

Rethinking the Work of Theologians in the Pandemic's Wake

KATHRYN LILLA COX¹ AND JASON KING²

¹University of San Diego, USA and ²Saint Vincent College, USA
klillacox@sandiego.edu; and jason.king@stvincent.edu

This article focuses on what the pandemic reveals about theological work in the academy and imagines a way forward. Too often, theologians are ground down, isolated workers, overworked, and strapped for time. They constantly must choose between progress in the guild and their familial and communal relationships. This false choice starves theologians of meaning and purpose, and, in such scarcity, inflames pursuit of status. However, a communal conception of theological academic work could mitigate some of these frictions. To imagine this possibility, we draw upon our collective experiences of working in Benedictine institutions that also argue for communal approaches to living, learning, and experiencing God. We draw ideas from the Rule of Benedict as a model for life-giving community that we think can be resituated in academic life.

Keywords: global pandemic, COVID-19, Rule of Saint Benedict, work, labor, theology

FALLOUT from the 2008 financial crisis included poorer working conditions for those who had jobs. People who lost jobs as markets dipped often found, when they tried to return to work, fewer opportunities and even fewer employers taking chances on the unemployed. The recovery was slow. Employed people took on increased work, even as wages stagnated. The gig economy expanded as many took on additional jobs or stitched together several jobs to make a living. As working conditions worsened,

*Kathryn Lilla Cox is a research associate at the University of San Diego. She enjoys spending time with her spouse, seeing family, cooking, and reading poetry. She authored *Water Shaping Stone: Faith, Relationships, and Conscience Formation* (Liturgical Press, 2015). Her research bridges fundamental moral theology, human cognition studies, and social ethics.*

*Jason King is Irene S. Taylor is Endowed Chair for Catholic Family Studies at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Faith with Benefits: Hookup Culture on Catholic Campuses* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and coedited *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives* (Liturgical Press, 2020) with Julie Rubio.*

Competing interests: The authors declare none.

people worked more hours and were essentially paid less since wages stayed flat.

Shutting down segments of the U.S. economy in the early months of 2020 because of the COVID-19 global pandemic further complicated this situation. Initially countless people lost their jobs, with unemployment rates reaching 15 percent overall, even higher for African Americans and Hispanics.¹ Although the job losses were anticipated as a result of the public health measures, what followed in the workforce was not. Even after the shutdown when segments of the US economy reopened and increased unemployment benefits tapered off, people still did not return to jobs. This phenomenon has been called “The Great Resignation.”² Reasons vary for staying out of the workforce. For some people, the demands of the workplace were too high.³ Fewer people in the workforce meant that remaining workers have had to work more.⁴ People feared both getting COVID and coworkers who disbelieved in COVID or resisted mitigation protocols. Old jobs were not replaced but transformed, so people were expected to reapply for jobs or learn new skills.⁵ Many people had responsibilities that transcended the need for a job. It was a situation that hit women particularly hard.⁶ They cared for children while schools were remote, daycares closed, and vaccines were not available to those younger than twelve. Often, women also had to care for elderly parents or other relatives who were highly vulnerable to COVID. Other people with paying jobs found themselves without childcare as relatives fell sick with or died from COVID. Others found themselves thrust into the role of caregiver for the same reasons. Still others just felt that patching

¹ Heather Long and Andrew Van Dam, “U.S. Unemployment Rate Soars to 14.7 Percent, the Worst since the Depression Era,” *Washington Post*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/08/april-2020-jobs-report/>.

² Karla Miller, “‘Micromanaged and Disrespected’: Top Reasons Workers Are Quitting Their Jobs in ‘The Great Resignation,’” *Washington Post*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/10/07/top-reasons-great-resignation-workers-quitting/>.

³ Lauren Jackson, “Why Aren’t People Going Back to Their Jobs?” *New York Times*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/podcasts/jobs-report-labor-shortage.html>.

⁴ John Fernald, Huiyu Li, and Mitchell Ochse, “Labor Productivity in a Pandemic,” *FRBSF Economic Letter*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/files/el2021-22.pdf>.

⁵ Kathryn Edwards, “Job Openings Are at a Record High. Why Aren’t People Going Back to Work?” *Rand Blog*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/08/job-openings-are-at-a-record-high-why-arent-people.html>.

⁶ Olivia Lofton, Nicolas Petrosky-Nadeau, and Lily Seitelman, “Parents in a Pandemic Labor Market,” *Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco*, February 2021, <https://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/files/wp2021-04.pdf>.

together three or four jobs to make a living was ridiculous and not worth it. Many started their own businesses.⁷ Lots of people retired.⁸ Many rethought the work that they want to do.⁹ These trends and effects continued into 2022.

The academy has also felt many of these effects. Students are stressed by all the changes, both academic and social. Meanwhile, many of these changes have exacerbated mental health stresses and disparities caused by race, gender, and class.¹⁰ Demands on professors' time have increased as they have had to adapt to online and hybrid pedagogies. It was already difficult trying to be a parent and a professor. The pandemic increased this difficulty as professors had to keep working while also caring for children who were home.¹¹ These dynamics had the greatest effects on female academics.¹² Even as schools adapt to the current conditions, wages have barely risen, and with declining revenue because of the pandemic, this stagnation seems likely to continue.¹³ Cultural forces have put academia in the crosshairs, and faculty have become targets.¹⁴ Contingent faculty use by administrators has been on the rise for years. These faculty piece together wages from several different gigs, and the pandemic seems to have caused many of

⁷ Ben Casselman, "Start-Up Boom in the Pandemic is Growing Stronger," *New York Times*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/19/business/startup-business-creation-pandemic.html>.

⁸ Juliana Kaplan, "Only Half of the People Who Lost Jobs During COVID Are Going Back to Work," *Business Insider*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/only-half-people-lost-jobs-during-covid-going-back-work-2021-9>.

⁹ Madison Hoff, "Resignation for a Year, and It's Making Them Rethink Their Careers," *Business Insider*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/workers-rethinking-jobs-careers-due-to-great-resignation-comparably-survey-2022-2>.

¹⁰ Chronicle of Higher Education, *Mental Well-Being in the COVID Era: Students Are Struggling. How are Colleges Trying to Help?*, <https://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/CampusWellBeingInTheCovidEra.pdf>.

¹¹ Maggie Doherty, "The Quiet Crisis of Parents on the Tenure Track," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-quiet-crisis-of-parents-on-the-tenure-track>.

¹² Liz McMillen, "The Pandemic Hit Female Academics Hardest," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-pandemic-hit-female-academics-hardest>.

¹³ Isha Trivedi, "Faculty-Pay Survey Records the Largest One-Year Drop Ever," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/faculty-pay-survey-records-the-largest-one-year-drop-ever>.

¹⁴ Brendan Cantwell, "The Culture War Has Come for Higher Ed," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-culture-war-has-come-for-higher-ed>; Jack Stripling, "How Chapel Hill Bungled a Star Hire," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-chapel-hill-bungled-a-star-hire>.

these part-time opportunities to disappear.¹⁵ These forces were already impacting academic work, but the pandemic exacerbated them.¹⁶

Many in Catholic theology have felt these same forces. Numerous faculty members have experienced increasing demands upon their time at work, constraining availability for relationships with peers and family. The discipline of theology differs slightly from other disciplines that address human dignity, respect of persons, and just labor in that theology grounds these values in the norms and practices of love of God and neighbor. Theologians doing this work almost inevitably are drawn to these topics as the ideas shape their lives and their lives shape their ideas. Theological work as an academic discipline necessitates that theologians adhere to professional academic standards for teaching, research, and publication, along with service to their institutions and professional guilds. Yet, theology is more than a field of study about what people say about God and professional standards. Theology begins with individuals' and communities' relationships with God. Theological work seeks to know who God is and how people experience God's relationship with them—individually, communally, and all of creation. The goal is faith seeking understanding not for head knowledge but to know and seek God in community with implications for living life. In short, theology considers the work of God.¹⁷

This article focuses on what the pandemic reveals about current dynamics of theological work in the academy and imagines a way forward. Too often, theologians are ground down, isolated workers, overworked and strapped for time. They constantly must choose between progress in the guild and their familial and communal relationships. This false choice starves

¹⁵ Audrey Williams June and Brian O'Leary, "3 Things New Federal Data Reveal About How Colleges Fared During the Pandemic," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/3-things-new-federal-data-reveal-about-how-colleges-fared-during-the-pandemic>.

¹⁶ Jason King, Andrew Herr, and Julia Cavallo, "The Pandemic, Contingent Faculty, and Catholic Colleges and Universities." *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* 6, no. 1 (2022), digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/alra/vol6/iss1/6/.

¹⁷ Columba Stewart, OSB, says that the work of God for Benedict "is the daily series of communal liturgical gatherings," which is also the "backbone of Benedictine prayer." He also says, "The work of God is the time and place of mindfulness of God par excellence; to miss it is to miss a precious opportunity of encounter with the One who is sought through the monastic way of life." See Columba Stewart, OSB, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 32–33. See the *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:21, cf. 72.11, and 43:3. We recognize that we are not monastics and that we are adapting the Rule of Benedict (RB) for outside the monastery. However, the liturgical life for nonmonastics also includes times for communal prayer, which must be prioritized in the face of competing claims on time.

theologians of meaning and purpose and, in such scarcity, inflames the pursuit of status. If we try to reimagine theological work along communal lines, however, some of these pressures and false choices could be lessened. A communal conception of theological academic work requires a realistic assessment of both difficulties and avenues for growth. We think that theological education can be humane, life-giving work that builds up the community and values the contributions of all.¹⁸

To imagine this possibility, we draw upon our experiences of working in Benedictine institutions. Although Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has much to say on labor and work, Benedictine spirituality has a particular advantage with respect to the issues we seek to address. The Rule of Benedict (RB) anchors work in community and the spiritual life. Drawing upon this conception, academic work can be thought of in relational terms and in the context of the college or university community. Academic work can be reimagined so that it is not life-destroying but life-giving. We draw on RB's description of work and community as a model that can be applied analogically to academic life.¹⁹

We proceed in two movements.²⁰ First, we give a descriptive analysis of the broader frictions within academia that affect how we as theologians seek to foster a love of learning and a desire for God. These frictions include not having enough time, devaluing relationships, and pursuing status. Then, we turn to RB to look at how it understands work in community life and how it can be applied analogously to academic life. In response to the frictions of academic life, we look at how time in RB constrains work, how

¹⁸ Benedictine Columba Stewart discusses why the communal dimension remains important for self-awareness, accountability, and growth in one's relationship with God, self, and others. He points out that RB does not cover all difficulties within communities. Yet, Stewart argues that Benedict provides insights into what is needed for healthy communities. See Stewart, *Prayer and Community*, 94–95.

¹⁹ We are not unique in considering how to resituate practices and values from RB outside of a monastic setting. By drawing upon RB, we are following Benedictine Columba Stewart's advice that "in thinking of Benedictine monasticism as a message for all Christians, we need to start with the *Rule*. It is the common ground of everyone and everything in the monastery, for all alike, from superior to novice, regard them as the norm for community life. This obvious point is often seen best by Benedictine oblates, who live without the complex customs, structures, and policies which govern monastic communities." Stewart, *Prayer and Community*, 117–18.

²⁰ The language of movements rather than sections signifies that although we offer diagnoses, narrative examples, and suggestive possibilities for community building practices, we acknowledge that there is a dynamism to the work undertaken. As RB indicates, there remains a need to begin again, to see connections that are intertwined and recursive rather than linear. The language of movements attempts to capture this lived reality.

relationships should be rooted in seeing Christ in others, and how status is rooted in God loving us.²¹ We hope to sketch some ways in which our work as theologians can foster the love of learning and a desire for God as a community of laborers in God's vineyard.

Academic Reality and Frictions of Theological Work

In *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Willie James Jennings argues that theological education presumes and thereby promotes an ideal scholar as a stoic, single, white male. This "ideal scholar" is a norm that distorts humanity for everyone, including white men, and so generates a distorted and often death-dealing theology.²² This "ideal scholar" also pushes academic life toward isolation and individual projects and successes. It emphasizes "what" we do, "what" we have accomplished, over the "how" and "why" we do our theological work. It distorts theological work, neglecting the inherently communal nature of humanity's encounter with God.²³ It often drains theologians of the desire for God and weakens their commitment to students. These forces affecting theology are manifested in several ways. Here, we focus on three concerns that seem not only pervasive but were exacerbated by the pandemic: not enough time, devaluing relationships, and pursuing status.²⁴

²¹ In using the language of constraining work, we are not challenging the good of labor but noting that it has limits. We are using the word to note the issue in the academy and so are not restricting ourselves to the vocabulary of RB, which is concerned with monastic settings as such.

²² Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2020).

²³ Communal theology will have various manifestations. For theologians advocating for communal theology, see Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), and Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018). See also the work of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, <https://blackcatholictheologicalsymposium.org/>, and the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States, <https://achtus.us>, as guilds of scholars.

²⁴ The phrase "not enough time" is shorthand for the reality that the pandemic increased labor demands both at work and home, while the number of hours in the day does not change. Academics needed and continue to make trade-offs regarding sleep, relationships, and the demands and expectations of their work. Questions about our worth and value are personal in how we perceive ourselves and contributions to the communal endeavor of theology in the church. Questions are communal both ecclesially and in the academy since theology as a humanitarian discipline is scrutinized for its value and worth in broader institutional considerations.

Not Enough Time

Perhaps the most obvious friction point is the constraints upon time. Rita Fontinha, Easton, and Van Laar note that demands on academics have been increasing for the past twenty years.²⁵ They indicate that the market emphasis on productivity has fed into this increase and, concomitantly, an increase in stress levels among academics. The increase in demands for productivity touches all three areas of academic life: teaching, research, and service.²⁶ As demands to produce more scholarship in a shorter period of time increases, other goods are ignored, diminished, and devalued. When this scholarly productivity is combined with the demands to develop excellence in teaching and to serve departments, schools, societies, and students, even more goods are sacrificed. Theologians have less time for their own spiritual, physical, mental, and relationship needs. There is less time for the very things that remind them that they are human beings with value beyond what they produce in their work lives.

This trend in the academy is part of the larger movement of work into daily life. John Malesic notes that modern work has changed to become expansive, abstract, and precarious.²⁷ It takes over more of one's life, utilizes less and less of one's creativity, and fails to provide the security that work should provide.²⁸ Malesic notes that work has increasingly consumed more of people's time for at least the last forty years.²⁹ The development of technology, even before today's Zoom world, contributed to more work flooding into home life. As Malesic writes, "The boundary between work and home has become more permeable."³⁰

Expanded work and increasing expectations cannibalize time and cause problems in professors' lives. In 2014, Monica Coleman drew on the experiences of African American females to discuss how dehumanizing the demands of work can be. Coleman quotes African American biblical scholar Renita Weems' account of becoming a mother while working toward tenure.

²⁵ Rita Fontinha, Simon Easton, and Darren Van Laar, "Overtime and Quality of Working Life in Academics and Nonacademics: The Role of Perceived Work-Life Balance," *International Journal of Stress Management* 26.2 (2019): 173–83, at 173.

²⁶ Fontinha, Easton, and Van Laar, "Overtime and Quality of Working Life in Academics and Nonacademics," 175.

²⁷ John Malesic, "Nothing Is to Be Preferred to the Work of God': Cultivating Monastic Detachment for a Postindustrial Work Ethic," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35, no. 1 (2015): 45–61, esp. 48.

²⁸ Malesic, "Nothing to Be Preferred to the Work of God," 45.

²⁹ Malesic, "Nothing to Be Preferred to the Work of God," 46.

³⁰ Malesic, "Nothing to Be Preferred to the Work of God," 47.

Within six months, having a baby had wreaked havoc on my professional life, draining me of the energies and time I needed to think and to read. With only two or three hours a night of sleep, it became difficult to sit for hours concentrating on an idea, sniffing out a subject, walking back and forth around a thought, and trying to chase down a hunch. With the increasing demands of motherhood and the mounting pressures in those early years of a pending tenure review, I felt as if I was being torn apart, dismantled, put back together again (but never in a way that felt right to me), only to be left ripped up in the end and left in a heap. Having a baby crying in the bassinet next to my bed, nursing every three hours, changing diapers every other minute, changing and washing the same clothes all day, with a growing accumulation of baby stuff crowding my space, and having simultaneously to put the final touches on a book and to keep up with class lectures, I was often tottering on the edge.³¹

This brief narrative shows how academic work's expansion erodes time for other aspects of life. In attempting to be both a mother to a newborn with intensive needs and a tenure-track academic, Weems sacrificed her physical and mental health.³² The lack of sleep and time kept Weems "tottering on the edge." While, for Christians, the Bible is to lead to the fullness of life, the demands of tenure meant that biblical studies led to being "torn apart" and "dismantled." As such, Weems' story becomes a paradigmatic narrative for how academic life distorts a more humane approach to time. People, particularly those who take on familial responsibilities, require periods of focus and attention not related to academic work. Yet, academic life and the tenure process present time requirements that work against a more humane approach.

The pandemic exacerbated the problems with time for many people. When campuses closed and classes went online, faculty had to adopt new, technology driven pedagogies, requiring increased use of learning management systems and related software. Zoom use exploded.³³ Far from making life easier, Zoom required faculty to develop new capacities and new focus

³¹ Monica Coleman, "Sacrifice, Surrogacy and Salvation: Womanist Reflections on Motherhood," *Black Theology* 12, no. 3 (2014): 200–12, esp. 207.

³² White feminist Elizabeth T. Vasko provides another perspective on this tension of trying to be both mother and academic in her article critiquing the notion of "good" and "bad" mothers. See Elizabeth Vasko, "Bad Mothers, Mad Mothers: Resisting the Theo-Logic of Stigma and Embracing Grace as Dis-ease," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2017): 141–59.

³³ Natalie Sherman, "Zoom Sees Sales Boom amid Pandemic," *BBC News*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52884782>.

while it drained more of faculties' energy.³⁴ Meetings could be scheduled back to back because there was no need to account for people's movement between physical spaces. Moreover, the shutting down of campuses meant this online teaching was done at home, accelerating the expansion of work into personal lives. With schools and childcare facilities closed, the juggling of childcare and teaching that many academics already did became exponentially more difficult. Because women often take on these parenting responsibilities, it is unsurprising that the number of women submitting articles to academic journals declined during the pandemic.³⁵

Together, these realities point to the ways in which our approach to time constrains academic activities, creates friction for life, and makes it difficult to do theology that is life-giving. The time that academic work demands, including theological academic work, expands. It encroaches upon our home lives because technology enables work's intrusion, and nothing institutionally or structurally mitigates the prioritization of work over all else. Academic work expands in ways that exclude our relationships and well-being. There was not enough time before the pandemic, and now there is less.

Devaluing Relationships

In addition to constraints upon time, theological work as it is currently practiced often devalues relational aspects of its laborers. Rowanne Sarojini Marie, in discussing a theology of work, points to the ways in which work becomes isolating, especially for women.³⁶ Work becomes more isolating as it is removed from its communal and familial contexts.³⁷ As work becomes more associated with jobs and money, the unpaid work people do in their homes, in society for the common good, and for families is devalued. Even more so, CST's perspective that work should entail cocreating with God is lost.³⁸ Faith and the cocreative perspective about work feel like they have little to do with work in the minds of most Christians.³⁹ It is a feeling

³⁴ See, for example, Jeremy N. Bailenson, "Nonverbal Overload: A Theoretical Argument for the Causes of Zoom Fatigue," *Technology, Mind, and Behavior* 2, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb0000030>.

³⁵ See Andrea R. Jain, "An Update on Journal Publishing and a Plea for our Discipline in the Time of Pandemic," *American Academy of Religion*, 2020, <https://www.aarweb.org/AARMBR/AARMBR/Publications-and-News-/Newsroom-/News-/Journal-Publishing-Plea.aspx>. Jain is editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

³⁶ Rowanne Sarojini Marie, "Toward a Gendered Theology of Work," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 149 (2014): 126–41.

³⁷ Marie, "Toward a Gendered Theology of Work," 134.

³⁸ Marie, "Toward a Gendered Theology of Work," 127–28, 131–32.

³⁹ Marie, "Toward a Gendered Theology of Work," 132.

particularly strong in women, according to Marie, who see their familial and ecclesial relationships in competition with the demands of their profession.⁴⁰

In academia, theological work (teaching, researching, and service) is often similarly structured and so leaves important aspects of theologians' humanity out of the profession. The work done teaching and researching is readily seen in competition with the work done for families and communities. Service—which is often for the sake of students and colleagues—is often undervalued even as it is required for tenure and promotion. Women, especially women of color, do more service at colleges. The same is true for transgender and non-binary faculty. As Lissa Hanasono et al. write:

Cis men tend to pursue more leadership roles like committee chairs and editorships, whereas cis women tend to perform important yet less institutionally recognized forms of service like mentoring, committee work, emotional labor (i.e., regulating one's feelings and exerting extra energy to attend to others' emotional states), maintaining a positive work climate, and record keeping. Faculty of color—especially women of color—tend to perform more service labor than their White colleagues, and institutions of higher education frequently overlook the extra service demands and work of trans faculty and nonbinary people such as recruiting and mentoring minoritized students, advising student organizations that focus on social justice issues, and serving on committees and university task forces related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.⁴¹

As this indicates, certain types of service performed by faculty work are less recognized, acknowledged, and accounted for in a person's workload. The overlooked forms of service tend to focus on the community and the needs of students. These relational aspects of the profession are often held to be of marginal importance, which is exacerbated by a focus on individual teaching and scholarly accomplishments.

The pandemic strengthened these trends and so simultaneously overwhelmed faculty and isolated them. In “‘On the Verge of Burnout’: COVID-19’s Impact on Faculty Well-Being and Career Plans,” the *Chronicle of Higher Education* surveyed more than a thousand faculty members on the consequences of COVID-19 on their lives.⁴² The report noted a vast increase

⁴⁰ Marie, “Toward a Gendered Theology of Work,” 133.

⁴¹ Lisa Hanasono et al., “Secret Service: Revealing Gender Biases in the Visibility and Value of Faculty Service,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 12, no. 1 (2019): 85–98, esp. 85–86.

⁴² *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “‘On the Verge of Burnout’: COVID-19’s Impact on Faculty Well-Being and Career Plans,” October 2020, https://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/Covid%26FacultyCareerPaths_Fidelity_ResearchBrief_v3%20%281%29.pdf, 4.

in workload between learning new technologies and pedagogies, an added complexity in completing research projects, and additional insecurity because of financial exigencies. The result was that faculty felt “high levels of stress, hopelessness, anger, and grief.”⁴³ Faculty work-life balance disintegrated as work expanded and moved into the home. This overwhelming expansion of work made faculty feel more isolated. They lacked “human connection” with students and colleagues. Faculty—especially “women, Black, brown, gay, nonbinary and disabled faculty members”—were also embedded in more vulnerable communities and so experienced loss because of COVID-19 deaths.⁴⁴

In her 2020 Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) presentation, Natalia Imperatori-Lee captured this feeling of isolation among Catholic theologians.⁴⁵ She wrote, “One year of pandemic and isolation, of loss and polarization and uprisings and death has left many of us numb. We feel nothing. We want to do nothing.”⁴⁶ In the midst of being overworked, theologians feel cut off from their peers, isolated from students, and struggling with their familial relationships. She warned that as theologians become separated from their “daily struggles, [their] *lucha* and [do not] theologize out of these contexts,” they become separated from the God who is found in these human relationships.⁴⁷

Pursuit of Status

Li-fang Zhang explores professors’ attachments to places of employment by examining how emotions in teaching affect organizational commitment.⁴⁸ She notes that when faculty feel positive about their place of employment, often measured by how their peers perceive their work, they feel strongly committed to their place of employment.⁴⁹ However, when faculty do not feel valued, their commitment changes. They begin to feel that work is just for pragmatic considerations, like paying bills or job security. Others feel like they have no other choice but to stay because they cannot find

⁴³ *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “On the Verge of Burnout,” 5.

⁴⁴ *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “On the Verge of Burnout,” 4–6.

⁴⁵ Natalia Imperatori-Lee, “Dispatches from the Wasteland,” *CTSA Proceedings* 75 (2021): 32–36.

⁴⁶ Imperatori-Lee, “Dispatches from the Wasteland,” 36.

⁴⁷ Imperatori-Lee, “Dispatches from the Wasteland,” 36.

⁴⁸ Li-fang Zhang, “Do Academics’ Emotions in Teaching Affect Their Organizational Commitment?,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 111, no. 7 (2019): 1317–330.

⁴⁹ Zhang, “Do Academics’ Emotions in Teaching Affect Their Organizational Commitment?,” 1320.

other work.⁵⁰ These responses are “largely maladaptive.”⁵¹ Faculty tend to become more passive in their work and scholarship, “adopting norm-conforming intellectual styles.”⁵² In other words, without some sense of value, faculty come to see themselves not as educators or scholars but as placeholders.

There is, however, a downside to feeling positive about a place of employment. The sense of value in academia primarily comes from status conferred by colleagues and peers. John Hamilton notes that there are three typical reward systems in workplaces: money, career advancement, and status.⁵³ For faculty, money and career advancement are often limited. Faculty have very little influence over their pay, with raises usually restricted to times of promotion and the annual cost of living adjustment.⁵⁴ Career advancement within an institution is also limited. While faculty labor for an institution (working long hours, handling numerous administrative tasks) and making sacrifices to do so—being given little extra pay, feedback, and academic support—this work rarely results in advancement within institutions.⁵⁵ Thus, the main motivation for faculty becomes status. It is why “many academics overcommit to their work, often working long hours at evenings and weekends, driven by a desire to deliver the best possible learning experience for their students.”⁵⁶ They seek to be valued by the community, to have some recognition and some status, which indicates that they make important contributions to the school.

Status is difficult to achieve.⁵⁷ Long hours dedicated to teaching, scholarship, and service with few rewards are hard to sustain. Frustration with long

⁵⁰ Zhang, “Do Academics’ Emotions in Teaching Affect Their Organizational Commitment?,” 1320.

⁵¹ Zhang, “Do Academics’ Emotions in Teaching Affect Their Organizational Commitment?,” 1320.

⁵² Zhang, “Do Academics’ Emotions in Teaching Affect Their Organizational Commitment?,” 1320.

⁵³ John Hamilton, “Cash or Kudos: Addressing the Effort-Reward Imbalance for Academic Employees,” *International Journal of Stress Management* 26, no. 2 (2019): 193–203.

⁵⁴ Hamilton, “Cash or Kudos,” 200.

⁵⁵ Hamilton, “Cash or Kudos,” 200.

⁵⁶ Hamilton, “Cash or Kudos,” 200.

⁵⁷ The academic world has structured this “difficult to achieve” status as promotion within the academy, the rankings of our theology programs and institutions, of journals and publishing houses. As theologians we signal status by creating in and out groups based upon these types of rankings. Furthermore, our personal status is telegraphed within the academy by the recounting of how many articles, book reviews, book chapters, and books we have published, as if quantity equals our value and worthwhile contribution to the theological endeavor.

hours and few rewards can manifest when faculty are excluded from discussions about the operation of an institution. Exclusion of faculty takes various forms. It appears in relationships between boards of trustees and faculty senates when boards make decisions affecting faculty without their input. Exclusion emerges when administrations make decisions to cut tenure lines and replace them with contingent faculty or eliminate programs without faculty consultation. Faculty, especially long-term faculty, are often ignored, even when they are valuable repositories of institutional memory, participate in preserving and passing on institutional mission and identity to students, and serve at institutions longer than many board members or even university presidents.

Even in Benedictine institutions that emphasize community, faculty recognition and status can be attenuated when they are viewed as “guests” of the community. In the monastery, the distinction between who is a guest (a temporary visitor with potential insight) and who is a member of the community (one who has input into and is part of communal decisions) is clearer. If this clarity is transferred over to institutions, the fluidity of belonging in a university or college is lost. If some members of the community feel like they are the “members” and others are just “guests,” the “members” feel free to act without considering the effects on the “guests” who are really community members. When the “guests” are faculty, the ability to be accepted, listened to, or valued as a community member is diminished and one avenue for status is cut off.⁵⁸

Status, as acceptance, being heard, and valued, is difficult to achieve in the theology guild too. At conferences and in articles, faculty bios focus on what people have written or what awards they have won. In faculty reviews, scholarship weighs more than teaching and service. Scholars are too often evaluated by productivity and in comparison to others. Meanwhile, theology aims to respond to people’s search for meaning, seek answers to burning questions, alleviate societal ills by drawing on the insight of faith, and foster

⁵⁸ Our argument is broader than the intentional community of RB. Although Benedictine colleges and universities are not intentional communities like a monastery or Catholic worker houses, they do have a communal dimension to them. As places of work, they have a work dimension to them. As Catholic and Benedictine, they have a religious component to them. Thus, there are insights from RB that can be analogically applied as RB speaks about ordering work, community, and spirituality. This ordering also has an advantage over Catholic Social Teaching (CST) as CST speaks less about the particular communities behind the teachings. We are attempting to bring awareness of how Benedictine insights and spirituality could help structure academic life in those institutions, in a similar manner to how Jesuit institutions think about Ignatian principles in their institutions.

relationships with God, self, and others. Yet, scholars are not judged by these criteria but by the quantity and place of their publications.

Status becomes a battle for recognition that pits theologians against one another. Every recognition of a colleague can be felt as a strike against one's status, and every criticism can diminish one's standing. Kathryn Young and her coauthors note that, in academia, microaggressions are often used to "communicate systemic valuing" and so are deployed to indicate people's position within institutions.⁵⁹ They note that there are usually three types of microaggressions. There are microinsults that demean a person, microinvalidations that nullify people's contributions, and micro-assaults that intend harm.⁶⁰ These microaggressions work on two levels, one level targeting the work faculty do and a second level targeting who people are (often based on race, gender, and sexual orientation).⁶¹ This repertoire of hostilities is deployed to establish status, building some up by cutting down others.

At least initially, the pandemic's effect on this pursuit of status was to undermine it. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* report "On the Verge of Burnout," about one-third (35 percent) of faculty considered changing jobs and another third (38 percent) considered retiring. The dynamics noted previously explain why. Learning new technologies and pedagogies for online and hybrid teaching has increased faculty work. Faculty are disconnected from students and colleagues. Scholarship slowed because of obligations to family, along with learning new pedagogical techniques and technological tools. Even if faculty still wanted to pursue status based upon prior norms, it was almost impossible in a pandemic. Such futility seems to have made faculty, more than 70 percent, rethink this pursuit in the academy.⁶²

The Rule of Benedict and the Work of Theologians

The Rule of Benedict (RB) with its emphasis on seeing Christ in all as a foundation of community can be used as a frame to understand theological work.⁶³ We believe that using RB's insights and applying them analogically

⁵⁹ Kathryn Young, Myron Anderson, and Saran Stewart, "Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 8.1 (2015): 61-71, esp. 61.

⁶⁰ Young, Anderson, and Stewart, "Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education," 63.

⁶¹ Young, Anderson, and Stewart, "Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education," 62.

⁶² *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "On the Verge of Burnout," 10-12.

⁶³ RB 53:1,7, and 15 (guests), RB 36:1 (the sick). Although RB specifically references guests, those who are poor, and the sick, there are also indications throughout the rule that lend themselves to expand the notion of seeing Christ in all. We draw attention, in particular,

to colleges and universities can mitigate the frictions of current theological work by situating it in relationships and community. As American Benedictine Joan Chittister writes, Benedictine spirituality helps us deal with broader issues and concerns such as “stewardship, relationships, authority, community, balance, work, simplicity, prayer, and spiritual and psychological development.”⁶⁴ Thus, Benedictine education is an approach to a way of life, about passing on life lessons, aiding growth in self-knowledge, living better in community, engaging more deeply the concerns of the world, and practicing love of Christ, neighbor, self, and even enemies.⁶⁵ Through such a framing, RB suggests configurations of academic life to make it more life-giving.

Time: Structuring Work

RB structures work by placing four limits on the time spent on work. The restrictions seek the good of the community by making sure necessary work is done and by limiting work so other important goods can be embodied. First, when it comes to work, RB puts parameters on work to make sure it does not overtake other activities, especially prayer.⁶⁶ Benedict sets beginning and ending times to pray, work, read, sleep, and other activities (RB 8:1–4, 41:9, and 48). When it is time to pray, one ends work even if unfinished (RB 43:1). When prayer ends, one transitions to meals, sleep, or another activity. Second, these limits on work also vary. Benedict changes prayer and work times along with their duration based upon the changing seasons. The length of day and night affects what kind of work can be done, whereas the liturgical season can shape the focus of prayer.⁶⁷ The limits are not absolutes dictating life but guides that help individuals and the community to flourish. Adaptability means these guides can be applied to the vagaries that shape

to RB 53.15, which states “Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received: our awe of the rich guarantees them special respect.”

⁶⁴ Joan Chittister, OSB, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chestnut Ridge, PA: Crossroad Publishing, 2014), xiv.

⁶⁵ RB 4:72 says to pray for one’s enemies because one loves Christ. This verse is part of a series of verses, RB 4:64–74, prefaced by RB 4:63: “Live by God’s commandments every day.” Given Benedict’s frequent allusions to scripture, it is possible that RB 4:72 is alluding to Matt. 5:44.

⁶⁶ Malesic, “Nothing to Be Preferred to the Work of God,” 51.

⁶⁷ See RB 8–11, which detail prayer schedules and scope for spring, summer, and vigil Sundays. Chapter 41 looks at the time for meals and references both liturgical and physical seasons. There is variety to how the limits are shaped.

how we live. Third, while Benedict wants monks to work, he does not want the work to be burdensome or an excessive grind. It must be done in moderation (RB 48). As RB commentator Aquinata Böckmann notes, work should not take over people's life, and it should "not crush them or drive them out" or cause people to "be ruined by work."⁶⁸ Finally, the Benedictine practice of *lectio divina* speaks to time. Abbot John Klassen of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN, defines *lectio divina* as a "call to contemplative engagement with the world of learning that is profoundly integrated."⁶⁹ It is a slow, meditative reading of texts that seeks a deeper understanding more than consumption of information. Overall, RB recognizes the importance of work and its necessity for the good of the community, but it should be done in ways that attend to people's lives and the orientation to God.

These four limits that RB places on time spent on work suggest four ways academic theology might analogously be configured. First, time limits on academic work could be set as RB limits works. Perhaps the simplest idea is ensuring that classes and meetings begin and end on time. It would set limits on what is done and honor faculty and students' other commitments. Emphasizing adhering to start and stop times reminds people in the community to see the individuals in front of them as people with lives beyond the immediate work. Starting and ending activities within the day also teaches that tasks can be stopped and returned to later. In addition, these limits could carry over to expectations beyond work hours. For example, expectations could be set around not sending or responding to emails before eight in the morning, after five in the afternoon, or during the weekends.⁷⁰ Even if these constraints were not adhered to rigidly, they will push people to be circumspect in crossing these limits. Although individuals could make these decisions, institutional support for them would expand their impact.

What would help even more would be if institutions paid a living wage. In "The Refusal of Work in Christian Ethics and Theology," Jeremy Posadas

⁶⁸ Aquinata Böckmann, "RB 48: Of the Daily Manual Labor: Part 1," *American Benedictine Review* 59, no. 2 (2008): 141–66, at 154. For example, 48.24–25 advise taking into consideration a person's health and adapting the assigned work accordingly. Likewise, RB 35:12–13 permit those serving in the kitchen to sometimes have something to eat and drink before beginning serving others. This is to mitigate grumbling and hardship, what we might call "hangry" serving today.

⁶⁹ Abbot John Klassen, "Educating in the Benedictine Context: Why It Matters," Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities Address, 3, https://98fb3d8d-5a79-4033-bcba-cf52bd80445a.filesusr.com/ugd/5f524e_9666472c36ee497ab7a4f69b36b197eb.pdf.

⁷⁰ We are advocating for a moderate limiting of email but draw the idea from Cal Newport, *A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

notes that money, or more accurately a lack of money, often makes placing limits on time difficult.⁷¹ Without a living wage, people feel pressed to take on more work.⁷² They either take on more jobs at their place of employment or take on extra jobs outside of it. In academia, it often means teaching an overload or summer classes. It can mean taking on administrative tasks for the extra job security or, maybe, a small stipend. It means teaching and research, not to mention personal lives, are sacrificed for the extra money in hopes of getting what is needed. Paying a salary where extra work is not needed would effectively constrain work time by once again giving academics more time for family, friends, leisure, prayer, and other life-giving activities.

Outside of colleges and institutions, academic conferences could become places that reflect the limits of time. Many look forward to the social and liturgical time together, finding sustenance in both intellectual engagement and prayer. Academic conferences could build in more time for conversation or longer mealtimes. Although they are typically good at adhering to stop and start times for conference sessions, they could designate times to put aside work for prayer or reflection or mindfulness, a time to “listen and attend with the ears of our hearts” (RB prol. 1).

This last point, scheduling time for prayer, should be part of our own lives. It could be arranged in a single longer block or several shorter blocks, or some other configuration that works. For Benedictines and others, returning to God as the source of all is essential for sustaining individuals and their relationships.⁷³ As theologians who hopefully have the work of God (prayer) as the well-spring for academic work, scheduling prayer time signals its importance and reminds us of the source and purpose of our theological work. As Monty Lynn suggests in “Ora et Labora: The Practice of Prayerful Teaching,” regular prayer can prevent our lives from becoming fragmented, divided into personal and professional labors that work against one another.⁷⁴

Second, as RB emphasizes adjusting work based upon the seasons, so too academic life's different “seasons” could reconfigure work. During the “seasons” when scholars have young children, there are special needs that should require a reconfiguring of time. In “Motherhood and Tenure: Can Catholic Universities Support Both?” Bridget Burke Ravizza and Karen Peterson-Iyer note how having children is often penalized in the academy,

⁷¹ Jeremy Posadas, “The Refusal of Work in Christian Ethics and Theology: Interpreting Work from an Anti-work Perspective,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 330–61.

⁷² Posadas, “The Refusal of Work in Christian Ethics and Theology,” 348.

⁷³ RB prol. 4 advises “every time you begin a good work, you must pray to [Christ] most earnestly to bring it to perfection.” Prayer is how we should start all endeavors.

⁷⁴ Monty Lynn, “Ora et Labora: The Practice of Prayerful Teaching,” *Christian Education Journal* 1, no. 3 (2004): 43–62, at 48.

exemplified in one study where no women who took maternity leave received tenure.⁷⁵ To address this problem, Ravizza and Peterson-Iyer suggest several policies, including paid parental leave, flexible work schedules, tenure clock adjustments, and on campus childcare.⁷⁶ These are important policies. They account for a true “season” in many faculty lives and would make work and family life easier, more life-giving than death-dealing. If policies like these had been in place, Renita Weems’s experience of being a new mother and a pretenure academic recounted earlier would have been easier to negotiate. Similar to the child-rearing season, faculty experience seasons of caring for elderly or other relatives who need focused attention and caregiving for various reasons. Policies similar to those suggested by Ravizza and Peterson-Iyer could be implemented for this other type of “season” in faculty lives. Another “season” is faculty productivity. Faculty are not productive on regular or predictable schedules, cranking out X number of articles and Y number of books a year. Productivity waxes and wanes, being affected by external elements. In “The Misleading Narrative of the Canonical Faculty Productivity Trajectory,” Samuel Way, Allison Morgan, Aaron Clauset, and Daniel Larremore find at least four different trajectories for faculty productivity.⁷⁷ Productivity may decrease as one ages or if one is hired at an institution that does not prioritize scholarship. Productivity may increase if one is at an institution that prioritizes scholarship. It might decrease right after one receives tenure and then rise again later.

For this last group, faculty seem to work on projects for an extended time, which slows productivity at first but increases later as projects come to fruition. Like RB that accounts for variations of work in different seasons, so too there needs to be a recognition of and accommodation to these dynamics affecting faculty research. If faculty do not have meaningful institutional support, then institutions ought to revise their expectations regarding faculty publications. Built into faculty expectations should be an awareness of how age and health affect productivity. Also, productivity expectations

⁷⁵ Bridget Burke Ravizza and Karen Peterson-Iyer, “Motherhood and Tenure: Can Catholic Universities Support Both?” *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 8, no. 3 (2005): 303–25, at 316.

⁷⁶ Ravizza and Peterson-Iyer, “Motherhood and Tenure,” 315–23. Also, Conor Kelly makes similar recommendations in his *The Fullness of Free Time: A Theological Account of Leisure and Recreation in the Moral Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), part 2.

⁷⁷ Samuel Way, Allison Morgan, Aaron Clauset, and Daniel Larremore, “The Misleading Narrative of the Canonical Faculty Productivity Trajectory,” *PNC* 114, no. 44 (2017): E9216–E9223, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1702121114>. See E9920 for the discussion of the four trajectories.

should not assume that significant insights happen on a regular schedule. Projects take time, so expectations for work should account for the slow build of important projects. Thus, policies governing faculty research expectations should be crafted to align with people in their contexts instead of policies designed in the abstract that are more suited for automatons on assembly lines.

Although a different kind of “season” because faculty too often do not transition out of it, contingency is still a situation that needs to be addressed differently than tenure and tenure track faculty members. These faculty members are usually teaching several classes at several different institutions in hopes of piecing together a living wage. It creates strains on time as faculty travel from one school to the next and so have limited availability for family and students. In “What Chairs Can Do for Contingent Faculty,” Jason King suggests policies that mid-level administrators can implement to ease the time constraints on contingent faculty.⁷⁸ These include ensuring contingent faculty have office space for storing needed material and login credentials to access software such as email and learning management systems. Contingent faculty should also be introduced to other faculty members and support staff who can provide emotional and administrative support for work. Perhaps more importantly, chairs should prioritize contingent faculty’s teaching schedules, like scheduling back-to-back courses on the same days, to ease the transitions between school and enable more time at home. If practices like these are implemented, the “seasonal” toil of contingent faculty will be lessened.

A global pandemic seems like another “season” that should affect policies around time and work. Extensions of tenure clocks, especially with regard to publishing, seem an obvious policy.⁷⁹ Recognition of all the extra work inside the institutions, such as developing new pedagogies, working with new technology, serving on committees dealing with institutional changes adapting to the pandemic, and outside the institution, such as care of family members, volunteering at vaccination clinics, organizing food drives, should be accounted for in the demands of academic labor. Suspend some policies, such as student evaluations, that take up time and are of limited value, at best, to create more time. There should also be some time set aside to reflect on how the pandemic has changed the life and culture of schools.

⁷⁸ Jason King, “What Chairs Can Do for Contingent Faculty,” *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 38, no. 2 (2019): 177–92.

⁷⁹ Jessi Smith, L. Lynn Vidler, and Michele Moses, “The ‘Gift’ of Time: Documenting Faculty Decisions to Stop the Tenure Clock During a Pandemic,” *Innovative Higher Education* (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-022-09603-y>.

Administrators, faculty, and staff can adjust to these changes as needed. While these suggestions focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, it sets a precedent for attending to the effects significant events outside of schools have on faculty. Natural disasters, mental health, or political unrest should be accounted for because faculty are people who experience and wrestle with such events, just like other people, including students.

If the aforementioned policies were implemented, they would address the third concern we noted in RB, namely, that work not become too toilsome or burdensome. RB is less about advice on personal time management and more about communal policies regarding time. Such policies set the priorities and values for the community. Transposing how RB structures time to theological work in the academy means arriving at policies that enable the work to be done but also constrain the work to allow the realization of the goods that theology studies and advances. The practice of beginning and ending habituates people and provides structure. It makes people pay attention to how our actions affect others. Accounting for the various factors shaping productivity in policies means reassessing expectations for how long work should take, which projects take priority at different times, or how to navigate competing goods. They would need to ensure that work does not take over and force the abandonment of other important parts of life, such as parenting. Paying a living wage would enable academic theology to better follow the Benedictine rhythm of work and prayer with times for sleep, recreation, and study. Together, these policies emphasize our beingness and limits rather than the illusion of invincibility in the pursuit of all. They make the work less toilsome, more rooted in our gifts and talents, more likely to contribute to the common good, and provide more time to live a life of love of God and others.

Although the first three applications of RB's limits on time speak to the structures supporting theological work, the fourth speaks directly to the work of teaching and learning. *Lectio* could be adapted to our pedagogy to help structure and direct time. In the classroom and learning environment, we can use *lectio*, as Abbot John Klassen writes, to "encourage the development of contemplative habits—of reading and studying. We want our students [to] know experientially what *lectio divina* is, because we have challenged them to sit with a text, to feel the words, to taste them, to see how they connect to each other."⁸⁰ "If," as Abbot John warns, "we are consistently trying to cram too much material into a course, we create the conditions for non-reflection and shallow learning."⁸¹ For faculty, contemplative

⁸⁰ Klassen, "Educating in the Benedictine Context," 2.

⁸¹ Klassen, "Educating in the Benedictine Context," 3.

learning means disciplining our own reading. We must resist the urge to “gut” a book for its argument that will serve our own research agenda. In contrast, *lectio divina* in classrooms and research slows down the work, so it can create space within us for God, for us to listen and foster a life lived well.

Relationships: Work for the Community and Seeing Christ in Others

Writing about RB 48, which concerns daily manual labor, Aquinata Böckmann notes that “the main work is prayer” and, because of this, other work must serve it.⁸² This perspective, Böckmann continues, shapes the orientation of our nonprayer work. It shapes work in ways that keep it from being conceived in opposition to community life. Böckmann notes explicitly that work is to serve others, to serve the poor, and so ultimately “work is seen as a contribution to the community.”⁸³

Columba Stewart applies this perspective to academic work, noting that “study, like any form of work, can become an end in itself and thereby an escape from the real focus of monastic life, the growth in charity that Benedict calls *conversatio morum*.”⁸⁴ This growth has relationships at its core. Although it is true that academic work can make important contributions, and Benedictines have made substantial theological contributions through their work on liturgy and *ressourcement* in the twentieth century, RB tries to keep the communal and transcendent end of the work in focus. The fear is that work might become detached from the needs of the community and so detached from God and growth in charity.⁸⁵

Benedict has monks rotate jobs to partly counter this danger (RB 35 and 38). Everyone comes to experience the various aspects of the community's labor, but none are boxed into being the dishwasher or kitchen cleaner for decades. It helps everyone understand the different aspects of communal life, assures that everyone contributes to the community, enables the needs of the community to be fulfilled, and contextualizes all the work as

⁸² Böckmann, “RB 48: Of the Daily Manual Labor: Part 1,” 146.

⁸³ Böckmann, “RB 48: Of the Daily Manual Labor: Part 1,” 148.

⁸⁴ Stewart, *Prayer and Community*, 45.

⁸⁵ Thus, RB 57 on the artisans can be adapted to theologians. Like the artisans, we need to practice our craft with humility. Our attitude, the “how” we practice, matters more than the “what” we produce. In this, we could put structures in place where, if avarice arises, we take breaks. As academics, our greed will probably not be monetary but more likely status.

important.⁸⁶ There are some positions that require stability, where the personality, character, and virtues of the person matter, such as the Abbott (RB 2) and the Cellarer (RB 31).⁸⁷ Even here, these roles are meant to be for the service of the community, positions that are meant to foster the growth of individuals and an awareness of Christ's presence.⁸⁸

This linking of work and community should help us see Christ in others. As Columba Stewart observes, seeing Christ as present in every aspect of life and in all people in the community helps create the desired community.⁸⁹ For monastics, this means learning to recognize Christ in everyone—the ill, the elder, the seeker, the young, and so forth. For those not in monasteries, this could reshape our community. For those at a college, this means seeing Christ in others, students, administrators, staff, faculty, members of the board of directors, monks, and visitors. In other words, everyone seeing Christ in one another. This seeing of Christ would help frame how we treat one another and prompt us to consider whether how we treat others is commensurate with how we would treat Christ.

Understanding work as oriented toward the community and rooted in seeing Christ in others should enable schools to design and implement policies that better account for human relationships. To begin, when thinking about faculty employment obligations, institutions and administrators should consider all the communities to which faculty belong. Often, faculty have familial obligations for children, for elderly, for extended family, and for spouses. Faculty belong to communities in the cities where they vote, work in food pantries, organize community events, coach recreational sports, and volunteer at school functions. Faculty belong to faith communities, participating in worship, community life, and outreach. Faculty also belong to advocacy groups and work to address needs not being met by society. These communities and the labor faculty provide in these contexts should be considered in setting out the expectations of faculty work.

⁸⁶ Kitchen work and reading at meals are rotated weekly. The beginning and end for the kitchen workers are psalm recitations, which places kitchen work within the context of liturgical prayer. See RB 35.15–18.

⁸⁷ See also, RB 21 with criteria for appointing deans and RB 65 on selecting a prior. Both chapters discuss personality, character, and virtues needed for these positions. An emphasis on the traits required for positions of stability points to questions about hiring or promoting for leadership positions within our institutions. Where is the emphasis on these qualities and traits in hiring that rather showcases CVs with publications, educational pedigree, and professional positions?

⁸⁸ Jason King, "The Exercise of Obedience and Authority in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*," *American Benedictine Review* 65, no. 3 (2014): 257–70.

⁸⁹ Columba Stewart, OSB, "Benedictine Monasticism as a Way of Life: Its Origins and Future," *Collegetown Connections*, March 10, 2021, <https://collegetowninstitute.org/events/event/benedictine-monasticism-stewart/>. This was a summary of his idea.

Hopefully, this would mean an expanded awareness of seeing God's work in the world and so an expanded awareness of seeing Christ in others by institutional administrators and in institutional commitments.

Likewise, theologians, by paying attention to and accounting for these communities, would enhance their academic work. The teaching and researching of Catholic theology should be grounded in the experiences of families and cities, of churches and activist movements. These communities help prevent teaching and researching from becoming the entirety of the theological work and ensure that the work being done is grounded in human beings, their lives, their loves, and their relationships to God. This approach would mean an expanded awareness of seeing God's work in the world and so an expanded awareness of seeing Christ in others by theologians. This expanded awareness would hopefully enrich our theological labor and writing. The Black Catholic Theological Symposium already grounds their work and theology in these principles. As part of their annual gathering, they meet with Black Catholics to listen to the local Black Catholic community as a way of bringing the community's concerns into their theology.⁹⁰ The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States also grounds their theological work in deep listening and attending to their communities' struggles as they seek a theology that nourishes.⁹¹ Both groups meet in a colloquy format that fosters discussion and a communal seeking of theological responses to the topics under discussion.

In accounting for relationships, colleges and universities should set policies valuing service, especially when it is done to help the school or students. Faculty work such as teaching in the core curriculum, serving on ad hoc and standing committees, in addition to teaching in their specialties and taking on administrative work, should be valued. Even more so, the faculty who spend time mentoring students and junior faculty need significant recognition. The faculty who do this for faculty and students who are particularly vulnerable—women, minorities, first generation immigrants, LGBTQIA—need even more recognition. This work attends to people and relationships and so should be valued as much as, and so balanced with, research and teaching.

⁹⁰ See the Black Catholic Theological Symposium's website for their history, mission, and explanation of purpose, <https://blackcatholictheologicalsymposium.org/>.

⁹¹ See the Academy of Hispanic Catholic Theologians in the United States website for their history, mission, explanation of purpose, <https://achtus.us/>. Also see Victor Carmona's 2022 presidential address, which begins with acknowledging and naming the wounds and struggles of the various communities to which ACHTUS members belong but also the struggles of the theologians themselves. He models what a listening theologian does by referencing aspects of their colloquium's discussions and conversations in his address. See Victor Carmona, "Questioning Hope at our Borders—2022 Presidential Address," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 24, no. 2 (2022): 90–101.

In “Undoing Disparities in Faculty Workloads,” KerryAnn O’Meara and her coauthors sought a way to ensure the work that faculty do is evenly distributed, especially when it comes to service.⁹² Service work is a pressing issue because it often falls unevenly on faculty, based on gender, race, and sexual orientation. O’Meara et al. found that a simple four-step process could fairly account for and distribute the work. First, provide a workshop for faculty to recognize implicit bias and how it affects workload, especially for female and minority faculty. Second, create a way to publicly document and view the work faculty are doing. Third, use the documentation to identify inequalities. Fourth, develop and implement plans for addressing the inequities. So much of the effort to address work inequality and recognize the valuable work of service is finding some way to publicly acknowledge and count the work that is actually being done. In RB, all monastery labor is acknowledged and seen as important, not just the leadership roles. Rotation of certain work among the monks such as cooking, dishwashing, and reading at meals or prayer ensures that all see its value. Academically, sharing, or rotating committee work, for example, means everyone knows how different things work, thus moderating expectations and understanding more readily our colleagues’ experiences of different forms of service and teaching. In RB, one aspect of the primary work of God is seeing Christ in those who serve Christ in others. Thus, for theological and other faith practicing faculty, can we see Christ in fellow faculty who serve Christ in others?

In their teaching, theology faculty could also set policies and craft assignments that foster seeing Christ in others and so generate an environment where relationships are valued along with work. In her teaching, Kathy became frustrated at her students’ entrenched suspicion of one another. The graduate classes were small. Students were often in the same classes, together for several years. In a spur of the moment exercise, one she now sees as inspiration of the Holy Spirit, she had them stand, pair off, and gave them the following instructions. One person was to be the gazer (Christ), the other person was to stand as themselves in the presence of Christ. When the timer went off, they were to switch roles.⁹³ Together they talked and processed the experience. Although this activity did not change everything, because change on such a

⁹² KerryAnn O’Meara, Audrey Jaeger, Joya Misra, et al., “Undoing Disparities in Faculty Workloads: A Randomized Trial Experiment,” *PLOSE One* 13, no. 12 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0207316>.

⁹³ A similar activity was undertaken by Marina Abramović in the 2010 performance “The Artist is Present” at The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). Discussion of this event and how looking into another’s eyes can communicate depth of emotion and connections with another person can be found in Marissa King’s *Social Chemistry: Decoding the Patterns of Human Connection* (New York: E. P. Dutton Publishing, 2021), chap. 7.

scale exceeds the capacity of one exercise or experience, a shift occurred in the students' interactions. They began to listen differently, more willing to try to hear one another as companions on the discipleship journey rather than people with different (read wrong) theological ideologies or beliefs. At the time, she did not fully grasp what was happening. However, since then, she has heard Columba Stewart articulate an often overlooked and harder to accept aspect of this practice of seeing others as Christ, that despite being a sinner I am a Christ-bearer to others as they are to me.⁹⁴ It helped explain why the students responded to the activity as they did. On some level, they began to realize that they were Christ-bearers to one another. They needed to treat one another as if it were Christ in front of them.

Additionally, this concept of seeing the other as Christ, and oneself as Christ-bearer, can shift how we see and approach teaching, service, and scholarship. The content of the course, evaluation of students' work, faculty evaluations, and peer review of scholarship still matter. But the manner, the approach, the delivery—the “how”—is important and crucial. Being a Christ-bearer means someone's encounter with each of us matters. Being a Christ-bearer transforms our work to be oriented toward people and makes it more likely that our work serves people. It generates a more communal and caring approach in our theological work.

The pandemic highlighted the need for policies that attend to faculty's communities and move faculty to attend to the people around them, including one another. As classes moved online and campuses shut down, faculty felt the loss of human interactions, even as they continued to attend to students and work with colleagues. As churches, restaurants, and community activities closed down, people felt the straining of their community relationships. In the midst of this, social problems surrounding racism and poverty became more visible to many people, calling for more immediate actions. Policies and approaches that value relationships, policies rooted in RB's view that work should be oriented to the community and seeing Christ in others, become all the more important. They would help speak to a more humane academic life and would also point to the deeper human needs that must be met.

Status through Christ

RB presents a different kind of status than the status found in current academic life. RB has a seating and processing order that is not based on a person's age, background, or role within the community. Instead, it is based

⁹⁴ Stewart, “Benedictine Monasticism as a Way of Life.”

on who came to the monastery first, who came to God first (RB 63:1). This approach privileges relationship with God and de-emphasizes societal status markers. RB also emphasizes humility understood as knowing oneself. It means recognizing and acknowledging one's gifts, one's growing edges, or even simply ongoing brokenness that needs buttressing and support from other community members (RB 7, RB 46, RB 72, RB 73:1, 8). Then, it calls monks to live from these spaces with a calm, centered sense of self in relationship to God and others. Living according to RB's definition of humility means understanding that the community needs everyone for their differences, for their wide, beautiful gifts. In the community, Christ is present in each, and the Body of Christ needs eyes, ears, noses, hands, and feet; it needs teachers, administrators, prophets, priests, abbots, and prioresses. Status, then, comes from seeing Christ in and being Christ to others. This status moves us into a deeper relationship with God and others while helping us grow in the virtues.

This view shapes the work done in the monastery. Manuela Scheiba, OSB, discusses how so much of culture prizes productivity and achievement, an "I work, therefore I am" mentality.⁹⁵ In education, it leads to what she calls bulimic learning: "devour—chuck up—and forget about it."⁹⁶ Students, with the support and direction of the schools, focus only on their career path and test performance. It is an education that "can hardly shape a person as whole nor provoke any 'sense and taste for the Infinite' in people."⁹⁷ For its part, RB sets boundaries that limit valuing productivity and emphasize instead valuing God. RB requires sleep and food, time for *lectio* and prayer (RB 48; 8:2; RB 43:1).⁹⁸ It operates on the principle that all other work is subordinated to the work of God and so must be put aside (RB 43:3).⁹⁹ It is meant to care for the whole person, body and soul, and education within this framework should be holistic.¹⁰⁰ The work that is done must not be so burdensome

⁹⁵ Manuela Scheiba, OSB, "Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule," *American Benedictine Review* 70, no. 1 (2019): 25–44, at 27.

⁹⁶ Scheiba, "Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule," 27. See our earlier reference in footnote 79 to Abbot John Klassen's approach to *lectio*. It is one remedy to this problem.

⁹⁷ Scheiba, "Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule," 27. Scheiba references Friedrich Schleiermacher on what religion is in this quote. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39.

⁹⁸ Scheiba, "Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule," 29.

⁹⁹ Scheiba, "Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule," 30.

¹⁰⁰ Scheiba, "Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule," 31.

as to weaken its members and must not define a person.¹⁰¹ “It is rather of primary importance that no one in the monastic community defines himself [*sic*] by his [*sic*] skills, work or success.”¹⁰² Although work should be “adequate” to provide for need, it should not go beyond this scale.¹⁰³ Work should not be for “success, position, or authority” but for “mutual listening and loving service.”¹⁰⁴ This type of learning and work is formative for the virtues, our approach to life, with knowledge serving human formation and prayer.

Academic approaches to status influence and problematize how faculty view one another. As noted previously, part of the reason status plays such an important role in academic life is because other avenues of growth are cut off. There is little professional advancement and little increase in financial award. Still, even if more money and more advancement were made possible, the comparison and valuing of self from achievement would exist. It would just be spread across more possible routes, and with increased competition, hostilities between faculty could easily increase.

The key to address the reigning model for academic status runs deeper and at a more spiritual level. It comes from RB's recognition that community is built on recognizing Christ in others, around the community valuing members, and members valuing the community. Mary Hoffman sketches how such communities might do this. Hoffman studies how three communities of Benedictine nuns “negotiate conflicting demands from their religious communities and the Roman Catholic Church.”¹⁰⁵ She notes that there is ongoing tension between the loyalty of nuns to their community and to the institutional church.¹⁰⁶ Their religious communities “embrace the principles of equality, mutual support, listening, and empowerment, that together can be conceived of as a Benedictine approach to organizing.”¹⁰⁷ This approach results in nuns being valued by the community, leaders seeing their work as service, and communities functioning as a support system.¹⁰⁸ When the

¹⁰¹ Scheiba, “Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule,” 32. See RB 68 where Benedict provides guidance to the monk who has been given a task he deems too burdensome and which he cannot complete.

¹⁰² Scheiba, “Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule,” 33.

¹⁰³ Scheiba, “Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule,” 36.

¹⁰⁴ Scheiba, “Economization and the Humanizing Potential of Benedict's Rule,” 40.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Hoffman, “*Ora and Labora* (Prayer and Work): Spirituality, Communication and Organizing in Religious Communities,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 30 (2007): 187–212, at 187.

¹⁰⁶ Hoffman, “*Ora and Labora*,” 192.

¹⁰⁷ Hoffman, “*Ora and Labora*,” 196.

¹⁰⁸ Hoffman, “*Ora and Labora*,” 197–98.

institutional church overlooks their gifts or restricts their participation,¹⁰⁹ the community provides a “buffer”¹¹⁰ against these dynamics. The community listens to and strengthens the nuns, valuing and empowering them.¹¹¹

Such buffering can limit the pursuit of status where value comes from standing apart from others. The community provides a buffering that emphasizes the value of the person, especially when it is being challenged by others. Instead of faculty being cut out of deliberations about the operations of colleges and universities, these communities could engage them more authentically. For Benedictine schools, the perspective should not be viewing these individuals as “guests” that might offer helpful suggestions but otherwise do not belong. Instead, faculty—and others who are part of the community—should be people listened to for insights and perspectives especially around decisions that will affect all, a key value of RB. Monks are to listen for God and to the abbot, the abbot is supposed to listen to the community and individual monks. The older monks are to be listened to just as the younger (especially the youngest) are to be listened to. Benedict devotes the entirety of chapter 3 to the importance of listening when the community faces significant decisions. This framework for thinking and deciding helps to communicate the value of people and their role in the community.¹¹²

Still, most faculty have experienced being ignored or cut out of institutional deliberations. Even in these instances, there can be a buffering. Faculty can come together to support one another, reminding one another of their value. It can start with something as simple as recognizing the work peers and colleagues are doing. Such actions establish a sense of value and belonging long before it is needed in a conflict. The recognition need not be formal but should be ongoing and consistent. It should extend to value all the work people are doing, publishing, teaching, service in the school, and service outside the school. Department members should try to read what one another have published. Faculty should attend or discuss the talks that are given by their peers. Teaching successes (and failures) should be shared and discussed, as each person supports the others. Births of children and grandchildren should be celebrated as well as concerns about

¹⁰⁹ Hoffman, “*Ora and Labora*,” 199.

¹¹⁰ Hoffman, “*Ora and Labora*,” 204.

¹¹¹ Hoffman, “*Ora and Labora*,” 200–02.

¹¹² See Doris Donnelly, “Listening and the Rule of St. Benedict,” *American Benedictine Review* 46 (1995) 178–81. In Joan Chittister, OSB, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (Chestnut Ridge, PA: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 49, Chittister indicates that to follow God’s way Benedictine monks must listen to “the Gospel, the teachings of its abbots and prioresses, the experience of the community, and the Rule of Benedict itself.”

illness or aged parents expressed. Such a community should also alleviate microaggressions. Mutual respect would better enable people to acknowledge and bridge their differences, perhaps even coming to see differences as gifts to the community. When everyone is supported, they should have greater openness to new perspectives and questions. They also should be willing to hear criticisms, come to see their biases, be willing to change when needed, and act more respectfully toward others. In wanting to foster such a buffering, the community—whether it be a department, school, or the whole institution—could evaluate the cultural climate to clearly see what needs to be improved.¹¹³ The community imagined here does not mean that there will be no problems or that all problems will be readily solved. Rather, such a community provides a buffer for difficult and tense conversations and decisions. It means, even in conflict, that there is a building up of all by valuing one another instead of a building up of one's status by diminishing others.

Thus, to address issues of status, theologians should foster these buffering communities, communities ultimately rooted in seeing Christ in self and others. Faculty need to see one another's dignity and their work as a common endeavor, working together. They need to see that good work done by one person is a good for the whole, that everyone is better when individuals do well. This community does not come easy. It is why the practices noted previously, practices where faculty are formed to view others and all their labor as positive, are so important. If they are sustained, the buffering can shape people's horizon so that they see their value by being with people instead of apart from them.

Theology faculty should lead the way on this perspective. As RB indicates, Christ is present in each person, and theologians should not just be aware of this but also have this understanding as fundamental to their work. Theological work should reflect awareness of Christ in others. Instead of a competition that threatens, theologians should work toward cooperative endeavors that celebrate, while finding ways to care for one another. Status in the theological community should not be some scarce achievement to be had at the cost of self or others. It should be a recognition of being in relationships of love. Such relationships provide the push back against microaggressions, against the violence that seeks to degrade the image of God within us.

While such work buffers people from the way status pursuits distort thinking, it also addresses the problems emerging from the pandemic. As the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* report noted, faculty in the pandemic felt

¹¹³ These suggestions for alleviated microaggressions come from Young, Anderson, and Stewart, "Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education," 69–70.

“disconnected,” and the top reason respondents gave for considering leaving was a “lack of fulfillment in being part of an academic community.”¹¹⁴ When status pursuits reign and the pandemic cuts one off from students, peers, and opportunities for meaningful work, the emptiness of the motivation becomes clear. The true pursuit, it seems, is belonging to the community. The buffering, the ongoing valuing of people, is key to address this deeper need. Seeing Christ in others should move theologians to meet this need.

Conclusion

The pandemic revealed and exacerbated problems many theologians experienced in their work. Our aim in this article was to begin reimagining theological work to address the problems. We argued that to address and begin solving for the ills of academic life we identified, as theologians we need to develop a communal spirituality of work. We believe that the Rule of Benedict offers a realistic, practical approach that acknowledges and accounts for the ongoing learning that happens when people gather in committed spaces and, therefore, can be applied analogically to academic life. We began by naming and describing several constraints within higher education that form and produce a certain type of academician. Institutional pulls, demands, and culture around time, relationships, and status are too often death-dealing. They lead to over work, unhealthy competition, devaluing some contributions (even while necessary) to institutional and professional functioning, and sacrificing play, rest, and family. Tragically, this leads to dehumanization and lack of care for one another.

We turned to the Rule of Benedict for insight for reframing our theological labor as communal, as attending to love of God and neighbor. Reenvisioning constraints on time in a Benedictine key opens space to breathe and see colleagues as people with whole lives, lives not subsumed by professional labors. RB recenters people and relationships. It provides a frame for considering how to practice the craft of theology and live the values of humility, hospitality, and seeing Christ in the other. Theological labor is valuable, needed, and necessary. Yet, theological labor should not define people in their entirety. There are other needs, commitments, and values beyond professional outputs. When the demands of labor overshadow everything else, people no longer see one another as people with whole lives, let alone as the beloved Christ before us.

¹¹⁴ *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “On the Verge of Burnout,” 19.

Thus, the goods we seek in academic work—teaching, service, scholarship—must be seen in light of relationships with God and neighbor. As goods they must be cared for and distributed equitably according to need. Care must be taken not to give too much teaching, service, or even time for scholarship to any one person. While mindful that different people at different times will need to focus more on one dimension than another, this distribution of communal goods requires discernment and interpretation for each community. Benedict provides a structure for building community with a common purpose that is attentive to God. The friction points identified in this article cannot be solved by individual change alone. Robustly addressing them for the health of individuals and the academic community requires a broader vision and structural change to support practices that foster holistic educational labor. Benedict worried about how monks with a too individualistic outlook might harm a community's common focus and aim. Hence, his focus on constraints for the individual. This is the reversal of how the academy forms, trains, and judges its academics—a focus on individual endeavors rather than on contributions to building a community with a common focus. Adapting Benedict's concern about the danger of individualistic monks to the academy means reassessing our formative and structural practices. RB provides a construct that, when applied to academia, calls theologians to practice inclusivity, to practice learning to love all, to practice equitable distribution and appreciation for all labor, to practice growth in humility, in ranking based on love and not exterior status markers. Theologians need to honor service, teaching, and scholarship aimed at the love of God, others, and self.