The Idea of a Christian Village

HOW TO CONSERVE AND STRENGTHEN CHRISTIANS IN A CULTURE HOSTILE TO OUR FAITH. AN EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM *THE BENEDICT OPTION*.

by Rod Dreher

Illustration by Dante Terzigni

FOR MOST OF MY ADULT LIFE, I have been a believing Christian and a committed conservative. I didn't see any conflict between the two until my wife and I welcomed our firstborn child into the world in 1999. Nothing changes a man's outlook on life like having to think about the kind of world his children will inherit. And so it was with me. As Matthew grew into toddlerhood, I began to realize how my politics were changing as I sought to raise our child by traditionalist Christian principles. I began to wonder what, exactly, mainstream conservatism was conserving. It dawned on me that some of the causes championed by my fellow conservatives—chiefly an uncritical enthusiasm for the market—can in some circumstances undermine the thing that I, as a traditionalist, considered the most important institution to conserve: the family.

I also came to see the churches, including my own, as largely ineffective in combating the forces of cultural decline. Traditional, historic Christianity—whether Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox—ought to be a powerful counterforce to the radical individualism and secularism of modernity. Even though conservative Christians were said to be fighting a culture war, with the exception of the abortion and gay marriage issues, it was hard to see my people putting up much of a fight. We seemed content to be the chaplaincy to a consumerist culture that was fast losing a sense of what it meant to be Christian.

In my 2006 book, *Crunchy Cons*, which explored a countercultural, traditionalist conservative sensibility, I brought up the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who said that Western civilization had lost its moorings. MacIntyre said that the time is coming when men and women of virtue will understand that continued full participation in mainstream society was not possible for those who want to live a life of traditional virtue. These people would find new ways to live in community, he said, just as St. Benedict, the sixth-century father of Western monasticism, responded to the collapse of Roman civilization by founding a monastic order.

I called the strategic withdrawal prophesied by MacIntyre "the Benedict Option." The idea is that serious Christian conservatives could no longer live business-as-usual lives in America, that we have to develop creative, communal solutions to help us hold on to our faith and our values in a world growing ever more hostile to them. We would have to choose to make a decisive leap into a truly countercultural way of living Christianity, or we would doom our children and our children's children to assimilation.

Today, Christians who hold to the biblical teaching about sex and marriage have the same status in culture and, increasingly, in law, as racists. The culture war that began with the sexual revolution in the 1960s has now ended in defeat for Christian conservatives. The cultural left—which is to say, the American mainstream—has no intention of living in postwar peace. It is pressing forward with a harsh, relentless occupation, one that is aided by the cluelessness of Christians who don't understand what's happening.

I have written *The Benedict Option* to wake up the church, and to encourage it to act to strengthen itself, while there is still time. If we want to survive, we have to return to the roots of our faith, both in thought and in deed. We are going to have to learn habits of the heart forgotten by believers in the West. We are going to have to change our lives, and our approach to life, in radical ways. In short, we are going to have to be the church, without compromise, no matter what it costs.

The Benedict Option is not a political agenda. Nor is it a spiritual how-to manual, nor a standard decline-and-fall lament. Benedict's Rule is a detailed set of instructions for how to organize and govern a monastic community, in which monks

(and separately, nuns) live together in poverty and chastity. That is common to all monastic living, but Benedict's Rule adds three distinct vows: obedience, stability (fidelity to the same monastic community until death), and conversion of life, which means dedicating oneself to the lifelong work of deepening repentance. The Rule also includes directions for dividing each day into periods of prayer, work, and reading of Scripture and other sacred texts. The saint taught his followers how to live apart from the world, but also how to treat pilgrims and strangers who come to the monastery.

To be sure, few Christians are called to a monastic community as such, but there is much in the Benedictine way that can be approximated in daily life, which can help Christians and Christian communities of all kinds be resilient and grow deeper in Christ, especially in an era such as this.

The Benedict Option has implications in a variety of areas: from national politics to single-family homes. It does not mean withdrawal from the world by any means. For the purposes of this article, let me suggest one way it might shape the life of Christians in community.

THE IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN VILLAGE

The fate of religion in America is inextricably tied to the fate of the family, and the fate of the family is tied to the fate of the community. In her 2015 book, *How the West Really Lost God,* cultural critic Mary Eberstadt argues that religion is like a language: You can learn it only in community, starting with the community of the family. When both the family and the community become fragmented and fail, the transmission of religion to the next generation becomes far more difficult. All it takes is the failure of a single generation to hand down a tradition for that tradition to disappear from the life of a family and, in turn, of a community. Eberstadt is one of a long line of religious thinkers to recognize that when concrete embodiments of the relationship to God crumble, it becomes very hard to hold on to him in the abstract.

Strengthening families and communities—and thickening our ties to each other and to our churches—requires us to shake off our passivity. It's unrealistic to hope or expect to live as intensely in community as monks under the Rule do, but in the Benedict Option, we cannot be laissez-faire about the ties that bind us to each other. With so many forces in contemporary culture pulling families and communities apart, we can't assume that everything will work out if we just go with the flow.

Benedict Option Christians have a lot to learn from our Orthodox Jewish elder brothers in the faith, who have faced horrifying attempts to destroy their families and communities. Orthodox rabbi Mark Gottlieb says that Christians living apart from mainstream culture need "raw, roll-up-your-sleeves dedication to create deep structures of community." If we are to survive, we need to develop a "laser-like focus and dedication to seeing [ourselves] as the next link in the chain of the Christian story."

Geography is one secret to the strength and resilience of Orthodox Jewish communities. Because their faith requires them to walk to synagogue on the Sabbath, they must live within walking distance. This is also convenient for their communal prayer life.

"My day is built around the prayers," Gottlieb told me. "Morning prayers: wake up, go to synagogue. Afternoon prayers: go down the street from where I work in midtown Manhattan. Evening prayers: back home in my New Jersey neighborhood. The ritual of prayer structures every day and every month."

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"It's not enough to say that you go to synagogue on Sabbath," said the rabbi. "You often see that Jews who are able to go to synagogue two or three times a day, in addition to the Sabbath, are also those most able to maintain a healthy distance from the most nefarious elements of modern culture. It's a matter not just of theological commitment but

of practices and of seeing yourself as part of a larger Jewish community in relationship with God. This is not just for rabbis and scholars but also for the average observant Jew."

Christians don't have the geographical requirement that Orthodox Jews do, but many of those who choose to live in proximity have found it a blessing. As newcomers to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Alaskans Shelley and Jerry Finkler found that living 20 minutes from the cathedral in Eagle River inhibited their ability to partake of the fullness of church life. A number of cathedral families live within walking distance of the cathedral, on land purchased by church members decades ago, when it was affordable.

The Finklers initially thought living in a neighborhood with their church family was weird. Circumstances caused them to live temporarily in the church neighborhood, and they discovered what a difference it made in their family's life. Later, when they returned to their house in the exurbs, the Finklers missed what they had back in Eagle River. Everybody in the exurban settlement knew each other and were of the same class, but it wasn't the same.

"There wasn't the sense of the common good that you have when you're living around people who share your faith," Shelley Finkler once told me. "That made a big difference when it came to reaching out to help each other."

The Finklers soon sold their house and moved again, this time much closer to their church.

Why be close? Because as I said earlier, the church can't just be the place you go on Sundays—it must become the center of your life. That is, you may visit your house of worship only once a week, but what happens there in worship, and the community and the culture it creates, must be the things around which you order the rest of the week.

American Christians have a bad habit of treating church like a consumer experience. If a congregation doesn't meet our felt needs, we are quick to find another one that we believe will. I'm as guilty of this as anybody else. But Rachel Balducci can testify to the benefits, spiritual and otherwise, of grounding oneself in a committed community.

Rachel lives with her husband, Paul, and their kids in the Alleluia Community, a covenanted lay community of charismatic Catholics and Protestants founded in 1973. Paul and Rachel's parents were among the early settlers of a distressed neighborhood in Augusta, Georgia, where the new community's members could afford housing. They helped each other fix up their places and began life in common.

Today the Alleluia Community has around 800 members, many of whom remain in Faith Village, which is what they call the original settlement. When they married and decided to start a family, the Balduccis realized that what they had been given as children was something worth giving to the family they hoped to start one day.

Community itself won't make you holy if you aren't committed to prayer and cultivating a personal relationship with Jesus, Balducci cautions. She says the gift of community is that it builds a social structure in which it is easier for Christians to hear and respond to God's voice and in which others hold them accountable if they lose the straight path. Living so closely with others can strain one's patience, concedes Balducci, but it has been good for her and her family.

"If I were a hermit, just God and me, it would be easier to be a saint," she says. "Living this way is good for my humility. It's like being in a rock tumbler. It polishes you and wears away your rough edges."

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COMMUNITIES ACROSS BOUNDARIES

A generation ago two conservative Christian leaders—evangelical Chuck Colson and Roman Catholic Richard John Neuhaus—launched an initiative called Evangelicals and Catholics Together.

The idea was to foster better relations between Christians in two church traditions that had been mutually suspicious. Colson and Neuhaus realized earlier than many that the post-1960s cultural changes meant that conservative evangelicals and orthodox Catholics now had more in common with each other than with liberals in their own church traditions. They called their kind of partnership, born in part out of pro-life activism, an "ecumenism of the trenches."

Times have changed, and so have some of the issues conservative evangelicals and Catholics face. But the need for an ecumenism of the trenches is stronger than ever. Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, a senior bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church, has on several occasions appealed to traditionalists in the West to form a "common front" against atheism and secularism. To be sure, the different churches should not compromise their distinct doctrines, but they should nevertheless seize every opportunity to form friendships and strategic alliances in defense of the faith and the faithful.

Erin Doom, a longtime employee of the legendary Eighth Day Books, a Christian bookstore in Wichita, Kansas, founded the Eighth Day Institute (EDI) as the store's nonprofit educational arm. Committed to small-o orthodox ecumenism and to building up the local Christian community, EDI hosts various symposia and events throughout the year. Its signature event, though, may be the Hall of Men, a twice-monthly gathering in EDI's clubhouse, a kind of Christian speakeasy next door to the bookstore, in which Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant men have been coming together since 2008 to pray, to discuss and debate the works of a great figure of Christian history, then to sit around the table drinking pints of beer and enjoying each other's company.

The Hall of Men and its recently launched parallel women's organization, the Sisters of Sophia, are a way for "mere Christians" to engage the Great Tradition, to root themselves in it, and to go out into the world to renew culture. Doom says the men come together in a spirit of brotherhood, willing to talk about their theological differences in an atmosphere of Christian love. He credits the ecumenical generosity and sense of hospitality of Eighth Day Books owner Warren Farha for setting the tone.

"If we Christians are going to survive, if we're going to make a difference, we have to be able to come together. Small-o orthodoxy is vital," says Doom. "I'd like EDI to be a model for other communities. It all begins with Hall of Men, getting the guys involved. Ultimately I want to provide tools and resources for all Christian families to make their homes into little monasteries."

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It's as simple as starting a book group—but one with the purpose of catechesis, discipleship, and intentional community building. It's a social event, true, but it has to have a strong focus on something more serious than socializing. The Hall of Men prays when it meets, then discusses a text from the church's Great Tradition. Participants are expected to argue from their own theological convictions, but nobody is trying to convert anybody else, and it's all in friendship.

One key to making these ecumenical groups successful is to avoid watering down doctrinal distinctives for the sake of comity. Honoring diversity means exactly that: giving others in the fellowship the grace to bring their full Christian selves to the table without fear of reproach. This mutual respect for difference creates the space where serious theological discussion and community building can occur.

"These guys aren't all part of my church tradition, but they have become my best friends," an evangelical man told me. "Once you start reading this stuff and talking about the early church, you start to see that you have more in common with some believers outside your own tradition. It's good to be with other guys who take the Christian life

as seriously as you do. You realize that we're all in this battle with the world together."

A LIVING ORGANISM

The greatest temptation for a tight-knit community is a compulsion to control its members unduly and to police each other too strictly for deviation from a purity standard. It is hard to know when and where to draw the line in every situation, but a community so rigid that it cannot bend will break itself or its members.

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In Eagle River, Alaska, the Eastern Orthodox community around St. John's Cathedral lost a significant number of its members after deep divisions over how strictly to live the Orthodox life. Father Marc Dunaway, the cathedral's pastor, lived through the painful departure of friends and family who left in search of a more rigorously observant Orthodox life. In 2013, he told me, "I think the cure for any community to avoid these sad troubles is to be open and generous and to resist the urges to build walls and isolate itself.

"If you isolate yourself, you will become weird," Dunaway continued. "It is a tricky balance between allowing freedom and openness on the one hand, and maintaining a community identity on the other. The idea of community itself should not be allowed to become an idol. A community is a living organism that must change and grow and adapt."

Communities that are wrapped too tight for fear of impurity will suffocate their members and strangle the joy out of life together. Ideology is the enemy of joyful community life, and the most destructive ideology is the belief that creating utopia is possible. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said that the line between good and evil runs down the center of every human heart. That axiom must be at the center of every Christian community, keeping it humble and sane.

"It was good for us to develop friendships outside our community," said one man, still an enthusiastic member of that community. "When the only people you have contact with are the ones you go to church with, it's hard to know when they're asking something unreasonable. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that everybody outside the community is corrupt, but it's not true."

The need to control things is a sign of the middle-class Christian mentality, chides Marco Sermarini. He and his community friends were raised in what Sermarini disdainfully calls "this bourgeois church, this church of comfort, this church where people didn't want to take any risks to live radically for the Lord Jesus." The story of how Sermarini and his lay Catholic community began in San Benedetto del Tronto, a small city on Italy's Adriatic coast, inspires because of its improvisational quality.

Sermarini, who is also head of Italy's G. K. Chesterton Society, says his community began as an informal group of young Catholic men inspired by the example of Pier Giorgio Frassati, a 20th-century Catholic layman and social reformer who died at the age of 24. The Blessed Pier Giorgio (he has passed the first stage of canonization, earning the title) was known for helping the poor—and that's what Sermarini and his friends did in college, reaching out to at-risk youth.

After college, the men found they enjoyed each other's company and helping the needy, so they stayed together. As they married, they brought their wives into the group. In 1993, encouraged by their local bishop, they incorporated as an official association within the Catholic Church, an association of families they jokingly called the *Tipi Loschi*—Italian for "the usual suspects."

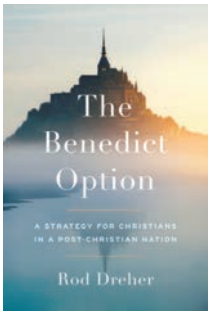
Today the Tipi Loschi have around 200 members in their community. They administer the community school, the Scuola Libera G. K. Chesterton, as well as three separate cooperatives, all designed to serve some charitable end. They continue to build and to grow, driven by a sense of spiritual and social entrepreneurship and inspired by

a close connection to the Benedictine monastery in Norcia, just on the other side of the Sibylline Mountains. As the Tipi Loschi's various initiatives succeeded (and despite some that didn't), the association of families came to regard each other as something more organic.

They began helping each other in everyday tasks, trying to reverse the seemingly unstoppable atomization of daily life. Now they feel closer than ever and are determined to keep reaching out to their city, offering faith and friendship to all, from within the confident certainties of their Catholic community. This is how they continue to grow.

"The possibility to live like this is for everyone," says Sermarini. "We have only to follow an old way to do things that we always had but lost some years ago. The main thing is not to go with the mainstream. Then seek God, and after that, look for others who are also serious about seeking God, and join them." It's becoming clear, Sermarini says, that Christian families have to start linking themselves decisively with other families. "If we don't move in this direction, we will face more and more crises."

Though an ocean separates them, Leah Libresco (now Leah Sargeant) understands what Sermarini is talking about. She is a Catholic and an effervescent Benedict Option social entrepreneur who lives in New York City with her husband, Alexi. Before they married in 2016, Libresco organized Benedict Option events among her young single Christian friends in Washington, DC. She started doing this after becoming convinced that her circle needed more Christian cultural liturgies in their daily lives.



"I used to do things with my Christian friends, and we knew we were all Christian, but the fact that we were Christians never came up," she says. "There's something weird when none of the communal parts of your life are overtly Christian. The Benedict Option is about creating the opportunity for those things to happen. It doesn't feel urgent, but it's really important." **CT**

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