

# THE MYSTERY OF MONASTICISM: HISTORY, SPIRITUALITY AND VOCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

What is a monk? What exactly do they do? What is the purpose of their way of life? These are the questions people often have when they first visit a monastery. To those looking in from the outside, the monastic life with its concealing cloister walls, its unusual clothing, its highly ritualized lifestyle, and its unwavering silence, must appear as a great mystery, even a conundrum.

As a monk, the temptation is to respond to these questions with a list of our works, of our apostolates and ministries, the things that keep us occupied—what we do “for a living.” Monks throughout history, in fact, have done many different things. They have been farmers and ranchers, teachers and scholars, they have copied and printed books, they have served in parishes, they have been preachers and missionaries, artists and musicians, craftsmen and tradesmen, they have operated seminaries, retreat centers, guest houses, and so forth. They have engaged in any number of revenue-generating enterprises over the years, some exciting, most mundane.

Monks are not angels. We have to eat, we need a sheltered place to sleep; monks *do* need to earn a living. Nevertheless, a monk, to be true to his name, must always resist the temptation to define himself and his way of life in terms of his work, what he does for a living. The works that we do are always secondary, and never necessary, to our identity as monks—save one thing. The one activity common to all monks today and throughout history has been the constant daily round of prayer. The monastic vocation is essentially that. It is the call to a life devoted to prayer.

All consecrated religious commit themselves to praying what is known as the *Liturgy of the Hours* or the *Divine Office*. This is the great liturgical prayer of the universal Church. It is called the Liturgy of the Hours because it serves to sanctify the whole of our day; it recalls us back to prayer throughout the day at the seven canonical hours of Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. It is called the Divine Office because it contributes to the fulfillment of the Gospel precept to “pray without ceasing”—“office” here from the Latin *officium*, meaning duty or obligation.

Today, most people who make this ancient prayer do so alone. They make use of a breviary that groups the daily prescribed psalms and canticles, responses and antiphons, readings and prayers, and so forth, according to the rank of the liturgical day and season. In the monastery, however, Office (as monks are accustomed to calling it) is prayed in common. Praying the Divine Office together in common is the primary commitment we make as monks. Desire for the *Opus Dei*—the “Work of God”—as Saint Benedict describes monastic prayer in his Rule, is his criterion for gauging the sincerity of those seeking entrance to the monastery.

Office is celebrated in the church, in the choir, and for the most part is sung or chanted rather than recited. Because this is the core of our life, historically monks have taken the *Opus Dei* very seriously. Nearly the whole of the rich cultural legacy that has been handed down to us from ancient and medieval monasticism is in some way connected with the celebration of the Divine Office. In fact, the whole structure of the monastic life, all of its outward and visible forms, is ultimately for the sake of remaining faithful to this prayer.

It is a matter of great perplexity to many people in our modern world with its largely secular outlook—perhaps to some even a matter of scandal—that so much time and energy should be spent on liturgical prayer. How could anyone justify praying “for a living”? Ours is a culture that values the useful and the practical; the concrete and the tangible. We are interested in how things appear, how they work, and what they can be used for, rather than what they might mean in the larger scheme of things. We ask what a person does, or what they look like, and then make our judgments based on that, rather than investing the time to find out *who* they are.

Yet to approach monasticism from this perspective is to miss the point entirely. The outward appearances of the monastic life, all of which serve to promote its deeper spiritual reality, at the same time work to conceal it. In setting up its clear boundaries between the sacred and profane, monasticism has ensured that only those who approach with the eyes of faith might be able to see beyond the externals and into the hidden spiritual substance that stands behind this ancient way of life.

So what, then, is a monk? What do they do? What purpose does their way of life fulfill? We could fill in the blank with any number of answers to describe the externals of what goes on inside and out of a Benedictine monastery; but none of them would penetrate to the deeper,

hidden mystery of what really takes place within the cloister walls, inside the individual monk's cell, within the deep recesses of his soul.

From this perspective, monasticism is indescribable. The monastic vocation is ultimately a mystical one. It has to be experienced. And that is the whole crux. How to break out into the world? How to reveal hidden truths that cannot be seen? The three essays that follow are an attempt to draw those on the outside into a deeper understanding of the monastic life, beyond its visible forms, and into the mystery of what it means to live a life of prayer.

## MONASTICISM IN HISTORY

### *The Desert Fathers*

The roots of Christian monasticism are in the Egyptian desert. Some 1500 years after Moses and the Israelites had fled their taskmasters into these same deserts, men began to respond to the Gospel message by fleeing the Hellenized, cosmopolitan cities of Lower Egypt in order to seek a different kind of freedom in the harsh Egyptian wilderness.

These first monks were, for the most part, hermits; although not long after, *coenobia*, or communities of monks living an organized common life, began to spring up as well. Saint Anthony the Great (d. 356) is the name most associated with the former way of life; Saint Pachomius (d. 346) with the latter. The hermits lived by themselves in secluded places, spending their time dedicated to prayer and manual labor. They were known to be spiritual athletes, accomplishing great feats of asceticism such as prolonged fasts, extended night vigils in which they took very little sleep, and other self-imposed hardships.

These were not refined men—their own contemporaries considered them to be uncouth, anti-social, even subversive. They were unshaven and wore shabby clothes; baths were considered an unnecessary luxury. They were probably not very pleasant men to be around. Yet, in spite of this, they acquired immense reputations for holiness. People from all over the ancient world made pilgrimages to the Egyptian desert in order to visit those who history now remembers as the “Desert Fathers,” and receive from them advice about the spiritual life. Even though present-day monasticism has evolved and undergone much change since its primitive beginnings, it still looks back to the Egyptian desert as the source of its spirituality.

But why? What lured men to the deserts in the first place? It must first be understood that from the very beginning of the Church, the highest expression of the Christian life, and indeed its ideal, was that of the martyr. Sanctity and martyrdom were virtually synonymous. Jesus had died a violent death on the cross. His apostles, in their willingness to give their lives for the sake of spreading the Gospel, had followed his example. The early witness of those such as Ss. Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 115), Polycarp of Smyrna (d. ca. 156), and others reveals the driving force that lay behind the rapid expansion of the Christian faith: the overwhelming desire to share in the life and passion of Jesus Christ.

In fact, *martyr* is a Greek word which means literally “one who testifies,” and so these martyrs became the first witnesses, living monuments as it were, to the truth of the Christian religion. By their example it was shown that neither human authority, the threat of violence, nor even death itself, had any power over life now that Christ had wrought his victory over sin on the cross. It is on their account that within three centuries Christianity was able to convert to its cause the very empire which from the beginning had labored so hard to destroy it.

The baptism of the emperor Constantine in 313 proved to be a great boon for the spread of the faith and its eventual institutionalization. The Church, having emerged from the underground and into the light of the public sphere, ceased to be a counter-cultural movement; it had now become the source of culture and its defender.

“Thou hast conquered, Galilean,” lamented Julian the Apostate (d. 363), the purported dying words of the last pagan emperor. Indeed Christianity had triumphed, and while throughout succeeding history martyrdom would continue to be held up as the highest witness to the Christian faith, the era that would come to be known as the “Age of the Martyrs” was now complete. Victory over the human powers of this world had been assured; the Church as an institution had been established. The battle could now move to another plane, this time a spiritual one.

The pressing question became, if martyrdom was no longer a realistic possibility, what then constituted sanctity? How could a Christian share in the passion and cross of Christ if he could not reasonably expect to give his life or shed his blood? The answer would come from the deserts of Egypt.

The Desert Fathers, the hermits of the wilderness, cultivated the notion of “white” martyrdom. They may not have been able to shed their blood, but they would in no less a way give their lives in order to follow Christ. They took their stand, not against emperors and other human principalities, but against the spiritual forces of sin. Through the self-denial of asceticism and their devotion to constant prayer, they resolved to conquer in the name of Christ everything in this world that was working to keep man separated from God and from his fellow men.

In addition to asceticism and prayer, the example of the Desert Fathers introduced into Christian monasticism at its very inception several ideas that remain fundamental to the monastic vocation. First, as has been pointed out, they assumed the martyr’s mantle of witness. The

monastic life became a living witness to the truth of the Christian faith. In this context, it is no accident that John the Baptist is greatly venerated in the monastic tradition, sometimes even referred to, albeit somewhat anachronistically, as the first monk.

He was “the voice crying out in the wilderness,” the one giving testimony about him “who was to come,” the Christ whom John identified and prepared the way for. The example of the monastic life, and the abundant fruit that it has bore throughout history, continue to be a testimony to the tremendous power of Christ to sanctify and transform lives, even the world itself.

The devotion to John also reveals another of monasticism’s fundamental pieces: its prophetic aspect. John the Baptist is often interpreted as being the last of the Old Testament prophets; in Jesus’ own words he was Elijah come again. Consecrated to God from his birth in the Jewish Nazirite tradition, he lived apart from the city, in the desert, where he became a social and religious critic, calling upon Israel to turn back and repent.

As the Church became increasingly accepted and established in society, involved in the power politics of the day, and as its own culture began to merge with that of the Roman world of which it was a part, it was the monks who now assumed the prophetic role. Perhaps they might even be seen as the conscience of the early Church. The monastic movement began as a popular movement; it did not originate within the official Church hierarchy. Monasticism, therefore, grew up on the fringes. In this respect, it had to be kept in bounds, within the limits of orthodoxy, or even at times reeled back in. Yet, reciprocally, it was always the monks who kept the institutional Church itself grounded, connected to its spiritual sources, as it were.

Thus there was a constant tension—a healthy tension—in the early Church between these two poles. Monasticism became an institutional witness to the truth that religion is more than hierarchy and structure, ritual and visible acts of piety—though it was established very early on that these are essential and cannot be set aside without consequence. Nevertheless, these take their source from prayer, and it is prayer that stands behind all the externals of the Christian life and its fundamental beliefs. In this way, the prophetic aspect of the monastic vocation is a call to remain ever close to the sources of Christian spirituality.

These then are the foundations of the monastic life: a desire to follow the example of the martyrs by engaging in asceticism and self-denial; the prophetic witness of standing apart from

society and the culture of the world; and, above all else, holding fast through unceasing prayer to the sources of the Christian faith. This is the tradition which the spirituality of the desert would bequeath to monasticism in the West as it came to be transplanted there over the succeeding centuries.

### *Monasticism in the West*

In spite of its celebrated beginnings, the future of monasticism was not in Egypt. The Christological controversies of the fourth through sixth centuries had divided and weakened many of the Eastern churches to the point that they were not later able to withstand the Arab invasions of the seventh. Christian monasticism would continue to flourish in the East within a variety of contexts, but from this point forward it takes on a much different character than that which was to grow up in the West.

The Latin Church Fathers, especially Ss. Ambrose (d. 397), Jerome (d. 420), and Augustine (d. 430), all played a large role in establishing monasticism in the West, but above all it was the writings of John Cassian (d. ca. 433) that gave initial shape to what would become the most dynamic and influential institution in medieval Europe. Cassian was an Easterner who had spent a number of years in the Egyptian desert before finally settling down and founding a monastery of his own in southern Gaul (present day France). His *Institutes* and *Conferences*, which together paint a vivid portrait of the spirituality of the desert, would greatly influence St. Benedict, whose own Rule would recommend them.

The main difference between what monasticism became in the West and what it was in the East was its predominantly communal nature. Eastern monasticism primarily saw the *coenobium* or monastery as a preparation for the eremitic life. Solitude was the ideal; the common life was a not-always-necessary stepping stone for the spiritual novice. Cassian himself wrote under this assumption. In the West, however, the climate—both physical and cultural—always worked against the eremitic life, though it never fell out of the tradition altogether, and by the time St. Benedict composed his Rule in the sixth century, the common life was not only more popular but had become the ideal itself.

Perhaps more than anything else, it was historical circumstances that determined the form that monasticism would take in the West. The monastic movement began to take root in Europe at the same time that the Roman Empire was beginning to fall apart. The Western Empire and its infrastructure had been in steady decline from at least the beginning of the third century. By the fourth, barbarian invaders from the north had made permanent inroads, and at the end of the fifth century government in the West had ceased to function altogether.

It was a time of chaotic upheaval and great uncertainty. Christianity would have to fight for its survival, not only to prevent its institutions from being wiped away by warfare and violence, but even more so it had to preserve the cultural elements that make religion possible in the first place. By and large, it was the monks and their fortress-like monasteries who at the beginning of the Middle Ages took a stand against the many forces that would have destroyed civilization and the Christian faith along with it.

Historians often refer to the period immediately after the fall of Rome as the Dark Ages. The old Greco-Roman civilization had fallen into ruins. Very few individuals preserved the ability to read or write, and of those who did, none had a command of language that could approach the style of past ages. It was the monasteries of Western Europe that took upon themselves the task of preserving what remained of the ancient culture.

This is why one of the main tasks that monks engaged in during the Middle Ages was the copying of books. It is no accident that nearly all the libraries and schools in Europe during this time were in monasteries. It is largely on account of the efforts of medieval monks that today we still have access to the ancient sources, both Christian and pagan alike.

Monasticism, however, did more than simply preserve the culture it inherited from the ancient world; even more important, it transformed it and put it to use for the service of the Christian faith. It would be difficult to exaggerate just how much Christianity, and even Western civilization in general, owes to the efforts of the early-mediaeval monks. It is easy to take for granted, even to discount, the fact that without culture and civilization then there would be no Christianity.

On the one hand, the Christian religion is founded on the Word of God—a Word that has been preserved and handed down to us in the form of Sacred Scripture. This requires that there be people who know how to read, write, speak, and interpret. But just as fundamental to our

religion as the book, the Holy Bible, is the liturgy. The liturgy itself, of course, is founded on the book, but it is the liturgy that gives life to it—where it becomes incarnate, as it were.

It is through the liturgy that we come to share in the mystery of the Word present in the book, to enter into it, make it a part of ourselves, and put it into practice. Consider, moreover, that the liturgy is unthinkable without having a culture that is able to produce music, and artwork, and architecture, and everything else that constitutes beauty and human expression. So many of the great things that we associate with the civilization of the Middle Ages—Gregorian Chant, illuminated manuscripts, iconography, stained glass, Romanesque churches—these are all products of monastic culture, and all were inspired for the sake of enhancing the experience of the liturgy.

### *Saint Benedict and His Rule*

This spirit of preservation and transformation which animated the early monastic culture finds its fullest and most complete type in the monastic Rule of Saint Benedict of Nursia (d. 540). Considered from the standpoint of later history, from the fact that his Rule has become the foundational document of a religious order bearing his name, it is easy to think of St. Benedict as being a founder, the originator of something new, a pioneer and innovator within the monastic movement.

The reality is, however, Benedict stands at the end of this movement. He is less an innovator than he is a consolidator or synthesizer, someone who was able to deftly weave together the several traditions of spirituality that had currency in the ancient Christian world. The result was a document that has endured for over 1500 years, second only to the Bible in terms of its historical influence.

We know very little about St. Benedict as an historical figure. His Rule and the *Vita* appearing in the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory the Great (d. 604), who wrote a generation later, are the only sources we have. Born in Nursia around the year 480, he grew up in Rome before a religious conversion impelled him to seek God apart from the corruption of the city. He tried first the life of a hermit, then a disappointing attempt at a common religious life, before founding a monastery on the mountain of Cassino in southern Italy. It was here, as abbot, that Benedict

composed the Rule that would later make him so famous. He died in his monastery around the year 540.

Benedict's life corresponds to one of the most unsettling times in European history. Shortly before his birth the last Roman emperor in the West was deposed by the barbarian warlord, Odoacer (d. 493), and control over Italy and Rome was soon held by the kingdom of the Ostrogoths. In 535, the emperor of the Byzantine East, Justinian (d. 565), attempted to reconquer Italy and bring the West back into the dominion of the Empire. The result was a long, drawn out war that was devastatingly destructive to both Rome and Italy, and which ultimately led to another barbarian tribe, the Lombards, taking control. The anarchy of these historical circumstances may in part be what inspired Benedict to compose his Rule.

The Rule very much reflects an outlook which values highly the separation provided by the monastic cloister. The enclosure of the monastery forms a boundary between a world of constant change, of the vicissitudes of time and history, and one that is organized and controlled, predicable and unchanging. Benedict clearly saw that such protected space is necessary if the spiritual life is to flourish.

Moreover, perhaps further reflecting Benedict's historical situation, as has already been alluded to, the Rule is not a highly original composition; it is rather a synthesis of the entire monastic tradition and patristic legacy that had gone before. It is easy to imagine Benedict reflecting on the world that was collapsing all around him and perceiving a need to preserve in a unique way the heritage that was in danger of being lost.

Benedict's own Rule is largely a re-working of another monastic rule that had been composed not too long before his own, the so-called "Rule of the Master." The Rule of the Master has largely incurred a bad reputation within present-day monastic circles precisely because it is *not* the Rule of Benedict. Compared to its more famous progeny, the Rule of the Master is lengthy (almost three times that of Benedict's Rule), over-detailed, harsh in tone and character, and full of outmoded or, by our modern standards, unacceptable practices. These charges may well be true, but they should not take away from the fact that the Rule of the Master is itself the best known practical application of the teachings of John Cassian, and hence, through Cassian, of the Egyptian spirituality of the desert.

Benedict's choice to use the Rule of the Master as the foundation of his own Rule ensured that the desert values of asceticism and humility, obedience to a spiritual father or *abba*, and the ideal of continuous prayer leading to purity of heart, would all retain their fundamental importance in the monasticism of the West. Yet, very importantly, Benedict tempered the harshness, some would even say coldness, of the pure desert spirituality by integrating it with two other interpretations of the Christian life that had grown up in different contexts, but were by Benedict's time very influential in the West, namely, the spiritualities of the Cappadocian St. Basil the Great (d. 379), and that of St. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430).

Basil, a well-traveled native of Cappadocia in Asia Minor, had objected to the solitude of the desert hermits, believing that their way of life provided very few opportunities to engage in the prime Christian virtue of charity. His writings reflect a more apostolic interpretation of the monastic vocation, as well as one that is more integrated with, rather than separated from, the larger Christian community. Basil also lays emphasis upon the study of Scripture, as well the need to strike a balance between times for prayer, work, and holy reading. All these things Benedict would incorporate into his own Rule, and they helped to ensure that the Benedictine monastery, although separated from the world, would never find itself cut off from it.

Even more so than Basil, however, Benedict drew on the great Western Doctor, St. Augustine. The parts of the Rule that are most properly Benedict's own, and thus clearly distinguished from the Rule of the Master, take their inspiration from the bishop of Hippo. Augustine himself had lived the monastic life during the short period between his conversion and being made a bishop. Although he admired the desert hermits, his emphasis was upon the common life and the importance of fraternal relationships in finding one's way to God.

It is from Augustine that Benedict brings into his interpretation of the monastic life an eschatology that is much less future oriented, as the desert spirituality tended to be, and lays stress on the fact that the kingdom of God is already present among us—perhaps a very remarkable thing considering Benedict's own historical situation. Moderation, good zeal, fraternal charity, and mutual obedience, are the hallmarks of Benedict's Rule, and they are the fruit of an overpowering desire to love and know God. Such is the legacy of St. Augustine's contribution to the monastic life.

In composing his Rule, St. Benedict had drawn from the very best that the monastic and patristic traditions had to offer. His work of synthesis ensured that this rich classical legacy would become the heritage of the medieval Church and beyond. Yet the true importance of Benedict and his Rule lies not so much in the fact that he preserved the ancient practices and theological ideas in writing, but that he helped to transform them into a total way of life.

Through Benedict's efforts, patristic thought and spirituality would continue to survive and flourish, not because they had been preserved on the written pages of books, but because they came to be inscribed upon the hearts of men. And this living witness to the truth is something that no barbarian invasion, no heretical movement, no Reformation, no Enlightenment, no revolution, no secularization, nor any religious proscription will ever be able to wipe away. Thanks in large part to Benedict, the Gospel message has become inextricably woven into Western civilization and its culture.

### *Monasticism Since Benedict*

Monastic history, of course, does not end with the Rule of Saint Benedict in the sixth century. It remained still for the Rule to be distributed, disseminated, and established as the universal basis for the monastic life in the Western world and beyond. The work of missionary monks in the sixth through eighth centuries—from Rome to Anglo-Saxon England; from Ireland to Gaul, Switzerland, and northern Italy; and from England to Germany—served to spread the Rule throughout Europe where monasteries became centers of evangelization and culture.

They laid the groundwork for the Empire of Charlemagne (d. 814) and his sons in the ninth century, who used the Rule as the basis for achieving a synthesis between the Germanic and Roman cultures upon which they hoped to establish a unified Christendom. Though Charlemagne's Empire was short-lived, from this time forward the Rule was recognized as the undisputed standard for the monastic life in the West.

The Carolingian reform prepared the way for what is considered to be the golden-age of monasticism in the tenth through twelfth centuries, corresponding to the period known as the High Middle Ages. In this age, monastic culture flourished, and it is from these oft-called "Benedictine" centuries that we derive most of our contemporary ideas or images, many of them

stereotypical, about what a Christian monastery is. It was a highly ritualized form of life. Time in church chanting the elaborate Divine Office came to replace manual work in the fields, and what work there was tended to be of an intellectual or artistic nature: the study and assimilation of Scripture and the Church Fathers, the composition of liturgical texts and music, the copying of books, the illumination of manuscripts, and so forth.

The Romanesque architecture of abbeys and their churches very much reflected the medieval monastic outlook. The monastery ideally was a self-contained society, incorporating within its enclosure all that was necessary to sustain the life within. The walls of its church were typically thick and fortress-like, supported by roman arches; there were very few windows to let in light from the outside, and so they tended to be dim spaces. The interior would have been adorned with painting and sculpture of a highly symbolic nature, drawing from the rich imagery of Scripture, all meant to evoke a sense of the eternal. In fact, the monastery was meant to be a prefiguration on earth of the heavenly kingdom that was to come.

In large part this inward looking attitude was motivated by the dangers of a medieval world which lacked any central authority to provide protection against the multitude of outside threats. Nevertheless, the medieval monasteries were by no means completely cut off and isolated from the world in which they existed. They were famous for the hospitality they extended, to rich and poor alike, as well as for the charitable distribution of the wealth they had come to accumulate over time. The most celebrated of all the monasteries of the High Middle Ages, Cluny, in the Burgundy region of modern-day France, was even an important player in medieval politics.

Its inestimable influence on medieval culture, society, and politics, is evidence of the overwhelming success that the monastic movement came to play in the Middle Ages. Yet it also proved to be its Achilles heel. The monasteries had become the establishment; they had ceased to be a prophetic voice. They were inextricably a part of the feudal system that bound medieval society together. Naturally, as they increased in power and wealth, monasteries became the target of criticism.

St. Bernard of Clairveaux (d. 1153), the great 12th-century churchman, was especially critical of what he perceived to be the excesses of Cluny. Bernard was the leading spokesman of a monastic reform movement that had been building since the middle of the 11th century, and

which culminated in the foundation of the Cistercian Order. This was accompanied by smaller movements that sought to go back to the eremitical way of life and the spirituality of the desert.

The Cistercians themselves wished to live the Rule of Benedict more in accord with what they believed to be the intentions of the author; on that account they implemented a strict interpretation of the Rule. Their liturgy was greatly simplified, their churches less ornate, manual labor was encouraged, and they tended to dispense with much of the ritual and formalities that had grown up in the Cluniac model. The 12th-century reforms were a great success, giving new life to the monastic vocation.

This pattern would repeat itself time and again over the centuries. Monasteries, like any other human institution, tend to become stagnant over time, to become heavy with traditions whose meaning has become obscure, and to attract those whose fervor doesn't match that of the original founders. Unlike any other human institution, however, monasticism, as part of the Church, has always had a supernatural source from which to draw the waters of its renewal.

In the modern period of history, monasticism would have to draw heavily from this source in order to survive. Great changes in the makeup of society, revolutionary shifts in the way the world is perceived, and increasingly negative attitudes towards spirituality, religion, and especially the institutional Church, have posed a grave threat to the monastic way of life and its project. In the later Middle Ages, societal changes brought on by a growing urban economy raised a new set of problems that the Church had to face.

In the 13th century, new religious orders came into being, most prominently, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, in order to combat the rising threat of heresy, and to minister to the spiritual and material needs of the ever-increasing urban poor. Their way of life, although loosely based on the monastic model, dispensed with the ideal of stability and the cloister altogether; these were mendicant friars who spent their life on the move. Naturally, the rise of new orders, especially those engaged with the most pressing social problems of the day tended to draw vocations away from the older monastic establishments.

Another threat to monasticism came in the 16th century with the Reformation. Throughout much of northern Europe monasteries were suppressed by governments who were no longer loyal to the Catholic Church. This threat of suppression became even stronger in the 18th and 19th centuries. The attitude of the Enlightenment and the new scientific outlook towards

religion and spiritual matters was wholly negative. The old order—royal governments and the Roman Catholic Church, kings and priests—became the object of much hatred. Monasteries, especially in France whose Revolution was particularly violent, bore the brunt of this. Only a handful of monasteries, of what had once been many hundreds, remained in France after the dust had settled. The situation was only marginally better in other countries.

Yet, monasticism is resilient. As long as there are men and women who desire to find God in a radical way, there will always be those who will follow his call to the monastic life. In the middle of the 19th century, there was a movement in Europe to resurrect monasticism. This was partly motivated no doubt by the Romantic Movement that was then sweeping the continent, and which tended to look back at and idealize the culture of the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, this restoration was instrumental in recovering for the universal Church much of the best that medieval monastic culture had produced, especially in the area of liturgy. The revival of Gregorian chant grew out of this movement, and it also paved the way for the great liturgical reforms of the 20th century. In addition, the monastic life that came to be transplanted to the New World, to North America and beyond, owes much to the 19th-century revival.

St. Benedict had written his Rule for his own monks at Monte Cassino. It is highly unlikely that he ever intended it to become the standard for virtually all Christian monasteries in the Western world. Yet, in the early centuries when monasticism was spreading throughout formerly pagan lands, its flexibility, its moderation, its close connection with the Church in Rome, and its deep roots in the tradition, all combined to give the Rule a nearly universal appeal. It was a Rule capable of engaging with and integrating itself into the many cultures it came into contact with; through it Western monasticism preserved much of what was best of the pre-Christian world it established itself in.

In addition to that, the Rule was a link back to the sources of monasticism and to the spirituality of the Fathers. These two achievements—the transformation, even sanctification, of the world in which it came into contact with, and the continuity it maintained with the ancient sources of Christianity—are what characterize monasticism from the historical point of view. It now remains to be considered from the spiritual viewpoint, the way in which Benedictine monasticism plays out in the life of the individual monk.

## BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY

### *The Journey and the Battle*

From ancient times, the spiritual life has been compared to both a journey and a battle. The poet Homer, the fount of classical Greek literature, based his two epic poems, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, on each of these respective motifs. Scripture itself is full of military and travel imagery, and in the patristic tradition these become well-developed metaphors, especially in the literature connected with monasticism. It is not surprising then that Saint Benedict, himself deeply rooted in the tradition, employs them at the very beginning of his Rule to describe the monastic vocation.

The call to the monastic life is both a summons “to return to him from whom you have drifted,” and a charge “to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord” (RB Prol. 2, 3). These metaphors appeal to man’s fundamental experience of time in the world and his desire to find eternity. The image of the battle drives home the point that all that is good and worthwhile in life must be fought for, must be earned, and ultimately must be defended against the many forces of change that would wipe them away. That of the journey reminds us that it is not enough to stay in one place; life requires us to constantly adapt and grow, to keep moving forward.

As we have seen, these two motifs very much reflect the way in which monasticism has developed in history. Early monasticism fought diligently to preserve the Christian and classical heritages; even in modern times the preservation of culture is an important aspect of the monastic mission. Likewise, throughout the ages monasticism has had to constantly change and adapt; on the one hand, by absorbing what is best from the diversity of cultures that it has come into contact with over the centuries; on the other, by renewing itself, by returning time and again to its desert sources. Further, in its prophetic role, the monastic voice has regularly summoned the pilgrim Church forward on its universal mission.

Preservation and transformation; the battle and the journey—these lie at the heart of monastic spirituality, not only in monasticism’s public function, that is, in the role it plays in the Church and society, but equally in the life of the individual monk. By employing these two images, Saint Benedict has equipped the monk with a ready set of roles he might take up as he enters into the story of his monastic life.

The ability to conceive of himself as a spiritual soldier fighting to promote and defend the faith, or as a pilgrim upon the narrow path leading back to his divine homeland—these are what add a deeper layer of meaning, supply a wider context, to the monk’s larger vocation to a life of prayer. Monastic spirituality is not one of consolation and solace, but of mission and firm purpose.

### *The Monastic Vows*

The context in which the monk makes his journey and fights his battles are the monastic vows, as prescribed in the Rule of Saint Benedict. He makes three promises, three commitments, that will serve as the framework for his vocation: stability, *conversatio* (commonly translated as “fidelity to the monastic life”), and obedience. By living out these vows, the monk believes, with hope, that they will bring him to God and to eternal life. Understanding these, therefore, is an essential part of understanding the spirituality of Benedictine monasticism.

**Stability** might be described as the constitutive element of the monastic life; over time it is what makes the monk who he is, forming, giving shape to the core of his person. Stability, first of all, is to be understood as stability of place; it is about choosing to limit one’s world. In taking the vow of stability, the monk commits himself to living out his life in this particular monastery, at this particular time, with this particular group of people. It is an asceticism in that it requires the monk to renounce all other possibilities for his life.

He must acknowledge the fact that he cannot do everything there is to do, he cannot experience everything there is to encounter, he cannot know everything there is to learn, he cannot see everything there is to see. If the monk is going to find God he must do so within the limited universe of his monastery. Thus, stability promotes quality of life rather than quantity. It cultivates within us the ability to see the sacred in the ordinary, to recognize the divine in the things of everyday life, to know that God is present with us here and now.

This bears its most abundant fruit in our personal relationships. Stability of place provides the time necessary for our relationships with others to take root, to grow, and to flourish, and this is how we truly come to recognize the divine presence in our midst. It is through these relationships that we come to know ourselves, that we come to develop an identity

of who we are, that we gain an appreciation of what our gifts and talents mean for other people, and the impact that our lives have on theirs. When a person has lived for a long period of time in a community, there will come a moment when he realizes that his very being—who he is and his place in the world—is inseparable from the lives of the people around him.

But it is hard. Perhaps of all the vows stability is the most difficult. The great enemy of stability is the demon that the Desert Fathers described as *acedia*—restlessness, anxiety, the yearning for greener pastures, the desire to be any place other than the present one. The rewards of belonging to a community come at a price. As already described, there is the sacrifice of having to let go of all the other possibilities you could have chosen for your life. Thoughts about ‘what could have been,’ and ‘what still could be,’ are this demon’s most potent weapons.

Further, stability makes us vulnerable; it requires that we reveal ourselves, that others might get to know who we really are. On that account it is inevitable that our many flaws and weaknesses, our mistakes and personal defects will be brought to light. The temptation, of course, is to run; to leave and make a new start somewhere else with a clean slate. From this standpoint, the vow of stability is most closely related to Benedict’s motif of the battle. To achieve stability we must dig in our heels and take a stand. We must resist the temptation to flee, the temptation to seek out our unfulfilled desires. Ultimately, our life in this world is something that we must fight to stake out. The discipline of the Rule and the structure of life in the monastery provides the monk with the tools he needs to do so.

If stability is the vow which engages the monk in his monastic battle, then *conversatio* is that through which he enters upon his journey. It is the vow that calls the monk to a life of perpetual change and growth. *Conversatio* is one of those words that is very difficult to translate concisely into present-day language. Most often it is rendered “way of life,” or, not quite accurately, “conversion.” The Latin verb from which it is derived means literally to abide in a particular place, but in the sense of living with others, of having to interact with them, of sharing a way of life.

It might be said, then, that *conversatio* picks up where stability left off. Through the vow of stability the monk becomes planted, as it were, into a permanent spot and location; through the vow of *conversatio* he takes in its culture, he allows the place and the people to form him; they become a part of him. From *conversatio* we obtain our English word “conversation.” A

conversation is an exchange, a give and take, between two or more people; it involves self-revelation and discovery; its aim is to promote communion, to strengthen the bonds of relationship. In vowing *conversatio*, the monk commits himself to a life-long conversation between himself, his monastery, and the whole monastic tradition that has gone before. If he is faithful, having completed his journey, he will have come to embody that tradition itself.

If stability is the vow of permanence, continuity, and preservation, and *conversatio* that of growth and transformation, then, finally, it might be said that **obedience**, the third monastic vow, is what links these two together and makes their fulfillment possible. When Benedict summons the monk “to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord,” it is “with the strong and noble weapons of obedience” that he is to conduct his fight. When Benedict calls the monk “to return to him from whom you have drifted,” it is “the labor of obedience [that] will bring you back.”

In vowing obedience, the monk acknowledges that he can neither fight his battles by himself nor make his journey alone. Success in the monastic life comes not from ourselves, but from without. Obedience, then, might be understood as the formative principle of the monastic life; it is what makes the man a monk. Through it the grace of God is allowed to take over, so that the good works he has begun in us might be brought to their completion.

The essence of obedience is summed up in opening line of the Rule: “Listen carefully, my son,” Benedict begins, and “faithfully put [its teachings] into practice.” Obedience means hearing the Word of God and acting on it. Like the man who built his house upon rock—a Gospel reference which Benedict employs to make his point—it is the key monastic virtue, the foundation upon which the whole life depends. Benedict devotes two chapters to it, one emphasizing the obedience that is rendered to God out of fear, the other stressing the mutual obedience to one another that grows out of love. These, then, become the two pillars of monastic formation, the two hands that work to shape the monk.

On the one, obedience demands that the monk listen to those around him, in the first place, to his superiors, but also, perhaps even more importantly, to the needs of the community and its individual members. Christ, the Rule tells us, is to be found in the person of the abbot, in guests, in the sick, and through service to one another—which is to say, all those who put demands upon us.

On the other hand, obedience demands faithfulness to prayer, a constant listening for the Word of God, and contemplation upon how that Word might be put into practice. It is prayer that trains us to recognize Christ when he does appear in the moments of our daily lives. It is prayer that gives us confidence that the Lord stands by us as we fight our battles, and that it is he who leads us upon the path to salvation.

### *Monastic Prayer*

Prayer, indeed, is the heart and soul of the monastic vocation. It was the gospel precept to “pray without ceasing,” which inspired the Desert Fathers to seek out the solitude needed to put this into practice. It was the fear of losing its sources that motivated the early-medieval monks to dedicate themselves to the preservation of ancient manuscripts. It was the desire to enhance it with beauty that stirred the Cluniacs to direct all their artistic skills towards its service.

Today, it is for the sake of prayer, of finding God and entering into communion with the divine, that men and women find the courage to leave behind jobs, livelihoods, friends, family, homes, money, and everything else, in order to be part of a way of life whose sole reason for being is to give glory and honor to God our Creator.

Monastic prayer consists of two main elements. First, there is the common, public prayer of the Divine Office, the basics of which have already been described. Every few hours the monks are called back to choir by the ringing of the bells; in this way they might never stray too far from the divine source of their common life. Typically, monks spend several hours a day in Church, chanting the Divine Office together.

The foundation of the Office is the Book of Psalms. In his Rule, Saint Benedict prescribes that the entire Psalter, all 150 of them, be recited in a single week. Even this ambitious goal, an intense schedule followed today by only the strictest monasteries, Benedict claims to be a lightening of the practices of the Fathers who are said to have prayed the entire Psalter in a single day. The basic idea behind this program of prayer is that when you recite the Psalms day after day, week after week, year after year, they slowly start to become a part of you. You begin to memorize them. You find the words and phrases of these ancient prayers becoming a part of your own private, personal prayer, until one day you reach the point when the

Psalms simply are your prayer—you no longer have to make anything up. The words you need are just there, and it is God who has supplied them.

On another level, a Christological one, the Psalms are believed to contain, in poetic form, the fullness of the divine teachings. The Church Fathers even thought that the Psalms could be understood as constituting the mind of Christ. To pray the Psalms, then, and make them your own is to come to share in the life of God, to learn to see the world as he sees it.

The second main element of monastic prayer is the practice known as *lectio divina*, literally, “holy reading.” The essence of *lectio divina* is the reading of Sacred Scripture in a prayerful manner, slowly, deliberately, and meditatively. One might begin by focusing on a particular word or phrase within a passage that seems especially meaningful. After this, the passage may be read again, this time with the intent of looking for the presence of Christ within the text, and asking what it might tell us about his nature, about who he is.

Finally, and always the most challenging, the question becomes What is God asking me to do through this passage? How does it relate to me? There is no single right way to approach the practice of *lectio divina*, however. Although much literature has been written about different methods and techniques, ultimately each individual must find his own way of encountering the sacred text.

One of the most important aspects of *lectio* goes beyond the individual session or the reading of a particular passage, but rather embraces the *longue durée*, the habit of practicing *lectio* regularly over the course of a lifetime. It is here that the reader begins to enter into the deeper mystery that lies behind the words of the text, that the vision of God’s providential plan of salvation begins to unfold itself and be revealed.

The Church Fathers—particularly Origen who was extremely influential on the spirituality of desert monasticism, including John Cassian whose impact on Benedict has already been noted—distinguished between different “senses” of understanding Scripture. There is, of course, the *literal* or *historical* sense which focuses on what the human author of the text intended to say, but there is also a deeper, *spiritual* sense which aims at knowing the message that the divine author, God himself, intends to convey.

Understanding the literal sense is the work of scholarship; it involves understanding the languages, the historical situation, and the culture within which the texts were written.

Understanding the spiritual sense is the task of prayer; it involves approaching the text with the eyes of faith, with an attitude of listening. It indeed begins with the literal—the more we know about the literal sense, the more points of access we have to the spiritual. Yet these are always only the surface of something larger, entryways as it were into God’s revelation.

There are three stages or levels of the spiritual sense. From the literal the devoted reader soon passes into what the Fathers called the *tropological* or *moral* sense: what action is the text calling us to perform? what moral lesson is it teaching us? Only when we have begun to live the Gospel, to take seriously the teachings of Christ, and have experienced what discipleship means can we come to a realized understanding of the higher spiritual senses.

Following upon the moral sense is the *analogical* sense, or what we might better understand as *typology*. Typology is about learning to see Christ, being able to recognize him when he is not present to us in the literal sense, as he is in the gospels, but understanding that as the eternal Logos he stands behind all creation, behind everything that is real and true. Mistakenly, reading Scripture typologically is often equated with reading into it arbitrarily conceived analogies. This could not be further from the truth. When one is actively reading Scripture in the moral sense, obediently following the gospel precepts, and leading a Christian life, then the devoted reader soon finds the person of Christ appearing all over the biblical pages, Old Testament and New, even in places where we would least expect to encounter him.

And this leads, finally, to the highest sense of all: the *anagogical* sense, which is to say, a sense of the eternal or cosmological significance of the scriptural writings. It is to come into contact with an understanding of God’s providence, his eternal plan of salvation. It is, in fact, the height of Christian mysticism. Such an understanding of the spiritual sense of Scripture, especially its eternal significance, is not something that comes over night; it is something that must be cultivated over the course of a lifetime; it requires a commitment. It is born only out of a desire to love and to know Christ above all else, which ultimately is what the monastic program is all about.

The Divine Office and *lectio divina*, these two elements indeed form the backbone of monastic prayer. But we might also add a third. Although most monks spend several hours a

day in choir and are expected to give at least an hour of their time to *lectio*, this still falls short of the demand to “pray without ceasing.” What these formal elements train us to do, however, is to see the whole of our life, including those times when we are neither in church nor reading the Bible, as constituting one continuous, uninterrupted prayer.

John Cassian described it thus: “*Pray without ceasing*. For whoever is in the habit of praying only at the hour when the knees are bent prays very little. But whoever is distracted by any sort of wandering heart, even on bended knee, never prays. And therefore we have to be outside the hour of prayer what we want to be when we are praying” (*Conferences*, X.). He goes on to describe perfect prayer as the state of being aware of the presence of God at every moment of our life.

The art of prayerful reading, which is *lectio*—and it is an art—and the art of prayerful living, are intimately related. The gift of prayer that allows us to see Christ in all the pages of Sacred Scripture, and to perceive God’s providential plan of salvation, is the same gift that allows us to see Christ in the poor, in the sick, in guests, and in figures of authority; it is the same gift that helps us to discern and live out our vocation, which is our own individual part in God’s larger plan. A monk’s devotion to Office and to *lectio* ideally will bring him to see that the story of his own life, his own personal journey and individual battles are intimately connected to—in fact, inseparable from—the story of Sacred Scripture, the story of salvation history.

When we are able to perceive that as Christians we are heirs to ancient Israel, and as heirs, now living members of the Body of Christ with a specific mission of our own, our world becomes transformed. The things that may formerly have seemed trivial and insignificant—what we do with our lives, the individual decisions we make, the habits we form, how we treat other people, and so forth—these now appear to take on cosmic significance. God created us with a plan in mind; our lives do matter. Learning to recognize this, cultivating the faith necessary to believe this—this is what monastic prayer and spirituality are all about.

## DISCERNING A MONASTIC VOCATION

Today, the man or woman seeking God is confronted by a countless number of ways which claim to lead to him. A trip to any local bookstore will make this plainly evident. The category “Spirituality” has become one of the most popular; its shelves are now stocked with books ranging from traditional Christian spirituality, to that of the world’s other major religions, to so-called New Age, non-traditional spiritualities, along with everything else in between.

Even within Christianity itself there is the dilemma over which path to choose. A recent series of books on the various Christian spiritualities contains thirteen volumes, including titles on Carmelite spirituality, Beguine spirituality, Ignatian spirituality, Celtic spirituality, Dominican spirituality, Anglican spirituality, Franciscan spirituality, Byzantine spirituality, Cistercian spirituality, and, of course, Benedictine spirituality, among still others. It is no wonder then that so many people today are confused about how and where to find God.

It has not always been this way, however. In the early Church, until the later Middle Ages in fact, Christian spirituality was monastic spirituality; the two were virtually one and the same. The monastic vocation was simply understood as a special calling within the larger Christian mission of establishing the Kingdom of God here on earth leading to eternal life with Christ in heaven. It was in the liturgy, the highest expression of the life of the Church, where the two came together. The monasteries were the source of a tradition of liturgical prayer that flowed out to the whole of Christendom; it was through the liturgy that the fruits of monastic prayer and contemplation came to be disseminated throughout the universal Church and made accessible to all the faithful.

Today, however, our outlook on the world lacks this cohesive unity that was once assumed. The desire for God is as strong as it ever was; most of us still value the idea of spirituality and the practice of prayer or meditation, but, in our increasingly fragmented and complicated world, in addition to becoming a largely private affair, we now tend to look at it as just one aspect among many that contributes to living a healthy and balanced life.

The values that lay behind the spirituality of the monastic life and a devotion to the liturgy—the desert ideals of asceticism, obedience to a spiritual authority, commitment to a worshipping community, the discipline of a regular program of prayer, and an intense devotion

to the mysteries of Sacred Scripture—have largely fallen out of fashion. In general, it could be argued, the great variety of post-monastic spiritualities and methods of prayer have come into being in order to meet the needs of people who have become increasingly disconnected from the liturgical life of the Church.

It is interesting, however, that since the time of the Second Vatican Council, and especially in the last 25 years, we are starting to see a resurgence in the popularity of monastic spirituality, especially among the laity. Dozens of books have been written during this time on the subject, and most of these, if not written by lay people themselves, are certainly directed towards them. At the same time, the exponential growth of secular oblate programs at many monasteries in this country also points to the growing attraction of monastic spirituality.

Perhaps this might be seen as a reaction to the fragmentation and compartmentalization of prayer and spirituality so characteristic of modern-day religion. Today it has become tremendously difficult to live a life where spirituality, religion, church, God, and prayer, are not just the *center* of one's life, but actually *are* one's life. In fact, it might be said that one reason why Benedictine spirituality continues to grow in popularity is because it transcends the category of spirituality altogether.

Benedictine spirituality is a complete way of life. It demands not just precedence over all the other categories of our life—such as our social life, our work life, our family life, the life surrounding our hobbies and intellectual pursuits, among the many other possible lives that each of us lives—even more, it demands that all of these be completely subsumed, taken into, and transformed by our spiritual life. Benedictine spirituality demands a life that is directed wholly and entirely towards God, not just at certain times, but at all times. It calls for, not a compartmentalized, but rather an *undivided* heart. This is what monastic life is all about, and it is the sort of life that people today in our increasingly complicated world are hungering for.

Still, during this same period, vocations to the monastic life—as indeed vocations to nearly all forms of religious life—have continued to decline. The proliferation of publications and the recent success of oblate and other affiliate programs indicates that the monastic life and its spirituality are as popular as ever, yet, those wishing to engage it are choosing to do so apart from the commitments of taking vows, making hard personal sacrifices, or living in community.

This is not at all to criticize those whose lives have been deeply touched through their contact with Benedictine life. It is a wonderful thing indeed to see the fruits of monastic life—the seeds of which had first been planted by Christ and the apostles, and which brought forth its first shoots in the deserts of Egypt, and then, as it threatened to grow into something wild and unruly, brought under cultivation by the Fathers of the Church, culminating in Saint Benedict himself, and subsequently pruned and directed over the centuries by countless monastic leaders—it is a wonderful thing to see this way of life bearing abundant fruit from which all God’s people, including the laity, are now able to draw increasing nourishment.

Yet, the danger in our post-Vatican II Church, which has opened up and made available so much of the vast storehouse of the ancient spirituality, is that we will become, not just content to live off the spiritual nourishment of the Fathers, but that we will even become wholly dependent on it, losing in the process the art of being able to bring forth the new altogether. These reserves of wisdom, though deep, cannot sustain the Church on its pilgrim journey indefinitely. There is the constant need for each generation to raise up new prophets, new masters of the spiritual soil, who will cultivate and reap a fresh harvest, lest the long winter exhaust the current supply.

Saint Benedict writes in his Rule, in the chapter concerning manual labor, that “when they live by the effort of their own hands, just as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are truly monks” (RB 48.8). It is a quotation that has long served as a strong weapon for those who would wish to point out the excesses of monasticism, or who would dispute that study, intellectual work, pursuit of the arts, leisure, and contemplation are genuine activities for monks.

Like everything else in the Rule, however, because it is a document that aims for a meaning ultimately higher than the letter of the text, this passage too unfolds into a deeper spiritual meaning. Work for Benedict is always seen as a means, never an end, of the monastic life. A monk is a seeker of God; that he must work to support his efforts to do so is a given. His chief work, however, always remains that of prayer, and everything else he does—including his work—must somehow contribute to this.

It is an expression of faith in the words of Christ that, “not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4; Dt 8:3). The monastery exists for the purpose of cultivating this Word of God; the “true monk” is one who is called to

contribute to the bringing forth of its harvest. This is the deeper meaning of what the monastic vocation is all about. The monastic vocation is ultimately a mystical one.

Although it is often misunderstood, mystical prayer (or contemplative prayer as it is more often called) serves a vital and essential function in the life of the Church. Properly seen, mysticism is the end and goal of all our prayer and worship. To recognize the presence of the living yet unseen God in the world around us, to come into intimate contact with the divine Wisdom, although always an individual and unrepeatable experience, and thus evasive to our conceptual language, is itself a prelude to our ultimate desire for union with him.

Such experience is what fortifies our faith, enkindles our hope, and becomes the source of our ever-expanding capacity to love. The monastery and its whole structure of life are designed to facilitate this mystical form of prayer. The cloister walls, the monastic habit, the silence, the rituals, the discipline, even the cell of the individual monk: all of these help create the interior space needed for the monk to be drawn deeper into the mysteries of Christ.

Beneficial and sanctifying for the individual monk as this form of prayer may be, it is ultimately not for his own sake that he pursues it. Mystical prayer, as Saint Augustine describes it (*De Doctrina*, Bk. I), involves two aspects: on the one hand, penetrating the deeper, hidden mysteries of Sacred Scripture; on the other, conveying these mysteries—or at least the way that leads to them—to others. To do so is to share in the creative power of God, and it is, at last, an act of love.

How difficult it is to put into speech the Wisdom that is essentially unspeakable, to preserve the infinite in finite words. Yet this is precisely what God himself did in sending forth his Word, and it is ultimately for the sake of cultivating this Word that the monastic life exists. By their devotion to Sacred Scripture, monks at all times have labored to preserve it; through their commitment to prayer, they have been brought to understand it; and, above all, in the celebration of the liturgy, they have found the means to communicate it.

Indeed, the liturgy might properly be seen as the highest expression of Benedictine spirituality and the monastic life. It stands at the center of monastic culture. Over the centuries all its energies have been brought to bear on it, all its resources put to the service of it, in order to infuse it with beauty and meaning. It is in the liturgy where we come into contact with the soul

of Christ; the whole liturgical year is structured around the mysteries that surround his person; every mass is an opportunity to be fed and nourished by his Word and Body.

It is the place where heaven and earth meet, where ordinary bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, where the Kingdom of God as present looks forward to its future, perfect fulfillment. It is the place where the fruits of centuries of monastic prayer and mystical contemplation are made available to all the faithful; it is here that the inner life of the monastery meets the world.

The liturgy, which serves to draw all of us into these mysteries of contemplative prayer, is at one and the same time the outcome or produce of such prayer. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two. From the same vine comes both the fruit which nourishes us on our spiritual journey, and the seed which falls to the ground and dies.

While all the faithful, monk and layman alike, are invited to share in the divine banquet that flows from this harvest, it is the unique vocation of the monk to serve it—to cultivate the seeds, to tend the vine, to reap its produce, to prepare the table. “When they live by the effort of their own hands, just as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are truly monks.”

If the recent revival of interest in monastic spirituality has any lasting impact, if the Council’s call for a return to the sources should be sustained beyond its initial fervor, then let us hope that the result is a renewed devotion to the Church’s sacred liturgy. It is only here that the monastic ideal of a unified life, of an undivided heart, might be completely fulfilled. On that account, as much as ever before, the Church needs vocations to the monastic life. Lay oblation will not be enough to maintain the spiritual lifeblood that this most ancient way of serving the Church supplies.

Those discerning monastic life will certainly be attracted to a monastery whose works and ministries are in harmony with their own interests and talents; but the opportunity to engage in such pursuits should never be the criteria for determining a vocation. Not everyone called to the monastic life will necessarily become a mystic or a contemplative in the strictest sense of the term; but all must have an awareness of the greater work that is taking place—the *Opus Dei*, the Work of God, the life of prayer—to which all monks in their own unique way contribute.



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