God and Man at Seaside, *or* The Rich You Will Always Have With You

Human beings live our lives along what the late Philip Rieff, in his 1974 extended essay *Fellow Teachers*, somewhat elliptically [sic] called "the vertical in authority."

> [O]ur first aim [must be] to re-teach ourselves un-political recognitions of that sacred order which is always and everywhere in authority…. [L]et no one complain that he can but remain somewhere along the vertical in authority. From authority there is no escape…. My core courses in the arts and sciences of resistance to the enemy within…would have as the first object the criticism of that remorseless criticism of everything raising in life which is our culture industry, high and low. Then and only then, the culture industry of critical criticism…negated, can the decision that is *credo*, and not ideology, become again remotely possible in this radically anti-creedal culture.

"From authority there is no escape" is a skeptical modern intellectual's late-in-life conclusion that *God is not mocked.* Just as in the natural order Nature always wins, so too in human social life does sacred order, perforce, have the last word. The most formidable of modern atheists, Friedrich Nietzsche---to whom all theists owe an immense debt of gratitude for both articulating and representing with his life the full implications of what it means to be an atheist---arguably embodied the point. Nietzsche famously announced that "God is dead," as much an empirical observation of the state of modern western culture as a pronouncement of his own atheism; and articulated a view of human nature and human motivation that did not preclude but could not adequately explain human social relations such as family life and friendship. For these mistakes---though usually attributed to syphilis as the efficient cause---Nietzsche went mad; but in the providence of God spent the last eleven years of his life in the care of his sister and his friends.

Seaside, Florida, located on the Florida panhandle gulf coast, was founded some thirty years ago, and to this day remains the earliest poster child of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU). The relationship of Seaside to the sacred is perhaps less dramatic than Nietzsche's, but no less interesting or necessary for all that. Virtually all pre-1945 cities have been founded at the scale of what today we might call a town or even a village. Some have been founded around some sacred site or along some pre-existing sacred path. Others have been founded for purposes of protection or territorial conquest. Still others have been founded primarily to facilitate the production, distribution and exchange of material goods. And some have been founded simply for human pleasure in extraordinary natural conditions. Regardless of its origins however, every city is an artifact cooperatively made by human animals who are social, mutually dependent, in possession of productive, practical and theoretical reason, imperfect in virtue, and mortal. As a community of communities that any city is, over time and of necessity a city will inevitably engage and represent in material form each of these dimensions---sacred, political, commercial, recreational---essential to human

flourishing; and will do so as a more or less beautiful and symbolically charged *place*, in a *landscape* more or less carefully stewarded for both human flourishing and for its own sake. Pre-modern cities---see, e.g. Greek *poleis*, Roman *castra*, medieval chartered towns, "new world" towns established under the *Laws of the Indies*, the Puritan and other English settlements of North America, etc.---typically did all these things more or less simultaneously as a matter of course. For complicated historical reasons with five-to-six-hundred-year-old roots, and beginning in Europe and North America, human beings *strikingly* forgot how to do this in the second half of the 20th century. A few today, against long odds, are struggling to recover this cultural knowledge that has been lost. Seaside's historic importance is as a benchmark in this struggle.

In the thirty years of its existence, Seaside's foremost successes have been environmental, formal, and---according to a certain kind of metric---economic. That is to say: Seaside is a learned and well-made place in how it occupies its landscape, in the beauty and quality of construction of its public spaces and buildings, and in its mix of uses within pedestrian proximity of each other; and all these together in turn have created Seaside's strikingly spectacular economic appreciation. These successes are clear; Seaside's moral order and its relationship to sacred order less so.

Not that Seaside's makers are unmindful of sacred order. Indeed, sacred order at Seaside is acknowledged in several ways, both overtly and implicitly. Wittingly and skillfully, there is the Scott Merrill-designed neo-American-Carpenter-Gothic Seaside Chapel ("non-denominational") and bell tower, a finely crafted Protestant-cum-Modernist sacred building---abstract, but still true to type---at the north terminus of Seaside's main north-south axis; and which, when last I saw it several years ago fronted a public green that is now itself perhaps in transition to a hard-surfaced plaza. In addition, there have long been plans for a cemetery just east of the Chapel, which when realized will do much to make more visible Seaside's grounding in sacred order. And yet Seaside still is not a day-to-day town in any paradigmatic way, but rather a resort town populated by few permanent residents and many tourists, and hence transients. It remains at best a project that in the largest sense, and in a larger context of easy personal mobility and nomadic post-modern culture, aspires to urban culture and place.

"There is not life that is not in community, and no community not lived in praise of God," wrote T.S. Eliot. If Eliot was correct, Seaside still has a way to go before it can be characterized as a community in the fullest sense. It is impossible not to notice that the Seaside Chapel early in the 21st century does *not* function like the 15th century medieval parish church, or the 17th century New England meeting house, or even the 19th century Methodist chapel in such denominationally-sponsored summer resort anticipations of Seaside as Bayview, Michigan. For Seaside its makers' ambitions seem to include 1) making Seaside a kind of place once made by communities; 2) Seaside becoming the kind of community that used to make places like Seaside; and 3) exporting the experience of and the lessons learned from making Seaside to others with similar communal place-making aspirations. That Seaside's makers pursue these ambitions

with and for modern persons who---perhaps like even many of Seaside's makers themselves---now habitually value mobility *at least* as much as we value place suggests that these ambitions may be more than a little quixotic; and, at the very least, difficult.

Nevertheless, to understand Seaside clearly, Seaside itself must be seen first and foremost as a work of love that---if God is love---by that very fact *partakes of and participates in sacred order*. Seaside is a work of love by its founders, by the architects of its town plan and its buildings, by the craftsmen and women who built it, by the residents who first loved it enough to live there, by the tourists who love to visit Seaside, and (not least) by the absentee owners who love it as a financial investment and whose love has made Seaside the expensive parcel/s of real estate Seaside now is. And therein lies the story of Seaside and love's declension; or, at least, a partial description of Seaside's movements up and down "the vertical in authority." And if the reader senses some ambivalence about this relationship between beauty and economic value, here I want to suggest that this ambivalence is not only objectively inherent in the relationship itself, but is both rooted *in* the sacred and can only be resolved *by* the sacred.

Consider this: The most immediately apparent fact about Seaside as a whole is that Seaside is beautiful; next, that Seaside is expensive. People respond to these two facts differently. An acquaintance of mine---an adult daughter of overseas missionaries, who grew up in the Sixties among poor Filipinos---who visited Seaside for a conference was so put off by Seaside's relentlessly upscale character that she was unable to recognize (let alone enjoy) Seaside's beauty. Alternatively, I am told by people who know that a majority of those who own property in Seaside are so enamored of Seaside's beauty---and, not least, the economic value it creates---that they insist that the streets extending to Seaside's perimeter must not connect to the streets of Seaside's adjacent developments, lest the easy communication of the owners of these adjacent $2M properties with Seaside compromise the value (if not the beauty) of the latter's $4M properties. This distresses many involved in the making of Seaside---as well as many members of the Congress for the New Urbanism---because it represents a sensibility that is *perhaps* unjust but is without question ungenerous, not least because a beautiful public realm is (or ought to be, so New Urbanists profess) a *common* good. Moreover, if we ponder those things that are *raising* in the sacred "vertical in authority," Beauty and Justice and Generosity are goods *surely* at or near the very top of that sacred "ladder." How poignant therefore that the makers of Seaside and other New Urbanists are dismayed that beautiful architecture and urban design have apparently not made the property owners of Seaside more just and more generous. (How poignant---how *modernist*---that they imagined that it could!) How unsurprising that in the drab and ugly public realms of modernity beautiful places are expensive. And how inconvenient, taunt both modernist and Libertarian apologists for sprawl, that New Urbanist settlements almost without exception are costly; and that by the standards of today's Democratic Party, the property owners of Seaside are *rich*. Knowingly or otherwise, the moderns among us --both secularist and religious-- who in today's

United States of Shopping continue to feel and profess unease about wealth represent a continuing cultural legacy of biblical religion, whether that unease is honored more in the latter's breach or in its observance.

It is from Judaism and Christianity that the modern west has derived the notion (now fading?) that one mark of a good society is how well it attends to the poor and the weak. The potentially problematic relationship between wealth and blessedness---the latter of which in the moral and religious imagination of the west has always entailed the virtues, both corporate and individual, of justice and generosity---is a recurring theme of biblical religion; and the nineteenth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, verses 21-26 (RSV), may serve as a paradigmatic characterization of the tension:

> Jesus said to [the rich young man], "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

The challenge of promoting and balancing the virtues of justice and generosity---can an individual or a community have too much of either?---and of discouraging the sins of both greed and envy is perennial, and the task emanates outward from families to free associations to churches to various levels of political authority. But I have an idea for Seaside founder Robert Davis, particularly if he desires Seaside to be paradigmatic not only for its existing formal order, beauty and wealth, but also for its future justice and generosity. And that recommendation is this: donate a parcel of land in Seaside for the purpose, and invite a community of Benedictine monks --this refers in the first place to the Order of St. Benedict, but alternatively to any monastic community that lives according to some version of the sixth century *Rule of St. Benedict*, including modern day Cistercians and Trappists-- to establish a monastery in Seaside.

What would this accomplish? And why the Benedictines?

The main thing this would accomplish would be to establish in Seaside a permanent worshipping community, the effect of which would be to animate within Seaside its founders' intention to acknowledge the sacred order within which the Town of Seaside itself exists. For the foremost and most appropriate human response to the sacred is to worship, and to offer to the sacred as gifts those things in and by which we ask simultaneously that the sacred be present among us---hence prayers, song, bread and wine, acts of justice and charity, church buildings, cities; and, in some cases, consecrated religious life.

But why the Benedictines? After all, there are other disciplined worshipping communities besides these Catholic Christian ones; and I've no doubt whatsoever that holy men and women of any number of historic religious traditions can recognize one another as such.[1] Nevertheless, the Benedictines suggest themselves for Seaside by virtue of what they have always done historically, i.e., by testifying to the love of God for all and by drawing others closer to God by the example of their lives. Moreover, they do this in a disciplined way with deep resonance even for moderns, in accordance with their ancient *Rule* that in ordering their lives in imitation of Christ simultaneously reaches backward historically to embrace living Judaism and forward to embrace not only the reforming ambitions of Protestant Christians but the yearnings for peace and justice of all secular men and women of good will.

So, historically, how exactly are the lives of Benedictines ordered? And what makes them particularly well-suited both to participate in the civilizing mission and to address the spiritual poverty of wealthy Seaside?

- Avowed Benedictines seek to live holy lives by disciplined attention to prayer and work (*ora et labora*). Their dedication to the divine office and its seven daily periods of prayer is their most powerful witness, to the reality of sacred order. They engage in manual labor both as a spiritual discipline, and to ensure that their community will be economically self-sufficient.

- The Benedictines are a productive community that at the same time embraces voluntary poverty. This has several happy consequences. It means that they create wealth. It means that their monastery doesn't beg, but rather gives. And it means that they model for rich and for poor alike that one can live a life of dignified and generous poverty.

- Benedictine life in the monastery is ordered around a church, a cloister garden, a refectory, a library, the monks' cells, and various ancillary buildings related to their manual work. Historically, Benedictines make good buildings: beautiful for the glory of God, durable because

[1] Mahatma Gandhi, after visiting a Trappist abbey near Durban, South Africa in 1895, wrote the following about what he witnessed:

> The settlement is a quiet little model village, owned on the truest republican principles. The principle of liberty, equality, and fraternity is carried out in its entirety. Every man is a brother, every woman a sister…. [No monk or nun] may keep any money for private use. All are equally rich or poor... Wherever we went, a beaming smile and a lowly bow greeted us, we saw a brother or a sister. Even while the guide was decanting on the system he prized so much, he did not at all seem to consider the self-chosen discipline a hard yoke to bear. A better instance of undying faith and perfect implicit obedience could not well be found anywhere else.

For more recent popular accounts of the beneficent effects of Benedictine monasticism in and among modern persons (and sometimes its costs), see Kathleen Norris's 1997 account of her life as a Benedictine oblate in *The Cloister Walk*; and also the 2010 Cannes Film Festival Grand Prix winning film *Of Gods and Men*, based on a true story of a community of Trappist monks in Algeria during the 1990s Algerian Civil War.

they intend to be around for the long term. Here as well, Benedictines *model* the virtues of a good built environment, both for its own sake and for the *telos* that good buildings and spaces serve.

- The Benedictines have two historic *charisms* or vocational duties, of potential long-term benefit to Seaside. The first is *educational*. The Benedictines have always embraced the life of the mind in service to their religious vocation. If Seaside seeks educators for its children, teaching is a role that Benedictines have always undertaken. The second is *hospitality*. Benedict's *Rule* requires that monks welcome strangers as if welcoming Christ Himself, and monasteries are known for providing simple and inexpensive lodging. Seaside is already a pilgrimage destination of sorts, and an expensive one. A Benedictine presence might make Seaside even more of a pilgrimage destination, for good if different reasons; and might even provide Seaside with just a bit of that elusive "diversity" of clean and comfortable overnight accommodations.

- Last but by no means least: Benedictine novices take final vows of poverty, obedience to their abbot, and *stability of life*---which means, practically, that the monk will live the rest of his life in the monastery unless moved by his abbot. The pedagogical importance of stability-of-life must not be underestimated, least of all by persons seeking to recover a genuinely good urban culture. Post-modern nomadic culture can *consume* good urbanism but shows only the faintest evidence of any ability to *produce* good urbanism. The Benedictines' voluntary embrace of life-in-a-place goes against the grain of modern life, but may be yet another important lesson they have to teach would-be urbanists.

"In his holy flirtation with the world," wrote Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner from another era, "God occasionally drops a handkerchief. Those handkerchiefs are called saints." Most Benedictines are not saints. Nevertheless, they aspire to be; and even more to bear witness to sacred presence. Most importantly, the individual and communal virtues that Benedictines cultivate and model, not least piety, are also urban virtues---of which Seaside remains in need if Seaside is to be the exemplary urban place it aspires to be.

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