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Original Article

The Children's Gaze on Benedictine Monks: Insights from San Beda University Students

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this descriptive qualitative design study is to understand how Bedan pupils perceive Benedictine life and its influence on their faith formation. This study gathered insights from fifty (50) pupils (Grades 4-6) at San Beda University - IBED using an open-ended questionnaire, with data processed through thematic analysis. Findings indicated that pupils mostly view Benedictine monks as "prayerful," "disciplined," and "faithful," often using terms like "holy" and "devoted." While pupils recognized the sacrifice and conversion required, they also expressed curiosity about the monks' daily routines and vocational discernment. Based on these findings, the study recommends enhancing the Benedictine Spirituality curriculum, increasing the visibility of monks on campus, expanding the range of respondents, and organizing experiential activities, such as abbey tours and vocational talks. These insights may guide classroom strategies and resources to enhance pupils' understanding of Benedictine spirituality.

Keywords: *Bedan; Benedictine Monks; Christian Living; Faith Formation; Religious Life; San Beda University*

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Introduction

Catholic educational institutions, particularly those rooted in monastic traditions, play a vital role in the spiritual formation of their pupils. At San Beda University (SBU), an institution established by the Order of Saint Benedict (O.S.B.), pupils are introduced to Benedictine spirituality from an early age through the Christian Living curriculum (San Beda University, n.d.). The Benedictine monks, known for their commitment to prayer, work (*Ora et Labora*), and community, are a visible presence and serve as spiritual mentors (Sant'Anselmo, 2018). This educational model aims to instill Benedictine values and foster an environment conducive to spiritual growth (Pusztai & Rosta, 2023). In addition, the study by Bustamante reveals the importance of stability during challenging times, particularly in fostering leadership, as observed in school settings, where students approach this value through spirituality and learning (Bustamante, 2023). This commitment to spiritual development is mandated by the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), which holds that all educational endeavors must contribute to the spiritual perfection of the human person. However, despite the strong Benedictine presence and curriculum, little is known about how the children themselves perceive this monastic life and its figures.

Despite the strong Benedictine presence, little is known about how the pupils perceive monastic life and its monks. While the university emphasizes holistic development (Newman, 2022), existing literature often assumes that pedagogical practices directly translate into pupils' understanding; however, children's perceptions are uniquely shaped by a combination of school, family, and societal influences (Clements & Bullivant, 2022). From a psychological perspective, this spiritual formation process is inherently transformative, aligning with Loder's (1989) theory of the logic of the spirit; thus, understanding pupils' unique perceptions is crucial. This is often rooted in Fowler's (1981) Mythic-Literal Stage (Stage 2), which forms the psychological basis for their faith development and how they perceive the monks' spiritual roles in a literal sense. This gap is significant, as pupils' familiarity and understanding of religious figures can profoundly influence their own spiritual development and vocational aspirations (Gyllander et al., 2024; Afen & Egunjobi, 2023).

Research affirms that the roles of educators and religious figures are critical in shaping pupils' religious identities. Catholic educators, for instance, play a crucial role in promoting Church teachings that shape perceptions of religious life (Batu & Sihotang, 2022). Similarly, religious education teachers contribute directly to students' character formation by modeling and promoting spiritual values (Samuels et al., 2023; Julia et al., 2022). The influence of relatives who are priests or religious also reinforces spiritual norms, often prompting individuals to consider a religious life (Conway et al., 2023). This formation is particularly relevant to vocation. Studies specify a correlation between engagement in religious education and a student's understanding of a "calling" (Paul & Wa-Mbaleka, 2023). However, pupils may lack clarity regarding the nature of a religious vocation, particularly the transformative process of becoming a monk (Kasim & Salleh, 2023). Understanding pupils' personal reflections is crucial, as spirituality plays a significant role in guiding young people to make value-based life choices (Tambunan & Simbolon, 2023). This highlights the need for a curriculum that effectively connects spiritual teachings with pupils' lived experiences (Ivaniuk, 2024).

Overall, gaps remain in understanding how pupils conceptualize the daily lives and roles of monks, their views on religious vocation, and the relevance of Benedictine

spirituality to their own lives. As a religious and values educator, the teacher-researcher was inspired to conduct a study on the pupils' perceptions of Benedictine monks at San Beda University. This study aims to:

1. Explore how Grades 4-6 pupils conceptualize the daily lives and roles of Benedictine monks.
2. Examine pupils' understanding of religious vocation and the process of becoming a Benedictine monk.
3. Analyze pupils' personal reflections and questions regarding Benedictine spirituality and its relevance to their lives.

The insights gained from this research may serve as a basis for developing classroom strategies and educational resources that enhance pupils' understanding and appreciation of the Benedictine community within the Christian Living curriculum at San Beda University.

Methodology

The primary goal of this research was to explore how Bedan pupils perceive Benedictine life and its influence on their faith formation. To achieve this, a descriptive qualitative design was employed. This approach is ideal for gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context (San Beda University - IBED). The participants were pupils from Grades 4 to 6 of the Integrated Basic Education Department (IBED), selected through convenience sampling. This was based on the pupils' availability and willingness to participate, as recommended by the Christian Living teachers for Grades 4-6. The final sample of fifty (50) pupils was identified by the subject teachers who had been exposed to Benedictine Spirituality lessons, obtained parental consent, and matched the total approved by the Office of the Principal. It was considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation.

The research adhered to strict ethical protocols. First, approval was obtained from the IBED principal. Following this, informed parental consent was obtained for each participant, and pupil assent was also secured, with the explanation of the study's purpose and its voluntary nature. Data was then collected over two weeks using an open-ended questionnaire administered via MS Forms. This instrument was divided into four parts: (1) Respondent Profile, (2) Perceptions of Benedictine Monks, (3) Understanding of the Benedictine Vocation, and (4) Reflections on Benedictine Spirituality. To ensure confidentiality, all responses were anonymized, and all collected data were stored securely on a password-protected computer accessible only to the teacher-researcher.

The qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This systematic process involved (1) data familiarization (repeatedly reading responses), (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The analysis was specifically structured to explore the three key objectives of the study: the pupils' perceptions of the monks, their understanding of the Benedictine vocation, and their personal reflections on Benedictine spirituality.

Results/Findings

The results and analysis of the data are presented below.

Pupils’ demographic profiles

Table 1. Profile of Pupil-Respondents according to Demographic Variables

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Year Level		
Grade 4	24	48
Grade 5	14	28
Grade 6	12	24
Total	50	100
Gender		
Male	27	54
Female	23	46
Total	50	100
Religious Club Membership		
Yes	19	38
No	31	62
Total	50	100
Religious Relative		
Yes	15	30
No	35	70
Total	50	100
Considering Religious Life		
Yes	26	52
No	24	48
Total	50	100

Following the survey conducted among 50 respondents from Grades 4 to 6, the data reveal a diverse distribution across levels, genders, and religious interests. Most respondents were in Grade 4 (48%), followed by Grade 5 (28%), and Grade 6 (24%). A slightly higher proportion was male (54%) than female (46%). The majority (62%) were not members of religious clubs, and only 30% had relatives in religious life. Despite this, 52% expressed openness to considering a religious vocation in the future.

The Views of the Bedan Pupils on Benedictine Monks

Table 2. Pupil-Respondents’ on Benedictine Identity

Exploring Perceptions of Benedictine Monks	
When you hear the words “Benedictine Monk,” what are the first things that come to your mind? Write down as many things as you can think of.	Conceptualization of Benedictine Monks: Pupils associate Benedictine monks with prayer, devotion, discipline, and a deep connection to God.
Imagine you are telling a friend about a Benedictine Monk. How would you describe what they do every day?	Daily Activities: Pupils describe monks’ daily activities as centered around prayer, teaching, community service, and maintaining discipline.

What do you think are the most important things that a Benedictine Monk should be good at?	Important Skills: Pupils believe monks should be good at prayer, obedience, discipline, teaching, and helping others.
Where do you think Benedictine Monks live? What do they do in that place?	Living Arrangements: Pupils understand that monks live in monasteries or abbeys, where they follow a structured routine of prayer and work.
Do you think Benedictine Monks talk to people who are not monks? How do you think they do that?	Community Interaction: Pupils believe that monks interact with non-monks through teaching, guidance, and community service, emphasizing the importance of hospitality and mutual respect.
Have you ever met a Benedictine Monk or heard stories about them? If yes, please tell me about it.	Personal Encounters: Some pupils have met monks or heard stories about them, describing them as kind, humble, and dedicated.
What do you think are the good things about being a Benedictine Monk? What do you think are the hardest things?	Benefits and Challenges: Pupils identify benefits such as closeness to God and a peaceful life, as well as challenges like strict rules and separation from their families.
What do you think about the spiritual life of a Benedictine Monk? (Like, how they believe in God)	Spiritual Life: Pupils acknowledge monks' deep faith and daily devotion to prayer and worship.
How do you think Benedictine Monks learn about God and the Bible?	Learning About God: Pupils believe monks learn about God through reading scriptures, studying the Bible, and participating in communal prayers.
How do you think Benedictine Monks help other people?	Helping Others: Pupils mention that monks help others by teaching about God, offering spiritual guidance, and providing community service.

Pupils described Benedictine monks as “holy,” “prayerful,” “disciplined,” and “close to God.” One participant wrote, “They pray a lot and teach students to be kind.” Another shared, “They follow rules and help others like Saint Benedict.” Such remarks highlight a perception of monks as moral and spiritual exemplars who live meaningful yet straightforward lives. When asked about monks’ daily activities, pupils associated them with prayer, teaching, community service, and disciplined living. Their responses demonstrate familiarity with the Benedictine motto “*Ora et Labora*” (prayer and work).

The Understanding of the Bedan Pupils of Benedictine Vocation

Table 3. Student-Respondents on Benedictine Vocation

Understanding of the Benedictine Vocation	
If someone decides to become a Benedictine Monk, what do you think will happen to them?	Lifetime Commitment: Pupils believe that becoming a monk involves a lifelong commitment to prayer, work, and community service, leading to spiritual transformation.

How do you think a person’s life changes when they become a Benedictine Monk?	Lifestyle Changes: Pupils think that a person’s life changes significantly when they become a monk, with deeper faith and a structured routine
Why do you think some people choose to become Benedictine Monks?	Motivation: Pupils believe individuals choose to become monks due to a calling from God, a desire to serve, and the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment.
What do you know about the promises that monks make?	Vows and Commitments: Pupils recognize the vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, understanding the solemn commitments made by monks.
How do you think a person’s family and friends feel when they become a monk?	Family and Friends’ Feelings: Pupils think that family and friends may feel both proud and sad due to limited contact with the monk.

When asked why someone might become a Benedictine monk, pupils frequently mentioned “God’s calling” and “wanting to serve and pray.” They also recognized the vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, viewing them as signs of total dedication to the religious life. One pupil reflected, “They give their whole life to God and follow His rules every day.”

The Reflection of the Bedan Pupils on Benedictine Spirituality

Table 4. Pupils-Respondents on Benedictine Spirituality

Reflecting on Benedictine Spirituality	
Imagine you are talking to a friend who is thinking about becoming a Benedictine Monk. What advice would you give them?	Advice to Friends: Pupils would encourage their friends to pray, seek guidance, and prepare for the commitment involved in becoming monks.
What questions do you have about Benedictine Monks or their way of life?	The pupils expressed curiosity about various aspects of monastic life, including the monks’ daily routines, interactions with non-monastics, and the challenges they faced. Questions like “What do monks do for fun?” and “How do they know if God is calling them?” reflect a desire to understand the practical and spiritual dimensions of monastic life.
Write a short story or draw a picture about a day in the life of a Benedictine Monk.	The pupils interpreted the monks’ daily lives as a prayerful schedule balanced with productive work in the monastery and school. Other pupils drew pictures of Buddhist monks as illustrated below.



In reflecting on Benedictine spirituality, pupils offered advice such as “pray always,” “listen to God,” and “be ready to serve.” Some expressed curiosity about practical aspects of monastic life, asking questions like, “What do monks do for fun?” and “How do they know if God is calling them?” These inquiries reveal both wonder and a search for concrete understanding, typical of children’s faith at the imaginative, inquiry stage. A few pupils’ drawings also depicted monks at prayer or working in gardens. In contrast, others mistakenly depicted Buddhist monks.

Discussions

The demographic data indicate that younger pupils, particularly those in Grade 4, were the most represented in the study. Their early formative stage, as highlighted by Clements and Bullivant (2022), is a critical period for the development of religious and spiritual formation. Exposure to religious teachings and figures during this time can shape their initial understanding of vocation and religious life. Balanced gender participation, with a slight male majority, may influence how children interpret the roles of religious figures, particularly the distinct roles of male and female figures, such as monks, nuns, and priests (Conway et al., 2023). Gender identity may also influence how pupils envision themselves in religious life. The low participation in religious clubs and religious life may reflect the limited exposure of pupils to structured religious activities that could nurture spiritual interest. Paul and Wa-Mbaleka (2023) emphasize that involvement in church youth groups contributes significantly to spiritual growth and a sense of vocation, and the lack thereof may hinder such development. Moreover, this also suggests that most children may lack direct family role models in religious life. However, studies by Pusztai and Rosta (2023) and Conway et al. (2023) show that having religious relatives can significantly reinforce young people’s spiritual values, norms, and vocational inspiration. Despite limited direct influence from religious clubs or relatives, the data indicate a strong

inclination toward exploring religious life. This supports findings from studies such as those by Julia et al. (2022) and Bustamante (2023), which underline the important role of school-based religious education and spirituality in shaping students' perceptions and openness to religious vocations.

Pupils' descriptions of monks as "holy," "prayerful," and "disciplined" reflect an understanding of Benedictine life as centered on spirituality and service. Their familiarity with "*Ora et Labora*" suggests that school-based exposure effectively conveys core Benedictine values. This finding aligns with the views of Sant'Anselmo (2018) and Newman (2022), who suggest that Benedictine monks serve as "living catechesis" – visible signs of contemplative presence and service within educational settings. Children's perceptions, therefore, reflect not only cognitive understanding but also affective admiration, consistent with Fowler's (1981) Stage 2: Mythic–Literal Faith, where religious figures become concrete moral role models in a child's developing faith.

Responses on vocation highlight pupils' recognition of divine calling and commitment. Their responses mirror elements of vocational formation outlined in Church documents such as *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), which emphasizes nurturing faith that matures into service. From a developmental lens, this aligns with Loder's (1998) theory of the transforming moment, where faith encounters stimulate the reorganization of a young person's worldview toward purpose and transcendence. For religious educators, these insights underscore the importance of creating formative spaces where students can explore their calling and purpose beyond cognitive instruction – through reflection, prayer, and firsthand experiences of religious life.

Reflections on Benedictine spirituality emphasize prayer and service but also show misconceptions, such as confusing Benedictine monks with Buddhist monks. This suggests that while the concept of "monk" is understood, denominational distinctions require reinforcement. This underscores the pedagogical challenge of connecting abstract spirituality with familiar experiences, as observed by Tambunan and Simbolon (2023).

Overall, these reflections show that, as pupils see it, Benedictine spirituality is marked by prayer, service, and simplicity. These values are deeply rooted in the Rule of Saint Benedict. For monastic schools, this requires intentional teaching methods that reflect Benedictine presence in ways accessible to children, such as storytelling, guided visits to monastic spaces, and teachers demonstrating faith in action.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the youthful demographic has varied experiences and perspectives toward religious life. Despite low membership in religious clubs and fewer family ties to religious roles, the relatively high interest in considering religious vocations may reflect the influence of faith formation programs within the school setting.

Most pupils associate Benedictine monks with a life deeply rooted in religious and spiritual practices. They describe monks as prayerful, disciplined, and dedicated to their faith. Terms like "holy," "devoted," and "prayerful" frequently appear in their responses. Furthermore, many pupils acknowledge the significant commitment and sacrifice required to become a Benedictine monk. They mention the vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, highlighting the transformative nature of this vocation.

However, the pupils express curiosity about various aspects of monastic life, including the monks' daily routines, interactions with non-monks, and the challenges they face. Questions like "What do monks do for fun?" and "How do they know if God is calling them?" reflect a desire to understand the practical and spiritual dimensions of monastic life. However, a few draw a wrong interpretation of what Benedictine monks are. Concurrently, the study reveals that pupils view the priest as a servant leader who models Christ's compassion and strengthens the faith community. These insights can inform vocation-promotion strategies and guide the design of religious curricula that foster a deeper appreciation for priestly and spiritual vocations.

Based on the above findings and conclusions, several key recommendations are suggested. First, the Benedictine Spirituality topics in the Christian Living subject should be expanded to include more information on how Benedictine monks live their lives in modern times. This can help pupils relate better to the monks' practices and understand their relevance in today's world.

Second, the visibility of Benedictine monks on campus should be increased. Encourage more visibility of Benedictine monks on campus so pupils can interact with them. This can include regular visits, participation in school activities, and informal discussions. Third, organizing an Annual Abbey Tours for all pupils interested in seeing the monastery's beauty and gaining a deeper understanding of Benedictine life. This can be a valuable experiential learning opportunity.

Furthermore, introducing vocational talks at the elementary level helps students understand the path to a religious vocation early on. These talks can inspire students and guide them in pursuing a spiritual calling. Finally, for future research, the study should be expanded to include a wider range of respondents, such as students from public schools and other institutions. This can provide a broader perspective on students' perceptions of Benedictine monks and improve the findings. Future studies could also compare students from Benedictine and non-Benedictine schools to see how institutional charisms influence students' views on vocation. Additionally, including teachers and parents as participants could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the school's role in vocational awareness and development.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

The researcher used Grammarly (2009) to enhance grammar, and Gemini AI (2024) assisted in organizing and interpreting the data for this research study. These tools supported the researcher in maintaining coherence, academic rigor, and efficiency throughout the research process.

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