be seized from the city by state officials.

Decades later, St. Benedict's is still there, and its recent history is a remarkable story of educational success under extraordinarily challenging circumstances. *The Rule*, a documentary by Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno opening this Friday in New York and next week in Los Angeles, recounts the improbable tale of priests and brothers living under a nearly 1,500-year-old monastic code, and the Newark kids whose lives they have transformed.

The film's title refers to [the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia](#), the sixth-century founder of the Benedictine order. A hermit drawn out of isolation by his followers, Benedict founded a dozen monasteries around Europe, including Monte Cassino, near Rome, and fashioned precepts for community living based on prayer and work. Benedict's ideas guide many religious orders to this day. You don't need to read the Rule to guess that its teachings are out of step with modern educational pedagogy. What the monks who stayed in Newark found in the Rule was a prescription for community living through service to God and to others—especially Newark's children. It's hard to argue with their track record. Nearly all of St. Benedict's graduates go on to college, many at the nation's most prestigious institutions, and the reincarnated school's list of successful alumni is as impressive as the old school's ever was.

The obstacles to the school's success are formidable. As the documentary makes clear—its camera insinuating itself into the daily interactions between the monks and secular staff on one hand, and the students on the other—the priority of getting an education sometimes takes a back

seat to simple survival for St. Benedict's boys. Some come to the school angry at the world, haunted by memories of living in motels or moving from relative to relative, lacking fathers, and surrounded by violence. Sometimes they don't know what's expected of them because no one has ever told them. In one scene, St. Benedict's headmaster and guiding spirit, Father Edwin Leahy, counsels a young man on the verge of failing out; the boy's mother explains his chaotic behavior outside of school, including shuttling among various relatives, as his way of having "fun." In an exchange that I doubt you'd hear in any contemporary guidance counselor's office, Father Edwin asks the kid, "Who told you you're supposed to have fun? Everybody else has to work their behinds off so you can have fun?"

The monks have fashioned an intense, immersive educational experience that stresses the students' essential place in the larger community. Students refer to one another as brothers and chant, as they make their way through the halls, "What hurts my brother hurts me." They spend 11 months a year in school and hike the Appalachian Trail together. Freshmen complete a five-day orientation, in which they bunk in sleeping bags on the gym floor. In the film, a mother dropping her son off at orientation tells him, "You're gonna come back a man."

The monks are serious about building men. The boys don't just participate in the community; they eventually help run the school, despite their self-doubts. Seniors supervise freshmen; a student leader, not a priest, runs every

morning's convocation; students take attendance and even follow up with absentees.

The filmmakers, a husband-and-wife team who live in Newark, produced an earlier documentary about the city's infamous riots, *Revolution '67*. They are as unflinching about Newark's problems as they are hopeful about the persistence of an institution like St. Benedict's. *The Rule* presents stark contrasts between the nurturing and supportive St. Benedict's environment and the nihilism of the surrounding streets, in a city with one of America's highest crime rates. A kid is mugged on the way to school. Police sirens are background noise for school work. A graduate comes back home to visit his family and gets murdered. Father Edwin warns the students during an assembly that the Christmas holidays can be a dangerous time. That's true everywhere, but especially in Newark. "Stupid stuff happens in this city," he says.

The film's subtitle asks, "Want Inner City Schools to Finally Succeed?" If only it were as easy as merely wanting it. New Jersey, often with prodding from its courts, has spent staggering sums trying to fix Newark's schools. Currently, the district's graduation rate languishes at just 22 percent, despite spending about \$25,000 per pupil. Much of that money has been wasted. Institutional inertia, slavish adherence to fashionable pedagogies that have never proved effective, and the power of special-interest groups, like teachers' unions, have all blocked meaningful change. The kind of radical transformation that St. Benedict's represents, with its 1,500-year-old guidepost, is

hard to imagine except in the most extraordinary circumstances.

The film does not touch on a crucial component of St. Benedict's survival—its financial stability. Though many of its successful alumni were shocked at its closing, many also stepped up to support the school when it was reborn, and more have joined them since. The school's success has also attracted the attention of education-aimed charities that want to invest in what's effective. But in many other places, Catholic schools—despite ample research [documenting](#) their success in educating inner-city students—are [closing](#), thanks to a financial squeeze. St. Benedict's isn't just an island of hope within Newark. It's also increasingly an anomaly within Catholic education.

Scholars often point out that St. Benedict fashioned his precepts for community living based on that most basic of human institutions, the family. In Newark, the stable family has become increasingly rare. Only 30 percent of the city's kids live in two-parent families. Some 60 percent live without fathers, raised instead by mothers or grandparents or in foster homes. That is perhaps one reason why St. Benedict's doesn't define its success solely in terms of academic achievement. *The Rule* makes brief mention of the school's college-admission rates and graduation rates (85 percent of the school's students who attend college graduate), but it says nothing about such minutiae as test scores. In one of the film's final scenes, a counselor defines the school's aims and goals more broadly.

“How do I measure success?” he asks. “You’re able to graduate St. Benedict’s, have a mortgage, deal with your marriage, deal with your family, stick it out. How do I measure success? I got a father working with his son, in his son’s life.”

Amen.

The Rule, a film by Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno, opens this Friday, September 5, at Quad Cinemas, Manhattan, on September 12th at the Laemmle Encino, Los Angeles, and airs nationally on PBS starting September 25.

Steven Malanga is the senior editor of City Journal and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. His latest book is [Shakedown: The Continuing Conspiracy Against the American Taxpayer](#).