



BENEDICTINE MONASTICISM AND THE LAY VOCATION

by

ANDREW BOURQUE, B.A., B.Ed., M.R.E.

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Theological Studies



Faculty of Theology
St. Peter's Seminary at The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

© Copyright by Andrew Bourque, April 2010



This paper is dedicated to the blessed memory of my Grandmother, Marguerite Jones, who gave me some of my earliest and fondest memories of church and whose simple, but profound Christian faith continues to inspire me.



y the grace of God, monastic life has played an integral role in the growth and development of the Church. From its remote beginnings in the windswept wilderness of Egypt, monastic life grew to influence every aspect of ecclesial life. From liturgy, to prayer and spirituality, to the propagation of the Christian faith itself, monasticism has been a cornerstone in the Church's spiritual foundation. In fact, the magnitude of this impact caused St. Theodore the Studite to remark, "monastics are the sinews and foundations of the Church".¹ This influence, while evolving, continues to this day. Contemporary Christians, of all traditions and vocations, find solace and inspiration in the witness of monastic life. Whether it is in the enduring popularity of monastic authors such as Thomas Merton or Basil Pennington, the commercial success of Gregorian chant audio recordings or the recent Carthusian documentary film entitled *Into*

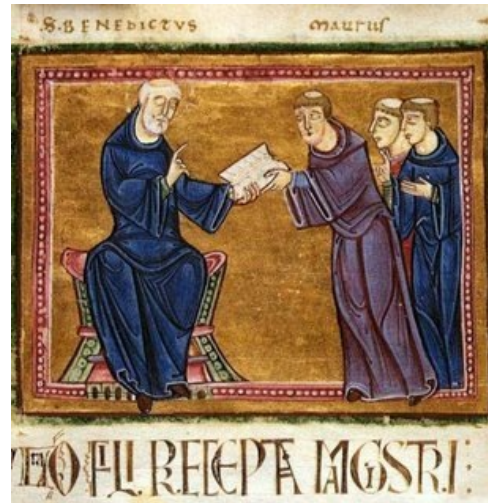
¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: New Edition* (London: Penguin, 1997), 183.

Great Silence, there can be little doubt that the monastic ideal continues to be a source of profound interest for the modern pilgrim.

Since the Second Vatican Council, monastic life has increasingly offered its wisdom to the laity. This is perhaps one of the most exciting developments in the evolution of monastic influence in the Church. Increasingly, lay Christians are finding that the lessons and rhythms of monastic life offer a vibrant and practical way of living their baptismal call in the world. This engagement between Catholic monastics and laity has taken many forms, but perhaps the most fruitful of these engagements are between laypeople and those monastics that follow the Rule of St. Benedict.

Since its writing in fifth-century Italy, the Rule of St. Benedict has been the dominant monastic rule for the Western Church. It is a small document, but its profound humanity, balance and spirituality has provided the foundation for monastic life in the West. To this day, thousands of nuns and monks base their spiritual lives on this work. At the same time, however thousands of laypeople are doing the same. Laypeople are doing this through the independent implementation of Benedictine values in their lives or by formal association with specific monastic communities via oblate programmes. The Church is rediscovering that the Rule of St. Benedict has the power to guide Christian lives both inside and outside the cloister walls.

In light of the historical importance of monastic life, its profound impact on the Church, and its enduring inspiration for consecrated and lay Christians, this paper will explore the role of monastic life in the Church and specifically, how the monastic values, as exemplified by the *Rule of St. Benedict*, can support and nourish the lay vocation.



St. Benedict gives the Rule to his first disciple St. Maurus.
 (France, Monastery of St. Gilles, Nimes, A.D. 1129).

Chapter I: The Origins of Christian Monasticism.

Monastic life occupies a place of mystery in the popular imagination of the West. It evokes medieval images of mysticism and a rarefied spirituality far removed from the concerns of “the world”. Even among Catholics, this rich spiritual tradition remains shrouded in cloistered ambiguity. What is often forgotten is that monasticism, while ancient, continues to be a dynamic presence in both the Church and the modern world. Rather than shunning the world, the disciplines and wisdom of the monastic tradition provide an integral path of Christian discipleship that ultimately drives its adherents to a deeper, Christian embrace of the world. This chapter will seek to shed light on the origins and development of Christian monasticism so that our contemporary exploration of this subject can be better rooted in the origins and original ideals of this Christian way of life. It will do this by illuminating key aspects of monastic history, identity and spirituality in

order to cast aside both the myth and mystery that continue to surround this profound and ancient path of holiness.

There is something universal about the monastic impulse. With few exceptions, various modes of monastic or contemplative life can be found woven throughout the religions and cultures of the world. From Buddhist monks, to the wandering Hindu *sadhu*, the contemplative and monastic impulse toward total devotion, intense spiritual discipline and solitude appears to be a universal human response to deeply held moral and spiritual convictions.² In his article on monastic interreligious dialogue, Bishop Pietro Rossano describes what he calls a “monastic archetype”³. According to Rossano, this archetype transcends all cultures and religions and seeks the transformation of the human person through “...the search for the Absolute and the Permanent; detachment from the transitory and ephemeral; asceticism and freedom of the spirit; rules of living and discipline; personal poverty and spiritual wealth...peace and silence; gentleness and benevolence; purity and sobriety”.⁴ This is Christian monasticism’s common human heritage. In his article on monastic ecumenism, Trappist monk and writer Thomas Keating describes monastics as “...the most typical example of the *homo religiosus*”.⁵ Monks of all stripes are icons of the universal religious impulse; as such, they represent

² David Knowles, Christian Monasticism (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 9.

³ Bishop Pietro Rossano was an auxiliary bishop of Rome from 1982 to 1991, and served in leading roles at the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue from 1965 to 1982.

⁴ Pietro Rossano, “Dialogue between Christian and Non-Christian Monks: Opportunities and Difficulties,” Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin 10 (1981), Accessed on-line: 13 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=21>>.

⁵ Thomas Keating, “Awakening of a Truly Ecumenical Conscience,” Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin 31 (1988), Accessed on-line: 13 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=75>>.

the innate human drive toward the transcendent. This universal impulse was perhaps best expressed by Henry David Thoreau when he wrote of his decision to live in solitude: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived”.⁶ In this sense, it could be said that one of the foundational sources for Christian monasticism is simply the nature of the human soul.

If monastic life is a natural response of the soul to the transcendent, then Christian monasticism is the specific response of humanity to the Incarnation of Christ. Says Thomas Merton, “...the Word made flesh. *Verbum caro factum est*. This truth is the foundation stone of our monastic life”.⁷ Christian monasticism is a focusing of that natural monastic archetypal impulse toward a personal encounter with the Risen Lord. One could say that this is a concrete example of grace building upon nature. Therefore, Christian monasticism is not some sort of generic spiritual path but rather begins and ends with Christ. For example, in his monastic rule St. Benedict reminds his monks that “...the love of Christ must come before all else”.⁸ With this essential point kept firmly in mind, it is at this point one can start to explore Christian monasticism’s historical and theological foundations.

⁶ Henry David Thoreau, Walden; or Life in the Woods (New York: Dover, 1995), 27.

⁷ Thomas Merton, The Monastic Journey (Kansas: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1977), 16.

⁸ Timothy Fry, ed, RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict 1980: In Latin and English with Notes, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 183. Note: Like the Bible, the Rule of St. Benedict is organized by chapter and verse. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from the Rule will be from the aforementioned edition, and the reference will be to the chapter and verse, not page number. For example: RB 4:21.

Most treatments of monastic history begin in the third century with St. Anthony of the Desert and a group of Christian ascetics collectively known as the Desert Fathers (and Mothers). While this era marks the beginnings of a truly discernable mode of Christian monastic life, it is important to remember that the monastic life of the Desert Fathers has far deeper roots that originate in the life of Christ, his teachings and the life of the apostolic Church.

The New Testament Roots of Christian Monasticism.

Thomas Merton described Catholic monastic life as a person's response "...to a positive call from God".⁹ That monastic "call" is the same call of Christ: "to repent and believe the Good News"¹⁰ This is a foundational point for understanding monastic spirituality, its role in the Church and its relation to the lay vocation. Many contemporary writings on monastic life treat monasticism as an end in itself. This is false, as the whole monastic endeavor is centered on Christ. Anglican priest and scholar Derwas J. Chitty explains it this way: "But one thread alone can give our story [of the development of monasticism] its true meaning—the search for personal holiness, the following of the Lord Jesus, whether in the solitary cell or on the abbot's seat, or in all the menial works of the monastery."¹¹ One of the mottos of the Benedictine order puts it even more

⁹ Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Life* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Book Service, 1974), 2.

¹⁰ Mark 1:15. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from: *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*. Fully rev. ed. Kenneth L. Barker, gen. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.

¹¹ M.C. Steenberg, "A Gospel Motivation for the Monastic Life," *Monachos.net*, February 2001, Monachos, Accessed on-line: 12 Sept. 2009 <<http://www.monachos.net/content/monasticism/monastic-studies/90-a-gospel-motivation-for-the-monastic-life>>.

succinctly: *Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus* (That God may be glorified in everything).¹²

Simply put, the monastic adventure is a wholehearted response to live Christ's call to conversion and union with God.

Christian monastic life is not an elite form of Christianity to which only a few are called. Rather it is a particular, although intense, response to the call of *metanoia* issued by Christ to all people. Says Thomas Merton, "The monk is just an ordinary Christian who lives, in the monastery, the ordinary Christian life: but he lives it in all its perfection".¹³ This quote illustrates two important aspects of the monastic way. The first is that it embodies an intense, but normative, response to the Gospel. Secondly, monastic life gives witness to foundational aspects of Christian life. It is a continual reminder to the Church of "the better part".¹⁴ As a result, monastic life has an iconic role in reminding the wider Christian community of the constitutive elements of Christian discipleship such as prayer, work, watchfulness, charity, community and self-discipline – no matter the milieu or state of life in which they are lived.

It is important to note that monasticism, as it is now commonly understood, did not start to develop into a discernable form until the third century.¹⁵ However, it would be incorrect to suppose that the early Christian ideal had no influence on, or continuity with, monasticism's later development. For many early monks, there was a clear identification of the monastic life with the early Christian community as described in the Acts of the

¹² 1 Peter 4:11.

¹³ Merton, *Monastic Journey*, 48.

¹⁴ Luke 10:42. The "better part" is not one of vocational hierarchy, but rather the spiritual prioritisation of putting the worship of God first in one's life. This applies to all vocations.

¹⁵ Knowles, 11.

Apostles. The relationship of monastic life to “ordinary” early Christian discipleship was not lost on the early monks nor is it on their modern counterparts.

In the Acts of the Apostles and other New Testament works there emerges a distinct manner of living among those who follow “*the Way*”. In Acts’ description of the early Jerusalem church, one sees a renunciation of possessions and a communal manner of living.¹⁶ It is also clear from both the New Testament, and early Christian documents like the *Didache*, that the early Christians were developing a practice of praying at set times and a tradition of asceticism. Moreover, in addition to Christ’s discussion on “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom”, St. Paul also encourages celibacy.¹⁷ While celibacy was not a mandatory feature of early Christian life, it is clear that it was both encouraged and esteemed by the early Church. In fact, one sees the emergence of what could be described as a semi-monastic state with the orders of widows and virgins.¹⁸ However, overarching all this was the express desire of the early Christians to follow Christ’s exhortation to love God and one another.¹⁹ It is this example that inspired St. Benedict five centuries later to describe the monastery as “a school of the Lord’s service”²⁰ so that his monks would learn to “...show the pure love of brothers and to God loving fear”.²¹

¹⁶ Acts 4: 32, 34-35.

¹⁷ Matthew 19:12, 1Corinthians 7:32-33.

¹⁸ Knowles, 11.

¹⁹ John 13:34.

²⁰ RB Pro: 45.

²¹ RB 72: 8.

At it was said earlier, it would be misleading and incorrect to describe the early Christians, as did Cassian, as the “most ancient of monks”.²² Nevertheless, what can be said with certainty is that the evolution of monastic life reveals a concerted effort to imitate the early Christian community, particularly in its love for God and neighbour, and it is through that reality one can describe monastic life as a true expression of the *vita apostolica*.

St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers.

Even though elements of monastic life were present in the apostolic Church, monasticism as a distinct and visible way of life did not appear until the third century. It was in this era that the monastic ideal grew and blossomed, forcing us to ask: what caused men and women in the third century to flee the cities in droves and adopt lives of solitude and intense asceticism?

To be a Christian in the early centuries of the Church required an extraordinary level of commitment and resolve. The follower of Christ faced ostracization by Roman society, and the threat of arrest and execution. In addition, Christian life itself was vigorous and demanding. Both the New Testament and early Christian documents attest to the rigorous life of asceticism adopted by members of the early Church. St. Augustine reminds his readers that the Christian life is one of challenge: “Our pilgrimage on earth cannot be exempt from trial. We progress by means of trial.” With the persecution of the early Church fresh in his mind, St. Augustine, like his predecessors, knew that being a Christian was not for the faint of heart.

²² Boniface Ramsey, Beginning to Read the Fathers (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 154.

However, this rapidly changed when in AD 313 the Emperor Constantine issued his famed *Edict of Milan* that allowed for the free practice of the Christian faith. As the Church emerged from the catacombs, Christians soon discovered that their faith was now *in vogue* among the wider population and was gaining imperial favour. By the time Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire by Gratian in AD 390, the Church had ascended from a life of persecuted poverty to one of imperial wealth and influence.

Despite the embrace of Roman society, the Church did not forget its persecuted past. In the early Church, martyrdom was seen as the ultimate expression of one's commitment to Christ. Tertullian went so far as to say, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." With Christianity now being embraced and even fashionable, the possibility of being a martyr, a witness, was fast disappearing. In addition, with imperial favor came a certain level of laxity in lives of ordinary Christians. Christian life was becoming pedestrian and for some this was an intolerable situation.

One could describe monasticism as a type of protest movement. It was also a movement that consisted primarily of laypeople. Even though some Christians were already living intense lives of solitude and ascetism prior to the legalization of Christianity, the taming of the early Christian ideal through its widespread acceptance inspired many Christians to adopt this more intense way of life.²³ The most famous of these was St. Anthony of the Desert.

²³ Andre Louf, *The Cistercian Way* (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 27.

The life of St. Anthony is made known to us through the famous biography written by St. Athanasius around AD 360. Originally intended as a monastic rule and guide in narrative form, this biography of a saint, by a saint, was a veritable “best seller”.²⁴ This biography struck a chord with the Church who, in the midst of growing Christian laxity, was looking for a new paradigm of zeal and heroism to match that of the apostolic Church. For the Christians of this time, monasticism became the new “white” martyrdom.²⁵

St. Anthony of the Desert is regarded by both the Catholic and Orthodox churches as the “Father of all Monks”. While not the first monk, his life and example became the archetype to which all subsequent monastics looked. St. Anthony lived an extraordinarily long one hundred and five years (AD 251-356).²⁶ Born the son of wealthy landowners, Anthony decided to retreat to the desert when he heard in church the passage from Matthew 19:21 in which Christ says: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” After making sure his sister was taken care of, Anthony divested himself of his wealth and privilege and retreated to the Egyptian desert outside of Alexandria.

²⁴ Ramsey, 149.

²⁵ Orthodox Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware explains the distinction between the types of martyrdom in the following quote: “St. Cyprian of Carthage, in the middle of the third century, renders the distinction vivid by speaking of ‘red’ and ‘white’ martyrdom – the red martyrdom of blood in times of persecution, the white martyrdom of self-sacrificing compassion and acts of charity in times of peace. The Irish elaborated the idea still further by speaking of a threefold martyrdom, red, white and green; red martyrdom is to shed one’s blood for Christ; white martyrdom is to abandon everything one loves for God’s sake, that is, to accept the vocation of wandering, pilgrimage, voluntary exile for Christ; green martyrdom is ‘to free oneself from evil desires by means of fasting and labor,’ pursuing the ascetic way in one’s homeland.” Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 121.

²⁶ John Vidmar, *The Catholic Church Through the Ages* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 76.

Broadly speaking, Anthony's life can be broken into two periods.²⁷ The first ranged from the ages of eighteen to fifty-five, during which Anthony placed himself under the discipleship of a hermit and then withdrew to a life of total solitude. During this time, Anthony engaged in intense prayer and asceticism. In fact, he locked himself in an abandoned fort and saw no one for approximately twenty years.²⁸ During this time, his asceticism included long sessions of prayer, work, fasting, night vigils, and combating demonic temptations. The second part of his life shows Anthony emerging from total seclusion to a life of deeper engagement with the world. Anthony remained in the desert but received visitors, had a small group of disciples and even found himself engaged in theological battle with the Arians. Anthony's wisdom and holiness became widely known. Described by St. Athanasius as "a physician to all Egypt"²⁹, Anthony died a celebrated saint and the inspiration for the explosion of monastic life that would follow soon after his repose.

St. Anthony's life set the standard for all monastics afterward. Anthony did this in two ways. The first was in his ascetical life. Anthony did not engage in ascetic discipline out of some sort of masochistic fetish. Rather, Anthony's attraction to the desert was rooted in Christ's example. In the Synoptic Gospels, Christ retreats to the desert for forty days of prayer and fasting.³⁰ Christ did this to prepare for his public ministry; Anthony did this to purify himself so that Christ could shine through him.

²⁷ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 39.

²⁸ Ramsey, 150.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁰ Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.

The true purpose of monastic asceticism is revealed when Athanasius recounts Anthony's emergence from complete solitude: "His body was in its former state, and it was neither obese by reason of lack of exercise nor emaciated by reason of fasting and his struggle with demons... the condition of his soul was pure too...he was completely even-tempered, as one would be who was governed by reason, and in him everything was in its natural state."³¹ Anthony's asceticism restored him to health in body, mind and soul. It was a return to wholeness. In this sense, Anthony sets the ascetic standard. In essence, monastic asceticism should have as its end the restoration, by God's grace, of humanity's natural state as "the image and likeness of God".³² In the sayings of the Desert Fathers, there is a following story which illustrates this point: "Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and, as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'"³³ Thus, the monastic paradigm set by Anthony is not a life of self-indulgent "navel gazing", but rather a concerted and purposeful life of transformation to overcome particular failings and defects so that God's love and grace can shine through us all the more.

The second paradigm that Anthony establishes is found in his re-engagement with the world. After Anthony had purified himself, he re-engaged the world with renewed vigor. To be certain, he maintained his monastic witness, but at the same time, he had

³¹ Ramsey, 157-158.

³² Genesis 1:26.

³³ Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 103.

purified himself to such an extent that he had gained the gifts of discernment and could shepherd others as a spiritual father.³⁴ He had truly “removed the plank from his own eye”, and could now see clearly to remove the speck from his brother’s eye.³⁵ This, says Orthodox Bishop and monk Timothy Ware, is the saintly pattern of “withdrawal for the sake of return”.³⁶ Monastic life is not supposed to be a self-contained circle, but rather its gifts and wisdom are meant to be shared. The monastery should be a lighthouse illuminating the way to God.

Drawing upon Anthony’s example, thousands of men and women fled to the wilderness in pursuit of holiness. The people who sought this life have come to be known as the Desert Fathers³⁷. The early days of monasticism were not organized. Usually, groups of monastics would loosely congregate around a venerated elder. These elders would respectfully be addressed as *Abba*³⁸ (Father) or *Amma* (Mother). Usually, each monastic would live on his or her own, and gather from time to time with other monks for worship or to “receive a word” of holy wisdom from an elder monk. This was a time of great growth in monastic identity; at the same time however, this loose and unorganized manner of monastic living would produce problems that would have to be addressed if it was to survive as a viable way of Christian life.

³⁴ Ware, Orthodox Church, 40.

³⁵ Matthew 7:3-5.

³⁶ Ware, Orthodox Church, 40.

³⁷ Those who lived this desert life in the 3rd century included both men and women. Therefore, there were “Desert Mothers” as well. Traditionally, the term “Desert Father” is meant to be inclusive and refers to the various sayings of both male and female ascetics during this period. In this essay, for stylistic reasons, the older term “Desert Fathers” will be used and is meant to include the holy women of this era as well.

³⁸ It is from this word that the monastic title “abbot” is derived.

In terms of growth and development, the distinctive features of monastic life became discernable. As discussed earlier, silence and solitude were key features of this life. It was during this period that the title “*monk*” started to be applied to the people who adopted the ascetical life.³⁹ Up until that point, these men and women were simply known as devout Christians. The word “*monk*” comes from the Greek word “*monachos*”, which means “one who lives alone”.⁴⁰ Usually, this term is used to refer to the solitary and celibate lifestyle of the monk. However, it can also refer to the fact that the monk has one goal in his life: namely God. It can also signify the fact that the monk, like St. Anthony, hopes to unify his being, and thereby achieve a sense of oneness with God by following the monastic way.⁴¹ In any case, the fact that a particular term is applied to these individuals demonstrates the fact that a distinct spirituality was in the process of developing.

In his book on the Desert Fathers, professor and Anglican clergyman David Keller discusses the development of the desert monastic life by third-century Desert Father Abba Evagrius.⁴² According to Keller, Abba Evagrius was one of the first Desert Fathers to articulate the key features of the emerging spirituality of the Egyptian desert. For Keller, the key features of this spirituality can be broken down into a variety of categories.⁴³ One of the key aspects was what he calls “*praktike*”. This practical aspect of the desert way

³⁹ Louf, 26.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² David Keller, Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 26.

⁴³ Ibid., 29.

was the means by which the monk was led to deeper conversion and union with Christ. According to Keller, the spiritual discipline of the early monks was threefold.⁴⁴ The first was a biblical knowledge. The Desert Fathers placed a great priority on the study of sacred scripture. Even illiterate monks were known to memorise vast sections of the Bible. One of the cornerstones of monastic prayer was the memorization and reciting of the Psalms. This practice would develop into the venerable tradition of the slow meditative reading of the Bible known as *lectio divina*.⁴⁵ Secondly, the desert ascetics placed a special emphasis on daily conversion through constant prayer and spiritual discipline. The desert monks kept set times of prayer, but also developed a tradition of quiet contemplation and the use of repetitive prayers like the “Jesus Prayer” or appeals to the Mother of God.⁴⁶ They also disciplined themselves through practice of all-night prayer vigils and various bodily mortifications such as fasting. The love of neighbour was the final aspect. For the desert monk, love of neighbour was expressed through labour and physical activity. The monk was not to be idle and many supported themselves through the making of simple crafts. In addition, monks would visit each other to offer spiritual comfort, encouragement and “a word” of wisdom.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Lectio Divina* (or *lectio* for short) literally means “divine or sacred reading”. This method of prayer is punctuated by a slow, contemplative reading of the Bible. Rather than reading the Bible, one could say that the Bible is prayed. This is an ancient form of prayer and is a spiritual practice that is valued highly among monastics to this day. In fact, along with the Divine Office this discipline is one the major pillars of monastic spiritual practice. It forms an essential part of being attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the life of a particular monk or nun. In recent decades, this ancient form of prayer has grown in popularity among the laity across all ecclesial lines. For lay people following the Benedictine path, this discipline is essential. There are many books on this subject. For an excellent introduction see: Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).

⁴⁶ For an excellent study on the spiritual practices of the Church Fathers (including the Desert Fathers) see: Gabriel Bunge, *Earthen Vessels: The Practice of Personal Prayer According to the Patristic Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002). _

When taken as a whole, one can easily discern the basic elements common to all forms of Christian monasticism. They can be summarized as: the worship of God through formal and private prayer, spiritual reading and study (*lectio divina*), asceticism, work, and community. It is for this reason that the era of the Desert Fathers becomes the touchstone for all subsequent monastic movements in the Church. It was from Egypt that monasticism spread throughout the ancient world. The desert life was also revered by the Church Fathers. In fact, the vast majority of Church Fathers lived the monastic life for at least a portion, if not all, of their lives. For later generations of monks and nuns, this era is looked upon as the ideal to which all monastics should aspire. This is often reflected in monastic literature and nomenclature. For example, certain contemplative orders like the Carmelites, will sometimes refer to their monasteries as “deserts”.⁴⁷ Other orders, like the Carthusians and the Camaldolese Benedictines, strive to imitate the hermit spirituality of the early Desert Fathers. To be certain, Christ’s temptation in the desert for forty days and nights stands as the ultimate source of this admiration of the desert experience, but buried deep within the monastic sub-consciousness is a desire to imitate the rugged, primitive monasticism of the Desert Fathers.

Despite the great wisdom and holiness that flowed from the intense spiritual lives of the Desert Fathers, problems did begin to develop. It should be noted that as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, monks were also granted

⁴⁷ For example, St. Therese of Lisieux wrote the following in her autobiography: “When thinking over all you had said, I felt that Carmel was the desert where God wanted me to go also hide myself.” Later Therese writes about how she felt when she first entered the Carmelite convent “Everything thrilled me; I felt as though I had been transported into a desert; our little cell, above all filled me with joy.” John Clarke, trans, Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976), 58, 148.

special privileges; monks were exempt from taxes, military service and conscripted labour.⁴⁸ The privileged status of the monk soon attracted less stellar examples of monastic detachment and holiness. These “monastic mooches” would wander from monastery to monastery looking for lodging and food. Others used the monastic life to avoid work and, in some cases, the law. Still others did not follow a rule and simply adopted whatever spiritual discipline fancied them. St. Benedict rails against these types of monks in the first chapter of his rule, calling them “the most detestable kind of monks”.⁴⁹ On the other end of the spectrum, some monks adopted extremely harsh forms of asceticism that went far beyond the original ideal set by St. Anthony. Among these groups, asceticism was not a means of achieving union with God, but instead became an end in itself, with monks competing to see who could adopt the most severe penances.

Up until this point, monastic life was primarily solitary or *eremitic* in nature. Its focus was on the hermit vocation. However, in the face of a growing need for regulation and accountability, a new form of monastic organization soon arose. This type of monastic life would come to be known as *cenobitic* or community based.

St. Pachomius is often credited with establishing cenobitic monasticism. Pachomius was born in the late third century. A pagan by birth, he first encountered Christianity while serving as a conscripted soldier in the service of the Emperor Maximinus against Licinius.⁵⁰ While a prisoner of war in Egypt, Pachomius received

⁴⁸ Knowles, 12.

⁴⁹ RB 1:6-11.

⁵⁰ Mayeul de Dreuille, Seeking Absolute Love: The Founders of Christian Monasticism (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 26.

food and comfort from the local Christians who would often visit the camp. The selfless love of the Christians impressed him so deeply that he embraced the Christian faith and was baptized in his mid-twenties. After this, he devoted himself to helping the poor, but felt a deeper call to prayer and solitude. In the fashion of the time, he placed himself under the tutelage of an older hermit named Palamon in order to learn the monastic way.⁵¹

Pachomius' initiation into monastic life, which was typical for the time, is helpful in helping one appreciate the revolutionary step that he would later take by establishing an organized monastery. As mentioned earlier, monastic life was unorganized. There were common features of what constituted the monastic life, but apart from the most basic admonitions, there was little in the way of formalized monastic legislation. For example, when Pachomius was initiated as a monk he was told: "to keep vigil, to recite God's word, to work with his hands for his bodily needs and to distribute any surplus to the poor; to fast until evening during the summer, and every two or three days in the winter."⁵² This advice, plus the personal example of his spiritual father, was usually all the advice and guidance a young monk received before embarking on his own life of prayer, asceticism and solitude. To be certain, the years living with one's spiritual father provided a practical, lived example of monastic vigilance that would serve the young monk throughout his days. However, the unorganized nature of monastic life left open the possibility of abuses, namely laxity or brutal extremes of asceticism.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 27.

According to legend, Pachomius received inspiration to establish a monastery shortly after the death of his spiritual father. Pachomius had noticed that many potential monks were deterred from the monastic vocation by the extreme way of living that many desert hermits had adopted. Therefore, part of the reasoning behind this new foundation was to provide people a place to be trained in the monastic life via a uniform and balanced means. Such a monastery also had the added benefit of ensuring accountability and thereby doing much to eliminate laxity and other abuses.

The Pachomian model for monasteries established much of what is presently presumed as essential in any religious house. Perhaps inspired by the military camps of his youth, each monastery had a gatehouse, oratory, cells, common room, kitchen, refectory, infirmary and workshops.⁵³ More importantly, there was an established rule that governed the life of the monastery. This rule highlighted the purpose of monastic life, which was the pursuit of holiness, wholeness and ultimately salvation for oneself but also for the entire world. This ultimate monastic goal is succinctly, but profoundly expressed by the early twentieth-century hermit St. Seraphim of Sarov who said, "...acquire the peace of God in your heart and a thousand souls around you will be saved."⁵⁴

The end to which monastic life was directed did not differ for Pachomius from his eremitical predecessors; however, it was the means he advocated that set him apart. To be certain, Pachomius had a deep respect for the eremitical life; in fact, he saw the life of solitude as the eventual goal for every monk. At the same time however, Pachomius

⁵³ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁴ Lazarus Moore, *An Extraordinary Peace, St. Seraphim: Flame of Sarov* (Port Townsend, WA: Anaphora Press, 1999), 83.

believed the *koinonia*, the monastic community, was the place where holiness was learned and lived.⁵⁵ Monks were expected to care for one another and to be obedient to both the abbot and the other members of the community. Love for God, expressed in and for the community was Pachomius' revolutionary contribution to the development of monasticism.

The balance of Pachomius' approach only fueled the spread of monasticism. Within his own lifetime, Pachomius had thousands of disciples and had established many monasteries and convents. The codification of monastic life paved the way for the transplantation of the monastic ideal and life from the rag-tag hermits of the Egyptian desert to every part of the ancient world. With further contributions from Sts. Basil, John Cassian and Augustine, monasticism was quickly becoming an institution that provided a clear, balanced, organized means of achieving salvation.

To conclude: by the end of the fourth century, all the foundational elements of monastic life had been established. Thomas Merton puts it succinctly: "The monastic life is a search for God."⁵⁶ All the rest is a question of means. For the monk, God is found through prayer, meditation upon Scripture, work, asceticism, and solitude. This can take place either in total isolation or in community. For many monks, the best place to learn this way is in community, expressing love for God through mutual service and obedience. That is monastic life at its most at its most elemental level. This is why there can be a variety of forms of monastic life. These forms have found their expression through the

⁵⁵ de Dreuille, 31.

⁵⁶ Merton, Monastic Journey, 34.

many contemplative religious orders that exist in the Church. The Benedictines, Cistercians, Trappists, Carthusians, Carmelites⁵⁷ and many others each represent a particular way of living these essential monastic values. Some orders focus on one aspect of these basic monastic values more than others might. For example, the Benedictine who works as a secondary school teacher or parish priest is just as much a monk as the Carthusian who lives his entire life in the cloister. Despite the outward contrast of their lives, both are monks as they both seek God according to the basic principles of the monastic life as first developed in the deserts of ancient Egypt. All these communities share a common source, and that source is the lives of the early monks in the Egyptian desert. Nourished by the waters of baptism, the root of the monastic tree has always been the Desert Fathers. It is they to whom all monastics look, and it is they who gave us the essential means by which one seeks God as a monk. The questions that now lie before us are how St. Benedict lived these ideals, and how did he contribute to the deepening of the monastic vocation, both in the monastery and beyond its walls.

Chapter II: St. Benedict and his Rule.

⁵⁷ The evolution of the Carmelite Order is an interesting one. Since the late medieval ages, the male branch of the Carmelite Order has been seen as a mendicant community of friars. However, the roots of the Carmelite Order are eremitic and monastic. The original Carmelites were a group of loosely organized hermits living on Mt. Carmel in the Holy Land. These hermits, who were most likely pilgrims and Crusaders from Western Europe, drew their inspiration and way of living from the biblical prophet Elijah and the Desert Fathers. The then-Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, St. Albert Avogadro, gave a rule to them in the 1200's. To this day, the *Rule of St. Albert* is the primary Rule of the Carmelite Order; paradoxically it is a rule for hermits. The female branch of the Carmelite Order has always retained some part of the contemplative and monastic charism of its founders. Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a rediscovery of this tradition by the male branch. This return to the ancient Carmelite tradition has even seen the reestablishment of thriving male Carmelite hermit communities. For further information on Carmelite spirituality and history see: Wilfrid McGreal, *At the Fountain of Elijah: The Carmelite Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999).

The details of St. Benedict's life come to us through the second book of St. Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*.⁵⁸ Benedict and his twin sister, St. Scholastica, were born around AD 480 in a small Perugian town north of Rome known as Norcia (Nursia).⁵⁹ This was a time of great societal stress and upheaval. For example, just four years before Benedict's birth, Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman Emperor, had been deposed, thus marking the end of the Roman Empire in the West.⁶⁰ In fact, Benedict lived his entire life in the shadow of chaos. Benedict died during the Gothic wars and even a few years after his death his monastery at Monte Cassino was destroyed by the Lombards.⁶¹ The Rule of St. Benedict was written in a time not unlike our own. His era was one of war, famine, and societal upheaval. The order of the *pax Romana* had given way to the chaos of what is popularly known as the "dark ages". Therefore, it may seem ironic, or perhaps providential, that the calm of St. Benedict's Rule emerged from the chaotic ruins of the Western Roman Empire. Benedict was able to carve out an island of Christian peace in a world that was tearing itself apart. His rule provided a way of stability in an inherently unstable world, and thus gave a practical means of replacing the *pax Romana* with the *pax monastica* throughout Europe.

⁵⁸ Basil Hume, *In Praise of Benedict* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede Publications, 1981), 7.

⁵⁹ It was a great tragedy that monastic life at Benedict's birthplace had been abandoned due to Napoleonic law until modern times. However, in 1998 a group of young American Benedictine monks reestablished Benedictine monastic life in the small Italian town. The newly established monastic community maintains the shrine marking the birthplace of Sts. Benedict and Scholastica and lives a traditional monastic life of prayer, work and study. They are also a thriving community with many new vocations. Their web site is: www.osbnorcia.org.

⁶⁰ Hume, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Most scholars feel that Benedict was the son of wealthy landowners.⁶² As such, they had the means to send the young Benedict to Rome for his education. It did not take long for him to become disillusioned with life in the once great city. He found classical Rome in its final gasps of life. As such, the city was corrupt, dangerous and decadent. In disgust and disappointment, Benedict left Rome in hope of living a life dedicated entirely to God. Accompanied by his boyhood nurse, he moved into a church in the small town of Effide (Affile).⁶³ He was welcomed there and his reputation for holiness grew. Like all saintly biographies from this era, the life of Benedict is replete with miracles. While at Effide, we are told that Benedict miraculously restored a sieve that his nurse had broken.⁶⁴ This confirmed his holiness in the minds of many people. People would flock to him in order to ask favours and to pay him homage. This attention was an affront to Benedict's natural humility and so he fled to live as a monk in a cave near Subiaco, a town fifty miles east of Rome.⁶⁵ St. Gregory describes Benedict's motivations this way: "But Benedict, desiring rather the miseries of the world than the praises of men: rather to be wearied with labor for God's sake, than to be exalted with transitory commendation: fled privately from his nurse, and went into a deserted place called Subiaco."⁶⁶

⁶² Hugh Feiss, Essential Monastic Wisdom (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 194.

⁶³ Juan Maria Laboa, The Historical Atlas of Eastern and Western Christian Monasticism (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 76.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ The Life of St. Benedict by St. Gregory the Great (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1995), 12.

Benedict followed the typical informal pattern for monastic initiation of his day. At Subiaco, he met a hermit named Romanus.⁶⁷ Romanus instructed him in the monastic way and clothed him in the habit. After some time, Benedict embarked on a life of total solitude; Romanus did assist him though by providing him with food and supplies.⁶⁸ In fact, Benedict's solitude was so strict that one year he did not know it was Easter until a local priest visited him with a special meal to celebrate the holy day.⁶⁹ Benedict lived as an isolated hermit for approximately three years. However, like St. Anthony of the Desert, his reputation for holiness grew and soon people were seeking him out for guidance.

Around the year 503, a group of monks from a local monastery sought Benedict out and implored him to be their abbot. Benedict tried to dissuade them because he had a firm commitment to living the monastic life in a strict and disciplined manner. He knew that these particular monks would eventually chafe under his authority. Nevertheless, the monks insisted and Benedict reluctantly agreed. Sadly, his instincts were correct and the monks soon rebelled. Fed up with the discipline that Benedict required of the monks, they devised a plan to get rid of Benedict by poisoning his wine.⁷⁰ According to legend, Benedict discovered this plot when the cup shattered after he made the sign of the cross over it.⁷¹ This legend is why images of Benedict often portray the saint with a broken

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12-14.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Laboa, 77.

⁷⁰ Hume, 9.

⁷¹ Ibid.

goblet. St. Gregory's account of this incident tells us that Benedict forgave the monks and then immediately left that monastery and returned to Subiaco. However, Benedict did not completely withdraw. Like Anthony, Benedict followed the paradigm of "withdrawal for the sake of return" and thus he endeavored to establish his own monastic community. He eventually established twelve small monasteries, each with its own leader, with Benedict having oversight of all the communities. This proved to be a fruitful enterprise. All of the communities thrived and Benedict's reputation as a spiritual father and monastic legislator grew. Despite his success, he still had detractors. Again, he was almost a victim of poisoning when a local priest became jealous and sought to kill him with a poisoned loaf of bread.⁷² He was saved however, by a raven that, by his command, carried the offending loaf away so that it could do no one harm. This is also the reason why, along with the broken goblet, a raven with a loaf of bread in its mouth is a common feature of the iconography surrounding this great saint.

Tired of persecution, Benedict and a few trusted disciples moved to Monte Cassino. There the monks found a temple to Apollo. The monks cleared the temple, established a monastery, and converted the local population. Monte Cassino would soon become Benedict's most enduring monastic foundation. It would also prove to be his home and final resting place.⁷³ It was there, with the benefit of experience and hindsight that he would work out his understanding of the cenobitic life, the fruit of which would be his famed Rule.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Laboa, 78.

The brotherhood at Monte Cassino pursued an intense monastic life, but did not cut themselves off from the local community.⁷⁴ In addition to converting the local populace from the last vestiges of paganism and seeing to their pastoral care, in AD 546 Benedict also met with Totila, the king of the Goths, in order to persuade him to exercise restraint in his conquests and to practice mercy.⁷⁵ In essence, Monte Cassino became a beacon of stability in very unstable times. The rhythm and discipline of the monastery provided the monks with the environment to grow in holiness and virtue. In addition, the stability of the monastery gave the local population a safe place to which they could turn for their spiritual needs, education and even health care. Benedict's monastic foundation at Monte Cassino set the example by which Benedictine monasteries would become spiritual centres of learning, healing and art throughout Europe. w

The remainder of Benedict's life was spent in prayerful contemplation and service to his monastic community. He would often correspond with his twin sister St. Scholastica, who was an influential monastic leader in her own right. In AD 547, Benedict passed away. The moving account of his death, found in St. Gregory's Dialogues, is best paraphrased in the following quotation:

Several days before he died, Benedict had his monks open the tomb he would soon share with Scholastica. Growing weaker, on the sixth day, he asked to be carried to the monastery's oratory, where he was given Holy Communion. Standing before the altar, his arms held up in prayer by his disciples, he gave up his spirit between the words of his prayer. He died among those he loved most.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 79.

It is important to note that Benedict died in the midst of his community. More to the point, he was literally held up by his community in his last hours. This, perhaps above all else, speaks to the communal orientation of Benedictine monasticism. It is one where the monk goes to God with the support, encouragement and prayers of his brothers...even in death.⁷⁷

Chapter III: St. Benedict's Rule, the Way of the Fathers.

For all its importance, the Rule of St. Benedict (RB) is an unpretentious and rather modest document. It consists of a prologue and seventy-three small chapters on how to live the cenobitic monastic life in a simple and orderly manner. At first glance, the Rule appears to be a list of maxims about the most mundane aspects of running a monastery. With such prosaic titles as “At What Hours Meals Should Be Taken,”⁷⁸ and “On the Clothes and the Shoes of the Brethren”,⁷⁹ it would be easy to overlook the profound wisdom and humanity of this little book.

Like the Church, the Rule of St. Benedict is “ever ancient, ever new”. Ancient in that it is a synthesis of the previous centuries of lived monastic experience before Benedict. New, as Benedict was able to arrange that wisdom into a moderate and workable rule that, while preserving the zeal of the early monastic Fathers, was at the

⁷⁷ Perhaps one of the most moving monastic customs, especially amongst Trappist communities, is that at the death of a monk the community, in pairs, will recite the entire Psalter over the monk's remains the night before the monk's burial. At the burial site, one of the brethren, usually the infirmarian, will actually be in the grave to receive the brother's remains, as Trappists traditionally do not use caskets. The community is with the monk from the beginning of his monastic life to the very end. For a popular introduction to the life and traditions of Trappist monks in modern times see: Frank Bianco, Voices of Silence: Lives of the Trappists Today (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

⁷⁸ RB: 41.

⁷⁹ RB: 55.

same time flexible enough to be lived by a diverse collection of personalities and in a variety of cultures and circumstances. In other words, the genius of Benedict is that he made the intense holiness of the desert accessible to all. It is often forgotten that St. Benedict is a Church Father. His Rule not only reflects patristic thought, but one could go so far to say that the Rule crystallizes the best of patristic spirituality.

In his book on monastic wisdom, Hugh Feiss tells readers that Benedict's Rule is unique in that it "...summarizes the written records of more than two hundred years of monastic experience."⁸⁰ Most contemporary scholars believe that Benedict used a significant amount of material from a slightly older monastic document known as *The Rule of the Master*.⁸¹ Dom Andre Louf⁸² believes that Benedict may have also used parts of *St. Pachomius' Rule* and the *Rule of St. Augustine* as well.⁸³ It is clear that Benedict was aware of other monastic and patristic sources.⁸⁴ In fact, he even recommends them to his disciples. In his own Rule, Benedict refers to the monastic Conferences of St. John Cassian, the writings of the Church and Desert Fathers and the venerable monastic rule of

⁸⁰ Feiss, 196.

⁸¹ Ibid. For a detailed study of Benedict's use of the *Rule of the Master* in the creation of his own rule, see: Timothy Fry, ed, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict 1980: In Latin and English with Notes*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981) 478-493.

⁸² Dom Andre Louf (b. 1929) is a prolific writer and abbot of the Trappist monastery Mont-des-Cats in France.

⁸³ Louf, 30.

⁸⁴ RB 73:3-6: "What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, besides, the *Conferences* of the Fathers, their *Institutes* and their *Lives*, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil."

the Eastern Church by St. Basil.⁸⁵ Therefore, the Rule of St. Benedict represents a wonderful compendium of patristic monastic wisdom. However, this is not to say that Benedict's Rule is merely a recapitulation of previous monastic legislation. Benedict's Rule goes far beyond that. It is clear that the Benedictine Rule is the fruit of both study and lived monastic experience. Benedict's personal holiness and wisdom, combined with his learning and experience as both a hermit and cenobite, allowed him to "produce the single most powerful and influential document of the monastic tradition in the Western Church."⁸⁶ The ability of Benedict's Rule to lead one into the monastic way of the Fathers was recognized quite early. In advising his monks in the eighth century, Ambrose Autpert wrote:

It is necessary always to live according to the Rule of the Fathers, but first and foremost according to that of the holy confessor Benedict. Do not depart from it either to the right or to the left, and do not add anything to it or take anything from it for it contains everything needed.⁸⁷

Benedict's genius is that his Rule introduces simplicity, flexibility, balance and a humanity that was lacking in other monastic rules.

One must remember that the vast majority of Church Fathers were monastics themselves, or at the very least had lived the monastic life for a part of their lives; the spirituality of the Fathers is invariably monastic in its orientation. To ignore this is to

⁸⁵ For two excellent and highly readable books on the history and spirituality of Eastern Orthodox monasticism, and how it is lived in modern times see: Kyriacos C. Markides, The Mountain of Silence: A Search for Orthodox Spirituality (New York: Image, 2001). and John Oliver, Touching Heaven: Discovering Orthodox Christianity on the Island of Valaam (Ben Lomond, California: Conciliar Press, 2003).

⁸⁶ Louf, 30.

⁸⁷ Laboa, 86.

miss a key aspect of Patristic tradition and spirituality. For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, the Church Fathers and their spirituality represent a normative understanding of the Faith itself. The Second Vatican Council says this:

The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church. Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her."⁸⁸

As such, the Rule of St. Benedict can play a unique part in introducing all Christians, no matter their state of life, to the foundational aspects of the spiritual life recommended, revered and practiced by the Church Fathers.

In his introductory book on the Church Fathers, Boniface Ramsey describes six key themes of patristic monastic literature.⁸⁹ These themes are: i) spiritual journey, ii) a return to paradise, iii) poverty, iv) asceticism, v) the immanence of divine power and vi) the monk as the personification of the saints of old. For this paper, we shall focus exclusively on spiritual journey, a return to paradise, poverty and asceticism, as these reflect the themes most pertinent to this paper's subject matter. Let us now explore these themes in order to gain a deeper appreciation of how the Rule is a revolutionary and ingenious document that makes the patristic ideal of monastic holiness both accessible and possible in a variety of ages and milieus.

⁸⁸ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. (Vatican II, November 18, 1965), no. 8. All Vatican II quotations are taken from: Austin Flannery, ed, *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996).

⁸⁹ Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, 151-160.

An ever-present theme in monastic literature is one of spiritual journey. As discussed earlier, monasticism is seen as a means to an end. That end is ultimately union with God. As such, the daily living of the monastic life is the step-by-step journey toward that goal. Many of the Church Fathers speak of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. The clearest example of this concept is the fact that early followers of Christ simply referred to themselves as followers of “The Way”.⁹⁰ Implicit in this unassuming title is the fact that Christianity provides the means or “way” toward God; as such, journey is a foundational aspect of the Christian life. For the Fathers, monastic life was the Christian life lived to the fullest, therefore the theme of journey was even more pronounced among monastic writers. In monastic literature, there is a wonderful story that illustrates this premise.⁹¹ In the fourth century, there was a Desert Father by the name of Sarapion the Sindonite. He was on a pilgrimage to Rome when he heard of a local woman who was renowned for her holiness. What piqued Sarapion’s interest about this holy woman was that she apparently never left her small isolated dwelling. Therefore, Sarapion set out to find her. When he found her, she was sitting at the door of her small home praying. This isolated and stationary life confused Sarapion, who was a great traveler. He asked: “Why are you sitting here?” To this, the holy woman replied: “I am not sitting, I am on a journey”. This endearing story reflects Thomas Merton’s definition of the monk as “...a man who has been called by the Holy Spirit to relinquish all the cares, desires and ambitions of other men, and devote his entire life to seeking God.”⁹² The monastic life is

⁹⁰ Acts 19:23, 24:22.

⁹¹ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1979), 7.

⁹² Merton, *The Silent Life*, vii.

stationary but not sedentary. On a spiritual level, it moves at breakneck speed toward God. St. Benedict assumes this theme as a foundational part of his monastic vision.

The theme of “journey” is quite evident in the prologue of St. Benedict’s Rule. In this section, Benedict issues a pressing call to the monastic life. He exhorts the reader to “get up” and “set out on this way” of monastic holiness.⁹³ Throughout the entire prologue, there is urgent exhortation to devote oneself to the monastic quest. “Run while you have the light of life...” cries Benedict.⁹⁴ The prologue of the Rule is filled with a sense of urgency and the exhortation to set out on the monastic journey. The prologue of the Rule sets the parameters of the journey (verses 39-44), and it invites the disciple to move from sin and darkness to a new life centered on Christ.⁹⁵

This journey theme is fleshed out in chapter seven of the Rule. This chapter compares the pursuit of holiness to climbing a ladder. This spiritual ladder consists of twelve steps by which the monk journeys upwards from a fear of God, to the “...perfect love that casts out all fear.”⁹⁶ Benedict’s ladder of humility mirrors Origen’s description of the monastic journey, where he says monks will “...go from strength to strength – until the final stage is attained, which the summit of the virtues, and the river of God is crossed and the promised inheritance received.”⁹⁷ Benedict clearly shared the patristic sense that the monastic life, and by extension the Christian vocation, is a quest or journey toward

⁹³ RB Pro: 8, 21.

⁹⁴ RB Pro: 13.

⁹⁵ Esther de Waal, *A Life Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 13.

⁹⁶ John 4:18.

⁹⁷ Ramsey, 151.

perfection. This is underlined in the final chapter of his Rule where Benedict describes his way as one for beginners. “Are you hastening toward your heavenly home? Then with Christ’s help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners.”⁹⁸ From this quote, we can glean two important points. The first is that Benedict sees his Rule as a beginning point. “The reason we have written this rule is that, by observing it in monasteries, we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life.”⁹⁹ Benedict is quite clear that the journey toward monastic perfection is not completed until it is consummated in union with God. Secondly, Benedict sees the monastic way as the means by which one travels to paradise. This journey to paradise leads us to the second theme of monastic literature.

According to Ramsey, the Fathers had a sense that the monastic life itself was a return to paradise.¹⁰⁰ Early monastic literature is replete with stories of saints who had achieved such a level of holiness that they were described as having returned to a state of innocence similar to Adam and Eve before the Fall.¹⁰¹ For example, there is a story regarding the Desert Father Macarius who was visited by a wild hyena. The hyena gently took the saint by the hem of his habit to her cave in order to heal her blind pup. Macarius prayed and the pup was healed. Later, the story says the hyena brought Macarius a large sheep fleece as thanks. At first glance, these touching stories may appear naïve but there is a deep theological assertion behind such accounts. That assertion is that the monastic

⁹⁸ RB 73:8.

⁹⁹ RB 73:1.

¹⁰⁰ Ramsey, 152.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

life of holiness can restore humanity back to a state of innocence. The effects of the Fall, including the animosity between humanity and nature, can be healed in a soul that pursues God exclusively. The Rule of St. Benedict itself does not contain any stories of miracles. In fact, given the time of its authorship it is a remarkably sober document. However, St. Gregory's biography of St. Benedict is written in a patristic style that equates holiness with miracles. As mentioned earlier, Benedict is also described as having command over the animals when he orders a raven to hide a loaf of poisoned bread. It is clear that such stories of Benedict's command over nature are consonant with this patristic theme. That being said, there is another understanding of monastic paradise among the Fathers, and that is in reference to the desert itself.¹⁰² For the early practitioners of monasticism, the desert had a variety of symbolic significances attached to it. In harmony with Christ's temptation in the desert, it was seen as the abode of demons and a place of testing and solitude. Paradoxically, the Fathers also saw the desert as a type of paradise because it was there that one shed the old self and encountered God face to face.¹⁰³

The next theme is that of poverty. The virtue of poverty was seen as one of the hallmarks of the authentic monk.¹⁰⁴ There are many examples of stories describing the poor and austere lives of the Desert Fathers. For example, in the *The Letters of St. Anthony*, Anthony says to his disciples: "Unless each of you hates earthly possession and renounces it and all its workings with all his heart, and stretches the hand of his heart to

¹⁰² Ibid., 153.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ramsey, 155.

the Father of all, he cannot be saved.”¹⁰⁵ This quote is a prime example of how the Fathers valued poverty as an essential part of monastic life.

In St. Benedict’s Rule, poverty is also highly valued. However, the important distinction between destitution and monastic poverty must be made. Poverty, in the Benedictine sense, is not one of total want and impoverishment. Rather, it is one of simplicity and communal ownership. In the Rule, no monk is permitted to own anything. Everything is to be held in common: “No monk should presume to call anything his own.”¹⁰⁶ At the same time however, the abbot of the community is responsible for the health and welfare of the monks in his charge. Benedict enjoins the abbot to provide the monk with everything he may need to accomplish his tasks in the monastery, and to live a balanced life conducive to his calling as a monk.¹⁰⁷ For example, in chapter fifty-five of the Rule, Benedict describes the clothing that should be given to the monks. What is interesting is that he advises that the clothing fits and is adapted to the climate in which the monastery finds itself.¹⁰⁸ In addition, Benedict says that the monks should have clothing for winter and summer. This approach is in direct contrast to the advice Desert Father Abba Pambo gave his disciples when he said, “...the monk’s coat should be such that even if he threw it out of the cell, and left it for three days, still nobody would take it.”¹⁰⁹ Benedict also advises that the monks have adequate bedding and the tools

¹⁰⁵ Feiss, 102.

¹⁰⁶ RB 33:6.

¹⁰⁷ RB 55.

¹⁰⁸ RB 55:1.

¹⁰⁹ Yushi Nomura, Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers (New York: Orbis, 1982), 16.

necessary to accomplish one's work in the monastery.¹¹⁰ Thus, one can see that the individual monk is poor, in that he can honestly say that he owns nothing, but at the same time, he is cared for by the community. The poverty envisioned by St. Benedict is one that is authentic and challenging, as it roots out the evils caused by a covetous spirit; at the same time however, Benedict's cure for this vice is balanced, realistic and sustainable.

For the Church Fathers, one of the major pillars of monasticism was the ascetic life. Of course, poverty was a part of this struggle, but poverty was seen within a larger framework of mortification and renunciation. As discussed earlier, many early monks would strive to exceed each other in their ascetical feats. Despite extremes, the ascetical life was understood as an essential part of the purification process monks had to endure to reach *apatheia*.¹¹¹ Ramsey describes this state as "...an ordering and directing of the passions by the intellect".¹¹² Battles with demons, the flesh and the self were all part of the ascetic battle. The end result was a total realigning of the will with that of God. The body now served the soul, and as a result imaged Christ. To cleanse oneself of pride, inordinate thoughts and desires was an essential step in the pilgrimage toward God. Take, for example, this saying from one of the Desert Fathers: "Just as it is impossible for a man to see his face in troubled water, so too the soul, unless it is cleansed of alien thoughts, cannot pray to God in contemplation."¹¹³ The mortifications adopted by the Fathers were to help the monk achieve this state of calm or *apatheia* so he could achieve

¹¹⁰ RB 55:15-20.

¹¹¹ Ramsey, 157.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Nomura, 4.

a profound contemplative union with God. Dom Louf best describes the goal of Christian asceticism when he says that the ascetic life “...is not to reduce anything in man, but to promote another part of him, a better part, which cannot be brought to light except by renunciation.”¹¹⁴

Like his monastic predecessors, Benedict takes the ascetic life seriously. In the Prologue of his Rule, Benedict implores his monks to “...do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.”¹¹⁵ In addition, Benedict describes the entire life of a monk as “a continuous Lent”.¹¹⁶ Despite Benedict’s eager endorsement of the Fathers’ traditional monastic ascetic practices like prayer, fasting and work, Benedict is unique in that his approach to asceticism is underscored by balance, mercy and a firm understanding that asceticism and renunciation are not ends in themselves. If someone were to sum up Benedict’s approach to asceticism in one word, the word that might be used would be “deference”. Unlike some other monastic rules, Benedict has retained a deep level of charity for all who were associated with one of his monasteries. Whether monk or guest all were to be treated as Christ.¹¹⁷ For example, in his section on food and drink, Benedict warns against overindulgence, but at the same time makes allowances for the sick, the young and those who are weak.¹¹⁸ In this section however, Benedict makes an interesting remark that is indicative of his entire approach to the ascetic life. Quoting 1 Corinthians

¹¹⁴ Louf, 82.

¹¹⁵ RB Pro: 3.

¹¹⁶ RB 49:1.

¹¹⁷ RB 53:1.

¹¹⁸ RB 39.

7:7 which says, “Everyone has his own gift from God, one of this and another that”, Benedict states, “It is, therefore, with some uneasiness that we specify the amount of food and drink for others.”¹¹⁹ This statement sums up Benedict’s attitude toward monasticism and the ascetic life. To begin with, he wants people to retain a level of adult independence and decision-making capacity. Benedict is not comfortable interfering with people’s ability to make legitimate decisions for themselves. He also recognizes that equality and sameness are not equivalent.¹²⁰ He knows that different monks need different things, and that, rather than building an autocratic community based on uniformity, Benedict seeks to create a home that is built on the Christian virtue of love. In all of the Rule’s chapters dealing with the everyday discipline of the monastery, Benedict is always providing options and alternatives for the weaker brothers. He also ensures that all have a voice, including the youngest members of the community, through whom he says the Lord is more apt to speak.¹²¹ Benedict is not a pushover, but his asceticism is punctuated by a deep level of respect and love. In the Prologue of the Rule, Benedict describes himself as a father who loves his monks.¹²² In this, Benedict has retained the spirit of charity that underlined the Desert Fathers’ approach to monasticism. For example, there is a touching

¹¹⁹ RB 40:1.

¹²⁰ RB 34: 1-5: “As the Scriptures say: “Distribution was made to everyone as they had need” (Acts 4:35). This does not mean that anyone should receive special favor (God forbid!) - only that consideration should be made for weaknesses. So if you require less, give thanks to God, and do not be sad. If you require more, be humbled by your weakness, and do not grow proud because of the compassion shown to you. In this way all shall be at peace.”

¹²¹ RB: 3:3.

¹²² RB Pro: 1.

story from the lives of the Desert Fathers that underscores the mercy found within the best traditions of Christian monasticism:

Some of the elders came to visit Abba Poemen and asked him: “When we see brothers who are falling asleep during the services, should we arouse them so that they will be watchful?” Poemen said to them in response: “For my part, when I see a brother falling asleep, I place his head on my knees and let him rest.”¹²³

Benedict falls well within this tradition. He is firm, and encourages his disciples to push themselves, but at the same time, he makes allowances for individual needs and weaknesses. He loves and guides his disciples; he does not arbitrarily rule them. The best of Benedictine monasticism has always done this. For example, in the Cistercian Rule (which is based on Benedict’s) there is the wonderful maxim which says “...a monk who is suffering should be treated in such a way that he will not regret the absence of his mother.”¹²⁴ In short, the Benedictine approach to the ascetic life exemplifies the adage that a Christian should “live seriously but with a soft heart.”

As one can now clearly see, the Rule of St. Benedict is an ingenious summary of the best of the monastic and patristic tradition of both the Eastern and Western parts of the Church. The Rule is demanding and merciful, simple yet profound, strict yet flexible. Its ability to adapt to a variety of circumstances and milieus, while at the same time retaining its ability to transmit the monastic spirit in its entirety, is what makes this spiritual document so enduring.

¹²³ Nomura, 17.

¹²⁴ Frank Monaco, *Brothers and Sisters: Glimpses of the Cloistered Life* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2001), 80.

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI praised the Benedictine tradition, “for its moderation, humanity and sober discernment between the essential and the secondary in spiritual life, [St. Benedict’s] *Rule* has retained its illuminating power even to today.”¹²⁵ It is no accident that in 1964 Pope Paul VI made St. Benedict patron saint of Europe. Benedict’s Rule had a unique power to spread Christian monasticism and holiness throughout the known world. Because of his Rule, monasteries played an integral role in uniting the medieval world and spreading the Gospel. “With his life and work, St Benedict exercised a fundamental influence on the development of European civilization and culture and helped Europe to emerge from the ‘dark night of history’ that followed the fall of the Roman Empire.”¹²⁶ It is, in part, for this reason that Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger chose the name “Benedict” when he was elected to the throne of St. Peter in 2005.¹²⁷ At his first General Audience on April 27, 2005, he explained, “I recall Saint Benedict of Nursia, co-patron¹²⁸ of Europe, whose life evokes the Christian roots of Europe. I ask him to help us all to hold firm to the centrality of Christ in our Christian

¹²⁵ Benedict XVI, General Audience: 9 April, 2008. Vatican Web Site. Accessed on-line: 15 March, 2010. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf_benxvi_aud_20080409_en.html>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ The inspiration for Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s pontifical name is drawn from two historical figures. The first is Pope Benedict XV, who was Pope from 1914 to 1922. He was reputed to be a man of great holiness and reconciliation, particularly during the horrific years of World War I. The other historical figure was, of course, St. Benedict of Nursia who is co-patron of Europe.

¹²⁸ Benedict has long been recognized as the patron of Europe. However, in recent years Europe has been placed under the patronage of other saints as well; including Sts. Scholastica, Bridget of Sweden, Cyril and Methodius, Catherine of Siena and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein). This is why in modern times Benedict is referred to as co-patron.

life: May Christ always take first place in our thoughts and actions!”¹²⁹ For the present Holy Father, there is a strong connection between the Rule’s proven ability to unite communities in Christ and his desire to re-evangelise Europe and the rest of the world.

The Rule of St. Benedict is not a large document. However, its ability to transmit the monastic tradition in an authentic and complete way makes it a document of great depth and importance. The Rule has a unique ability to transform individuals and entire societies. For people who choose to follow the Rule, either in a monastery or in the world, they have at their disposal a sure way to Christ that has produced and continues to produce saints according to the ancient monastic and patristic tradition. Let us now explore the key pillars of Benedictine spirituality and how they can be applied to the life of a layperson.

Chapter IV: Benedictine Spirituality in the Cloister and the World.

It is often said that one of the strengths of Benedict’s Rule is its flexibility.¹³⁰ Even Benedict himself allows for modification of his Rule based on local needs and circumstances.¹³¹ The result: the Benedictine Rule is followed around the world in many different cultural and ethnic settings. There are also a myriad of Benedictine communities whose particular expression of religious life can vary greatly. Benedictine religious can be strictly contemplative with no ministries outside the precincts of the monastery, or

¹²⁹ Benedict XVI, General Audience: 27 April 2005. Vatican Web Site. Accessed on-line: 15 March 2010 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2005/documents/hf_benxvi_aud_20050427_en.html>.

¹³⁰ Laura Swan, Engaging Benedict: What the Rule Can Teach Us Today (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2005), 16.

¹³¹ RB 18:22.

they can be found running secondary schools, universities and parishes. This diversity within the Benedictine order speaks to the flexibility found within the Rule itself. As an extension, if the wisdom of Benedict's Rule can be applied to a variety of cultures and circumstances, then it can also be applied to the life of a layperson. To be certain, the Rule was written for people living in a monastery; as such, Benedictine life, in its fullest sense, can only be found in that setting.¹³² Nevertheless, monastic life and the lay life are not contradictory states of life, but are rather complementary expressions of our common baptismal call. This reality, coupled with the inherent flexibility of the Rule, makes it possible for laypeople to bring the light of the cloister into their own lives.

Traditionally, Benedictines take three religious vows. They are *conversatio morum* (conversion of manners), obedience and stability. Immediately, one might notice that two of these vows differ from what most people think of when considering the vows taken by Catholic religious; namely poverty, chastity and obedience. To be certain, Benedictines are expected to live lives of poverty and chastity. However, the vows taken by a Benedictine are usually understood within a larger monastic framework. This brings us to the first vow of the Benedictine, *conversatio morum*.

Conversatio Morum: The Call to Put on Christ.

Thomas Merton described *conversatio morum* as “the essential monastic vow”.¹³³ This vow forms the foundation of a Benedictine's commitment to follow Christ without reserve. Traditionally, this vow is translated as “the conversion of manners” or

¹³² Terrance Kardong, *The Benedictines* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 97.

¹³³ Merton, *Monastic Journey*, 107.

“conversion of morals”; however most commentators prefer to retain the Latin as it denotes a deeper meaning than can be rendered in the vernacular.¹³⁴ In fact, even in the Rule itself, Benedict chose the archaic term “*conversatio*” rather than “*conversio*”. There is much debate among scholars as to why this is.¹³⁵ However, most scholars believe that Benedict chose to use the more ancient “*conversatio*” because it implies an on-going process rather than a one-time turning toward God.¹³⁶ As such, this vow denotes a lifetime commitment to the monastic way.

Throughout the Rule, Benedict makes use of this term. For example, he mandates that when a novice is first received into the community he “promises stability, fidelity to the monastic life (*conversatio morum*) and obedience.”¹³⁷ As a result, the novice monk promises to be faithful to this specific way of life. In short, the vow of *conversatio morum* is a call to on-going conversion each and every day. A good example of this commitment is found in the lives of the Desert Fathers. “A monk was once asked, ‘What do you do there in the monastery’ He replied: ‘We fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and get up again.’”¹³⁸ This vow denotes a complete giving of oneself to God through the monastic way laid down in the Rule. “*Conversatio Morum* means that we promise to work through self-renunciation toward the fullness of the love of Christ.”¹³⁹ From a

¹³⁴ Kardong, 95.

¹³⁵ For more information on this issue see: Fry, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 459-462.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ RB 58:17.

¹³⁸ Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 82.

¹³⁹ Augustine Roberts, *Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 48.

Biblical perspective, the vow of *conversatio* could best be summarized by St. Paul when he writes, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”¹⁴⁰ *Conversatio* is an embracing of this reality in a dedicated and purposeful manner. It is the commitment to rise with Christ by following the monastic way. This vow forms the foundation of what a Benedictine is called to do; as such, the term implies everything expected from a monk.¹⁴¹

For Benedictines, *conversatio* takes place on two levels. The first level is found in the externals of the life. The embracing of monastic customs and modes of living help give concrete expression to this particular vow. For example, the wearing of the monastic habit, diligent following of the monastery’s *horarium*, following the rules and expectations of the community’s abbot, living a life governed by certain monastic traditions and embracing the challenge of community life all signal a monk’s desire to live a manner of life that is directed toward achieving union with God. However, as the medieval expression wisely said “*cucullus non facit monachum*” (the cowl does not make the monk), so also do Benedictines recognize that this vow is one primarily of the heart. The vow of *conversatio* is one of total self-giving to God. One of the most powerful expressions of this is when a Benedictine monk makes his profession of solemn vows. At

¹⁴⁰ Romans 6:4.

¹⁴¹ Kardong, 97. It should be noted that for Benedictines the vow of *conversatio morum* implies the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. It is the assertion of some monastic writers that the Church’s formulation of the evangelical councils as poverty, chastity and obedience speaks to the major influence the Scholastic theologians and mendicant orders, like the Franciscans, had on the Church and subsequent religious life. The Benedictine tradition is much older, as such, it formulates these values with a different nomenclature and within a monastic framework. For a more detailed discussion on this topic see: Roberts, *Centered on Christ*, 40-46.

this ceremony, the monk stands before the monastic community and offers his entire being to God. With arms outstretched, he chants three times the *Suscipe Domine*; “Accept me, O Lord, as you have promised, and I shall live.” The monk then lies face down before the abbot and is completely covered with a funeral pall to signify his death to self and a new life lived in and for Christ alone. The vow of *conversatio* allows the monk to incarnate the words of St. Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”¹⁴²

Benedict envisions this vow to be a dynamic one that constantly pushes the monk towards God. Kardong notes that this vow differs from older monastic rules, which focused exclusively on “*conversio*” where conversion would reap benefits only in the afterlife.¹⁴³ St. Benedict however believes that the faithful living of this vow could reap benefits in this life also: “But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”¹⁴⁴ For Benedict, there is the firm belief that if one lives this vow fully then, with God’s grace, there is a real possibility that one can regain the image of God. The Greek Fathers would call this *theopoiesis*, which means, “to become godly”.¹⁴⁵ For Benedict a commitment to this vow allows for a real growth in virtue and grace. It transforms the monk and gives firm expression to the common call all Christians receive

¹⁴² Galatians 2:20.

¹⁴³ Kardong, 96.

¹⁴⁴ RB Pro: 49.

¹⁴⁵ Kardong, 96.

at baptism. As such, the vow of *conversatio* is nothing less than a rededication of oneself to live the baptismal call of conversion to its fullness. This commitment is fostered by dedication to prayer, the study of Scripture (*lectio divina*), humility and recollected silence.¹⁴⁶ It is here that the monastic life and the lay vocation meet, as ultimately they have one common source; namely the holy sacrament of baptism.

In his introductory work on Eastern Orthodoxy, the current Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, describes the relationship between monasticism and marriage. He says: “monasticism is a way of love, which is no less and no more than the way of the Christian Gospel, no different from or better than the way of marriage.”¹⁴⁷ This sentiment was echoed by Dom Cuthbert Butler¹⁴⁸ who made the bold statement that there is no such thing as Benedictine or monastic spirituality, as the Rule of St. Benedict and monasticism are “simply Catholicism, simply Christianity.”¹⁴⁹ What these two comments have in common is the firm assertion that monastic life and the lay vocation both direct themselves to the same ultimate end: the love of God and neighbour. Both forms of life flow from the same constitutive documents, namely the Gospels. “What Benedict offers Christians is a means to reach for Christ, to grow in Christ, and to be freed by Christ, that is so consonant with the Gospels themselves that it seems that he is simply offering a

¹⁴⁶ Roberts, 318.

¹⁴⁷ Bartholomew I, Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 69.

¹⁴⁸ Dom Cuthbert was abbot of the famed Downside Abbey in England from 1906-1922. He lived from 1858-1934, and was known as a great scholar, particularly in the areas of the First Vatican Council and Christian mysticism.

¹⁴⁹ Carolyn Westin, “Benedictine Spirituality,” The Machray Review 6 (1998), Accessed on-line: 15 December 2009. <<http://www.prayerbook.ca/library/machray/issue6/machray6i.htm>>

distillation of their teachings.”¹⁵⁰ Finally, both find their meaning in the sacrament of baptism. The Ven. Pope John Paul II, in his 1995 apostolic letter *Oriente Lumen* (Light from the East), highlighted this relationship between baptism and the monastic life in the Eastern Church:¹⁵¹

Moreover, in the East, monasticism was not seen merely as a separate condition, proper to a precise category of Christians, but rather as a reference point for all the baptized, according to the gifts offered to each by the Lord; it was presented as a symbolic synthesis of Christianity.¹⁵²

If the monk is called to *conversatio*, then so too is the layperson. Both monastics and laity are called to a total self-giving by their common baptism. By the focus and intensity of their lives, monks act as a prophetic witness to the call shared to by all Christians to “repent and believe the Good News”.¹⁵³ This theme is further explained by John Paul II:

The monastery is the prophetic place where creation becomes praise of God and the precept of concretely lived charity becomes the ideal of human coexistence; it is where the human being seeks God without limitation or impediment, becoming a reference point for all people, bearing them in his heart and helping them to seek God.¹⁵⁴

The monastery, in a focused and intense manner, does what each Christian should do in their daily life, which is to act as leaven¹⁵⁵ in the world and to transform it through

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Pope John Paul II, *Oriente Lumen*, 2 May 1995. Vatican Web Site. Accessed on-line: 16 March 2010. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jpii_apl_02051995_orientale-lumen_en.html>, no. 9.

¹⁵² Ibid., no. 9.

¹⁵³ Mark 1:15.

¹⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Oriente Lumen*, no. 9.

¹⁵⁵ Matthew 13:33.

seeking God in prayer, love for one another and personal holiness. The vow of *conversatio* relates to the lay vocation because it provides an explicit expression of one's baptismal call. At a monastic conference in Bangkok, just hours before his death, Thomas Merton spoke of the vow of *conversatio morum*.

When you stop and think a little about St. Benedict's concept of *conversatio morum*, that most mysterious of our vows, which is actually the most essential I believe. It can be interpreted as a commitment to total inner transformation of one sort or another - a commitment to become a completely new man. It seems to me that that could be regarded as the end of monastic life, and that no matter where one attempts to do this, that remains the essential thing.¹⁵⁶

What could be said of this vow could also be said of baptism.¹⁵⁷ As such, the monk's prophetic witness, and the layperson's personal embrace of the spirit of the Rule, provide renewed support and inspiration for living the Christian life in the world.

In fact, the Church recommends that all Christians seek the means to stay loyal to their baptismal call:

Whoever wants to remain faithful to his baptismal promises and resist temptations will want to adopt the means for doing so: self-knowledge, practice of an asceticism adapted to the situations that confront him, obedience to God's commandments, exercise of the moral virtues, and fidelity to prayer.¹⁵⁸

The Rule of Benedict does just what the above paragraph recommends, and the vow of *conversatio morum* is a dynamic starting point for laypeople to live the Christian life in a

¹⁵⁶ de Waal, *Seeking God*, 70.

¹⁵⁷ Ephesians 4:22-24: "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

¹⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2340.

focused and purposeful manner. This vow, supported by such Benedictine practices as praying the Divine Office, daily contemplative study of the Bible (*lectio divina*), and a worshipful attitude toward human relations and work, give both monk and layperson a way of expressing their radical commitment to Christ and of growing in relationship with the Lord.

In her reflection on this vow, Anglican writer and Benedictine Oblate Esther de Waal posits that a possible modern rendering of the vow of *conversatio morum* could be the “vow of openness”.¹⁵⁹ For her, this vow denotes openness to God, no matter what the circumstance. It is a commitment to embrace the ontological change that takes place in each person at baptism. It is an openness to our true identities as sons and daughters of God. Finally, it is a vow that takes seriously our baptismal call to become what God has made us to be.

Obedience: Listen, My Son.

If *conversatio morum* is the disposition of the heart toward Christ, then the vow of obedience is the means by which that vow is put into action. Like all monastic writers and legislators, St. Benedict sees the vow of obedience as the paramount quality of a good and zealous monk. In fact, the exhortation to obedience is contained in the first section of the Rule: “...by labor of obedience you will return to the One from whom you retreated by laziness and disobedience.”¹⁶⁰ The vow of obedience is at the heart of the Benedictine way. In essence, this vow is the expression of one’s relationship to God and

¹⁵⁹ de Waal, *Seeking God*, 70.

¹⁶⁰ RB Pro: 2.

the community. It is a vow of mutuality and self-giving to both God and others. It is the expression of humility and love. If the monk offers his life to God, then obedience is the means by which he does it.

In the modern world, the word *obedience* is often seen as pejorative. For the modern person who has been raised in a culture that values autonomy and individuality, this word most likely conjures up visions of dominance and subservience. However, the Benedictine understanding of this word offers another, perhaps more nuanced, understanding of a concept that at first hearing offends modern sensibilities.

Like all aspects of the Rule, Benedict's understanding of this vow flows from the life and example of Christ himself. If one were to take even the most cursory look at the Gospels, one would quickly see that the foundation of Christ's mission was his obedience to the Father. This filial obedience to the will of the Father is the very means by which humanity's redemption was won. St. Paul refers to this as *kenosis* or self-emptying.¹⁶¹ This theme underlines all of Christ's teachings and actions: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."¹⁶² This of course finds its ultimate expression in Christ's Passion: "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!"¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Philippians 2:7.

¹⁶² John 4:34.

¹⁶³ Philippians 2:8.

What can be seen in the “obedience passages”¹⁶⁴ in the Gospels is that Christ’s mission is to effect our salvation by being in total harmony with the will of the Father.¹⁶⁵ Whereas before, humanity’s relationship with God had been punctuated by disobedience, salvation is found in and through Christ’s perfect obedience. St. Paul makes this point by contrasting Adam’s disobedience to that of Christ’s obedience: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”¹⁶⁶ In Adam’s disobedience was found death, in Christ’s obedience is found life, as his obedience leads to the resurrection.¹⁶⁷ In fact, the resurrection reveals the fruit of obedience. Christ’s obedience was the concrete expression of his total oneness with the Father, and the resurrection reveals the glory of that union.¹⁶⁸

What becomes clear is that self-will and the illusion of autonomy only deepen our alienation from God and others. What one can learn from Christ’s example is “...that the divine vocation of each human person...is not one of independence from our Heavenly Father but, on the contrary, of increasing dependence on his good pleasure.”¹⁶⁹ The primary vocation of the monk is to seek God alone, and this can only happen if the monk renounces his own will. Like St. John the Baptist, the monk must say, “He must increase,

¹⁶⁴Examples of other passages that speak of Christ’s obedience are: Mt. 4:10, Mk. 14:36, Lk. 2:49, Jn. 5:30, 6: 38.

¹⁶⁵ Roberts, 167.

¹⁶⁶ Romans 5:19.

¹⁶⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

¹⁶⁸ Gervase Holdaway, ed, *The Oblate Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 170.

¹⁶⁹ Roberts, *Centered on Christ*, 167.

but I must decrease.”¹⁷⁰ If the monk is to fulfill his vocation then he must be like Christ and pour himself out, and renounce the illusion of independence. When he does this, he will realize his profound unity, with not only all people, but most of all with God. It is there he will find the glory of the resurrection.

St. Benedict develops his entire Rule around this theme. Benedict devotes a considerable amount of the Rule to what are commonly referred to “The Twelve Steps of Humility.”¹⁷¹ The monk who ascends these steps starts with “unhesitating obedience” and continues on a path of deepening humility and docility before the will of God, to the point where he arrives at the final step, which is “perfect love”. What this process does is unites the monk’s intentions, will and actions with his love for Christ. The monk has been restored to wholeness, because he has been restored to union with God. For Benedict, obedience is the concrete expression of *conversatio*. Conversion is found in hearing the word of God and doing it.¹⁷² As stated earlier, Benedict begins his Rule¹⁷³ with the exhortation to “Listen”, to “renounce self-will” and to “take up the bright weapons of obedience”. Later in the Prologue of the Rule¹⁷⁴, Benedict quotes Psalm 95:8, “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”; a true monk should be always ready to hear God’s call and to obey it immediately. “The first degree of humility is unhesitating

¹⁷⁰ John 3:30 (NRSV).

¹⁷¹ RB 5-7.

¹⁷² Luke 11:28.

¹⁷³ RB Pro: 1-3.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

obedience, which comes naturally to those who embrace Christ above all.”¹⁷⁵

Conversatio is the commitment to God, obedience is the living out of that vow.

It is important to remember that the commitment of a monk to be obedient to God is not undertaken in isolation. As noted earlier, the vow of obedience is a vow to give up the illusion of autonomy and independence for a life of self-giving and mutuality. As Christ’s obedience revealed his union with the Father, so too should a monk’s obedience lead to union with God and others. As such, Benedictine obedience is a commitment that takes place in community.

Benedict’s vision of monastic life is a communal one. For Benedict, living under the guidance and direction of an abbot is an essential part of the monastic vocation, as it reveals the monk’s desire to renounce his own will.¹⁷⁶ In a Benedictine community, the abbot represents Christ.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, the abbot should be obeyed as Christ himself. To the modern reader, this injunction at first seems shocking, if not idolatrous. Benedict is not saying that the abbot should be worshipped; however, he is saying that the abbot should embody the virtues of Christ. The abbot is to be Christ the shepherd, Christ the healer, Christ the brother.¹⁷⁸ The abbot is called to exemplify Christ and as such, the monk owes him filial obedience as an expression of his desire to follow God. By his obedience to the abbot, the monk is called to a relationship founded on trust and love. For

¹⁷⁵ RB 5:1.

¹⁷⁶ RB 2:1.

¹⁷⁷ RB 2:2.

¹⁷⁸ Kardong, *The Benedictines*, 75. See RB: 27; 28; 64, 72.

his part, the abbot is sternly reminded by Benedict of his responsibility to represent Christ and that his office is one of service, not domination.¹⁷⁹

Obedience above all is a vow of mutual service to one another. It is a vow to set aside one's own desires and to consider the needs of the other. Says Benedict:

They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other (Rom 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body and behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they should show pure love of brothers; to God loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love.¹⁸⁰

As one can see from the above quote, the Benedictine understanding of obedience is not one of subservience by rather the gift of self in love. As the Desert Father Abba Matoes put it, "He who dwells with brethren must not be square, but round so as to turn himself to all."¹⁸¹ Again, Christ set the example when he washed the feet of his disciples.¹⁸² It is in service and obedience that true love is expressed. "No one has greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."¹⁸³ St. Irenaeus said it well when he said, "Through obedience and discipline and training, man, who is created and contingent,

¹⁷⁹ RB 2.

¹⁸⁰ RB 73:4-10.

¹⁸¹ de Waal, 142.

¹⁸² John 13: 1-7.

¹⁸³ John 15:13.

grows into the image and likeness of the eternal God.”¹⁸⁴ The vow of obedience opens the soul to the other. For Benedictines, the vow of obedience takes a person turned in on himself and opens him to the limitlessness of God’s love. The Benedictine expression of this manifests itself in a commitment to prayer, both private and liturgical, and in an enthusiastic embrace of the needs of his community. This call to service even results in an opening of the monastery to the world beyond the cloister.

In the Rule’s section on the reception of guests, Benedict couches their reception in the language of humility and obedience.¹⁸⁵ “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ...once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love...all humility should be shown in addressing a guest upon arrival or departure. By a bow of the head or a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is welcome in them.”¹⁸⁶ For St. Benedict, humility and obedience shown to the other is, in fact, honour shown to Christ. This is especially so in the case of pilgrims and the poor. “Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received.”¹⁸⁷ In the Benedictine tradition, obedience denotes service.

¹⁸⁴ De Sola Chervin, 162.

¹⁸⁵ Throughout Christian history, monasteries have been refuges of prayer and recollection for diocesan clergy, members of active religious orders and the laity. An integral part of monastic ministry is the reception of guests. With very few exceptions, most monasteries have some sort of accommodation for guests who would like to spend some time with the monks in prayer and contemplation. This is often referred to as the “ministry of hospitality”. In recent years, some monasteries, particularly the Trappists in the USA, have developed programs for retreatants who would like to have an extended experience of the monastic life (i.e. one month to one year) without making a life-long commitment.

¹⁸⁶ RB 53: 1, 3, 6-7.

¹⁸⁷ RB 53: 15.

For the layperson, this vow has a unique ability to transform the demands of daily life. Like the monk, a layperson's life is punctuated by vows and commitments to a particular community. Whether it is the vows of marriage or the responsibilities that come with one's employment, laypeople also find themselves under the demands of others. Underlining all of this is the layperson's baptismal promise to be obedient to God and the demands of the Christian life.

Benedict's understanding of obedience challenges the layperson to see the demands of his or her life as an opportunity for service. At the same time, the Benedictine notion of obedience allows the layperson to unite one's daily responsibilities with one's faith. Work and service in the Benedictine sense are expressions of love for God and the community. For example, Benedict enjoins his monks to "...regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar".¹⁸⁸ Implicit in this statement is a connection between the tools of work and the worship of God. As such, an obedient and loving approach to one's work and responsibilities can be offered to God as prayer. This insight helps us understand the deeper meaning of the traditional Benedictine motto, "*Ora et Labora*" (Pray and Work). In a lay context, the vow of obedience bridges the illusory divide between one's life of faith and the demands of daily life.

The question is one of intention. St. Benedict gives this advice to his monks:

For if you as disciples obey with ill will and murmuring and complaining - not only with your lips but also in your heart - even though the command is fulfilled, still the deed will not be acceptable to God, who sees the murmuring and complaining heart. For this you will receive no thanks but will incur the punishment of murmurers and complainers, unless you change

¹⁸⁸ RB 31: 10.

and set things right.¹⁸⁹

The challenge that Benedict issues to monks and laity is one that transforms not just our outward works, but also the reasons why we do them. For Christians, all that we do should be for love of God and neighbor. Through the vow of obedience, Benedict challenges us put aside a negative and cynical approach to work, responsibility and other people, and embrace the challenges of the day as God's will for us and as an opportunity for loving service. This understanding of obedience has a powerful two-fold effect. First, it has the potential to transform the most mundane tasks into profound acts of faith and prayer. Secondly, this vow directs our thoughts and action toward community and mutual responsibility. As such, the vow of obedience acts as a direct antidote to the hyper-individuality promoted by many parts of modern Western society. The Benedictine understanding of obedience moves the layperson from a checklist approach to the day, where one meaningless task follows another, to a holistic one that transforms everyday tasks into expressions of our baptismal promise to love God and neighbor. This ancient principal was profoundly expressed in modern times by St. Josemaria Escriva.

“Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.”¹⁹⁰ For Benedictines, the vow of obedience, supported by humility, allows both monk and layperson access to the same obedience that punctuated Christ's life and which culminated in the resurrection.

¹⁸⁹ RB 5: 17-19.

¹⁹⁰ Josemaria Escriva, Passionately Loving the World (New York: Scepter Publishing, 2002), 52.

The Benedictine approach to obedience is not one based on power and subservience but is rooted in love and service. The layperson, like his/her monastic counterpart, is challenged by Benedict to build communities based on deference to the other. Whether in the family or in the broader society, the layperson will find in Benedict's Rule a profound theology of service that can be transferred into any situation. For the layperson in a leadership position, s/he can look to the model of servant-leadership that Benedict outlines for the abbot of the monastery.¹⁹¹ For the married couple, Benedict's advice to monks is "to each try to be the first to show respect to the other (Rom 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body and behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead what he judges better for someone else..."¹⁹² echoing St. Paul's beautiful teaching on love in 1 Corinthians¹⁹³ and could apply just as well to the family as it does to the monastery.

Most importantly, the vow of obedience is rooted in humility, and as result calls both monk and layperson to give up relationships based on power and domination. For the layperson, this means infusing the values of love, mutuality and justice in every part of one's day. The layperson can look to Benedict's advice on the reception of guests and embrace a life that is preferential to the many people, especially the poor and marginalized, who present themselves in his/her daily lives. The vow of obedience means

¹⁹¹ RB 2.

¹⁹² RB 73: 4-10.

¹⁹³ 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

seeking service over exaltation, community over individualism and love of God and neighbor over cynicism and self-interest. The vow of obedience has the power to create in a person's life a profound unity between one's intention to follow Christ and the actual living out of that reality. The vow of obedience is an earthy one that demands the real-life application of the good intentions found in the vow of *conversatio*. In this sense, the vow of obedience is the vow to bring Christ's teachings and will into every part of our lives. It is in this vow that both monk and layperson can say with Christ "...yet not my will, but yours be done."¹⁹⁴

Stability: The Call to Put On Christ, Where Christ has Put You.

Conversatio and obedience are merely abstract concepts if they are not applied in a specific time and place. Like God's love, they must be incarnated. If the first two vows are a question of means, then the vow of stability is the question of where. It completes the circle. The vow of stability forces the monk to apply his good intentions to a specific group of people and circumstances. The vow of stability is where the theoretical is dragged into practical, real-world applications. It is where the spiritual "rubber hits the road".

For Benedict, one's salvation was worked out in a specific place. The simple advice of a Desert Father to his disciple to "Go, sit in your cell, and it will teach you everything" succinctly sums up this basic monastic principle.¹⁹⁵ For Benedict, the monastery itself was the "desert". It was where Christ was encountered and the person

¹⁹⁴ Luke 22: 42.

¹⁹⁵ Nomura, 14.

transformed. Contemporary Trappist monk, Dom Andre Louf, writes that the monastery is where the Gospel is lived. It is lived in the worship of God, and through the Christ-centered love that the brothers exhibit toward one another.¹⁹⁶ This is why a key feature of Benedictine life is the vow of stability. Traditionally, this means that the monk is bound to one monastery and will stay there for life.

For Benedict, monastic life is tied to one place, one community. Benedict did not want his monks roaming about or leaving the monastery unless it was necessary. In the first chapter of his Rule, Benedict describes four types of monks. He names them cenobites, anchorites (hermits), *sarabites* and *gyrovagues*.¹⁹⁷ It is obvious that Benedict is partial to the cenobitic way, and has a deep level of respect and admiration for those who “...have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time...and are, with God’s help, to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind...” as a hermit.¹⁹⁸ However, he has no time for the last two types of monks. Even Benedict himself comments on how he does not want to discuss them in length because they are, in his words, “detestable” and “disgraceful”.¹⁹⁹ Benedict’s criticism of the *sarabites* and *gyrovagues* are instructive for our study here. It would seem that the *sarabites*, while living in small communities of two or three, did not submit themselves to an abbot but rather simply did what they liked. In other words, their monastic life was not about the renunciation of the self but rather a fulfillment of one’s own desires and tastes. For

¹⁹⁶ Louf, 133.

¹⁹⁷ RB 1: 1-13.

¹⁹⁸ RB 1: 3, 5.

¹⁹⁹ RB 1: 6, 12.

Benedict, they lacked the virtue of humility and obedience. The *gyrovagues* however, who Benedict says, “are in every way worse than the *sarabites*”, simply traveled from monastery to monastery every two or three days.²⁰⁰ Therefore, not only did these monks not have an abbot or some semblance of a rule, the *gyrovagues* did not have a community. In the Rule, there is a criticism of the *gyrovagues* that, while easy to miss, can help us understand Benedict’s dislike of these monks and his insistence on stability: “...they never settle down...”²⁰¹ In the Benedictine understanding of monastic life, real progress is made in a concrete commitment to a specific community. After all, as one Desert Father said, “a tree cannot bear fruit if it is often transplanted.”²⁰²

As much as possible, the Benedictine monastery was to be self-sufficient so that the monks had no reason to leave the “desert” to which they had fled. In essence, the monastery was where the monk was transformed. Benedict writes, “the workshop where we are to toil faithfully at these tasks [of holiness] is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community”²⁰³ It is this notion that would lead medieval monks to refer to the “paradise of the cloister.”²⁰⁴ The monastic cloister, like the desert, is where Christ would be sought in all earnestness. He would be sought through prayer, contemplation and the love expressed in work rendered to the members of the monastery. This is why the Cistercian Order, an eleventh-century reform of the Benedictine life, would refer to

²⁰⁰ RB 1: 10, 11.

²⁰¹ RB 1: 11.

²⁰² Holdaway, 159.

²⁰³ RB 4:78.

²⁰⁴ Louf, 132.

themselves as “lovers of the brethren and the place”.²⁰⁵ For St. Benedict, to love Christ was to remain in the community, in the place where they had been called together by God. In this sense, the monastery not only echoed the life of the early Christians, and ultimately the communal paradise of heaven, but also afforded the monk the opportunity to be challenged to grow in their vocation.

Benedictine stability is not simply about staying in one spot for life. Prisoners do the same thing.²⁰⁶ The difference lies in the motivation. For the Benedictine, the motivation is the monk’s love for Christ. In St. Gregory’s biography on Benedict, there is a story about a hermit, named Martin, which illustrates this concept:

When Martin first came to this mountain, before he had shut himself up in the cave, he fastened an iron chain to his foot and fixed another end of it into a rock, thus removing all possibility of going any farther than the length of chain would allow. When the saintly Benedict...heard of this, he sent one of his disciples to Martin with this message: “If you are a servant of God you ought to be bound by the chain which is Christ and not by a chain of iron.” Obedient to this advice, Martin immediately loosed the chain, but never again set foot beyond the space to which it had confined him. Having now cast the chain aside, he kept himself with the narrow circle as strictly as before.²⁰⁷

As one can see, the vow of stability is a choice based on love for Christ. It is an act of directed freedom where the monk chooses to stay in a particular place and with a particular community out of his love for God who has called him there in the first place. In this way, we can say that the vow of stability is a radical statement of one’s trust in

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 120.

²⁰⁶ Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 169.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 170.

God, a trust that says, “God is in this place. God is in this monastery. God is in this family...!”²⁰⁸

As mentioned before, the Benedictine model is a communal one. It is one where the monks go to God together. This, of course, is expressed in obedience, but the vow of stability ratifies that commitment. Thomas Merton explained it this way:

The real secret of monastic stability is, then, the total acceptance of God’s plan by which the monk realizes himself to be inserted into the mystery of Christ through this particular family and no other. It is the definitive acceptance of this communion, in time and eternity, with these particular brothers chosen for him by God to share in his sorrows and his joys, his difficulties and his achievements, his problems and their solutions. It means the glad realization of the fact all who are thus called together will work out their salvation in common, will help one another find God more easily, and indeed that we have been destined from all eternity to bring one another closer to Him by our love, our patience, our forbearance and our efforts at mutual understanding.²⁰⁹

The external act of physically committing oneself to one place and one community is the concrete expression of one’s love for God and the people in that community. The vow of stability cuts through spiritual illusions that imagine the perfect circumstances or community where love of God and holiness could come easily. Instead, it calls the monk to be fully present to the working of God in his life at that moment, and to the needs of the people in front of him.²¹⁰ Says Basil Hume, “The inner meaning of our vow of stability is that we embrace the life as we find it, knowing that this, and not any other, is our way to God.”²¹¹ As such, the vow of stability also denotes perseverance. To stick with

²⁰⁸ Westin.

²⁰⁹ Cummings, 172.

²¹⁰ Holdaway, 164.

²¹¹ Ibid.

one's commitments, with a particular place and people even when things get hard. It has even been described by some monks as the monastic "no-divorce law".

It is here that we see the direct application of this vow to the laity. Modern society can best be described as "frenetic". We live in a fast-paced, highly mobile culture that throws a myriad of choices at us on a daily basis. Even relationships are punctuated by a level of instability. Divorce rates are high and even family structures, which are thought to be the foundation of a sound society, are in a constant state of flux. It seems that the only constant in modern Western society is, in fact, change. To make matters worse, this phenomenon is coupled with a societal shift in attitude that holds the idea of permanent commitment in suspicion.

The vow of stability acts as a prophetic challenge to this trend. This vow reminds the layperson of two important things. The first is that all the activities of his/her life must be rooted in his/her baptismal call to follow Christ. What this vow does is provide an inner level of stability that grounds the layperson in the midst of the societal chaos that whirls around them. One of the prime ways this can be achieved is through a disciplined commitment to prayer.

In the Rule of St. Benedict, the commitment to praying at set times during the day is of paramount importance. Benedict calls this commitment to prayer the "*Opus Dei*" or "Work of God". The Rule says this, "On hearing the signal for an hour of the divine office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand and go with utmost speed, yet with gravity and without giving occasion for frivolity. Indeed, nothing is to be

preferred to the Work of God.”²¹² What we notice in this passage is that work is built around prayer, not the other way around. “Benedictine life centers around the chapel.”²¹³ For Benedict, the centrality of prayer roots all the other activities of the monastery in God. “The hours in choir are the high point of the monk’s day, but they will be the high point only if they are the expression of the basic attitude and activity of his whole day and life. His whole being is to be a ‘Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.’”²¹⁴ A commitment to regular prayer at set times sanctifies the day and creates an island of inner stability. Traditionally, monks gather seven times a day to pray the Divine Office. In modern times, the number of Offices prayed, and the times for prayer can vary from monastery to monastery. Nevertheless, what stays constant is the effort to consecrate key parts of the day with prayer.²¹⁵ This practice reminds the worshippers of who they are; and to place their daily work within that broader context.

²¹² RB 43:1-3.

²¹³ Joan Chittister, The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1993), 126.

²¹⁴ Basil Pennington, Light from the Cloister: A Practical Spirituality for Practical Christians Inspired by Monastic Practice (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 53.

²¹⁵ The *horarium* or daily schedule can differ greatly from monastery to monastery. As mentioned before, monasteries that follow the Rule of St. Benedict can be involved in a variety of external ministries, or their witness can be strictly contemplative. As such, the prayer schedule will reflect the activities of the monastery. For example, the *horarium* at *Our Lady of Genesee Abbey* in New York state is as follows: 2:25 AM Vigils, 6:00 AM Lauds & Mass (meditation), 7:15 AM Terce, 11:15 AM Sext, 1:05 PM None, 4:30 PM Vespers, 6:35 PM Compline, 7:00 PM Retire. This monastery is strictly contemplative. It has no outside ministries; as such it can have earlier and more frequent prayer times spread throughout the day. Also, one might find that their Offices tend to run longer. Contrast this to the *horarium* of *St. Meinrad Archabbey* in Indiana. Their schedule is as follows: 5:30 AM Vigils & Lauds (Morning Prayer), 7:30 AM Mass, 12:00 PM Noon Prayer, 5:00 PM Vespers (Evening Prayer), 7:00 pm Compline. Notice that the Offices are later in the day, not as frequent and sometimes combined. This does not mean that the monks of this monastery are less committed to prayer than the monks at Genesee. St. Meinrad Archabbey has a different mission. This monastery has many outside ministries. For example, it operates a major seminary and theological college and some of its monks are pastors of local parishes. Their schedule reflects the needs of the community and the various commitments of its members. What the two communities have in common is the commitment to gather and pray the Office each and everyday. This difference also speaks to the flexibility of the Rule itself. In fact, St. Benedict himself even made for such allowances in his Rule. See: RB 18: 22.

The Russian Orthodox saint Theophan the Recluse reminds us of the importance of this principle, “one act is required – and that is all: for this act pulls everything together and keeps everything in order... This one act is to stand with attention in your heart.”²¹⁶ That “attention” is to the things of God through regular prayer. This piece of monastic wisdom has flowed into many parts of the Church. For example, priests and deacons are required to recite *The Liturgy of the Hours* as a part of their spiritual discipline as well. While this is a mandatory part of the clergy’s vocational duties, the Church recommends that the laity practice this discipline as well.²¹⁷ The vow of stability invites the layperson to bring this same commitment to prayer into their lives. To be certain, it must be tailored to the layperson’s responsibilities. Nevertheless, a commitment to prayer at set times is a practice that grounds the day and thus creates a stable foundation from which one can set out into the world.²¹⁸

The traditional prayer book of the Church, and the Benedictines, is the Psalter. St. Benedict devotes a considerable portion of his Rule to the arrangement of the Psalms for prayer. In fact, chapters eight through twenty of the Rule deal specifically with the issue of prayer and the use of the Psalter. For reasons far too deep to expound on here, the Psalter has always enjoyed pride of place in the Church’s liturgy and the monastic

²¹⁶ de Waal, 155.

²¹⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1175.

²¹⁸ Many laypeople pray the Church’s Liturgy of the Hours (i.e. *Christian Prayer*). However, in recent years a breviary based on Benedictine spirituality has been released. While this is not the official prayer of the Church, many lay people and religious are finding this particular book to be a great help in sanctifying the day according to the Benedictine tradition. For more information see: Maxwell E. Johnson, ed, Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).

tradition.²¹⁹ The Psalter has a unique ability to express the deepest longings of the human soul. “The psalms are nothing if not prayers of the heart, and thus the heart’s salvation”.²²⁰

The second contribution the vow of stability makes to the layperson’s vocation is that it challenges him/her to commit to a specific community, to take seriously one’s vows and responsibilities and to become personally invested in the communities of which they are a part. The vow of stability requires both laity and monk to make a positive contribution to where they are, not where they would like to be. This vow recognizes that God is to be found in the now, in the everyday, in the people who share our lives on a daily basis. The vow of stability is a vow of reciprocity, a vow to be present and to set down roots, deep roots. How many people go through our daily lives disengaged from what is around them? How many marriages break apart due to communication difficulties? How many children feel alone and ignored by their families? The vow of stability cuts through the distractions that fill the day, and challenges us to focus on the things that matter and then build our lives around them. For the Benedictine, God and the monastic family are the foundation. For the layperson, it is the same thing, only a different context.

To conclude, stability is a vow that grounds the monk’s life. It is a vow that calls both monk and layperson to persevere when things get tough, because it is our commitments that define us. Benedictine nun Joan Chittister explains it this way:

²¹⁹ For an excellent introduction to the use of the Psalter in both the Church and monastic tradition, see: Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956).

²²⁰ Matthew Kelty, *My Song is of Mercy: Writings of Matthew Kelty, Monk of Gethsemani* (Oxford: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 51.

There comes a day when this job, this home, this town, this family seems irritating and deficient beyond the bearable. This is precisely the time when the spirituality of stability offers its greatest gift. Stability enables me to outlast the dark, cold places of life until the thaw comes and I can see new life in this uninhabitable place again. But for this to happen, I must learn to wait through the winters of my life.²²¹

With the vow of stability, the other two vows are fulfilled. *Conversatio* is the commitment to on-going change and growth in Christ, obedience is the willingness to actually set oneself aside – to give of oneself totally, and finally stability is the commitment to do that in a specific place and with a specific people. Stability is a strong statement of confidence in God’s fidelity, and it is a profound commitment to incarnate the love of Christ both in our individual lives but also in the lives of those around us.

Conclusion:

The monastic path is an ancient one that continues to speak its wisdom to the modern world. It may be surprising that a way of life begun 1,700 years by a rag-tag group of barely literate Egyptian hermits continues to speak in such a dynamic and relevant way to the modern pilgrim. Monasticism’s enduring influence is rooted in the nature of the human person. At our core, we long for God and family, and at the end of it all, this is what monasticism seeks.

The Rule of St. Benedict offers a deeply Christian and profoundly practical way of pursuing these most essential of things. This is why 1,500 years after its writing it is

²²¹ Joan Chittister, Wisdom Distilled From the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today (New York: HarperOne, 1991), 85.

still being studied and lived.²²² St. Benedict tells his disciples that “your way of acting should be different from the world’s way”.²²³ The model he provides is one that acts in prophetic defiance to the values that modern society promotes. Benedict’s Rule is based on love for Christ and neighbor. It invites us to commit to a path rooted in community and deference to the weakest among us. It challenges us to seek God in the present, to go beyond ourselves and to reach out in love to God and others. In essence, Benedict’s Rule continues to do what his small monastic foundation did in the “dark ages”. It provides our chaotic world with an island of stability; a place where we can stop for a moment, listen to God, and again “...get up” and “hasten toward [our] heavenly home”.²²⁴

Benedict is right when he says that he hopes to “set out nothing that is harsh or oppressive”. All he does is remind us of the things that are necessary,²²⁵ the things that flow naturally from our baptismal vows. What Benedict does is provide both laity and monastics with a “school” for doing just that.²²⁶ The vows of *conversatio*, obedience and

²²² In addition to the tens of thousands of monks and nuns who live their lives according to the Rule of St. Benedict, thousands of laypeople have also sought to apply the wisdom of the Rule to their lives. Many do this by applying the wisdom found in the Rule and other monastic works to their daily lives in a serious but informal manner. However, many chose to belong to an Oblate program. Oblation has had a long history in the Church, and has taken a variety of forms throughout the centuries. Today, Oblates are laymen and women in all states of life, and from a variety of Christian traditions, who seek to apply Benedictine principles to their spiritual lives in a formal way. They do this by formally associating with a monastic community, entrusting a good portion of their spiritual formation to the monks or nuns of that community, and by applying the Rule to their personal circumstances in a purposeful manner. Oblates continue to live their vocation as laypeople, but do so supported by the particular monastic community and the wisdom of the Rule. Most Benedictine communities have an oblate program, and see such programs as an essential part of their ministry to the Church and world. Perhaps one of the best introductory resources on the Oblate vocation is: Gervase Holdaway, ed, The Oblate Life (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).

²²³ RB 4:20.

²²⁴ RB Pro: 8 and 73: 8.

²²⁵ Luke 10:27: “...Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself.”

²²⁶ RB Pro: 45.

stability combined with *lectio divina*, prayer and community give concrete expression to the abundant life to which Christ has called all people. The vows allow both monastics and laity to act as prophetic witnesses to the best of human and religious impulses, and this is the powerful witness that monasticism brings to the Church and the world. In short, the Rule reminds us of the bigger picture. To close, St. Benedict issues the challenge to us. “Then with Christ’s help, keep this little rule we have written for beginners.”²²⁷ If we do that then perhaps we will truly “...prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ, and...be brought, all together, to everlasting life.”²²⁸

Bibliography:

- Aquilina, Mike. The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers. Huntington, IN.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999.
- Bartholomew I. Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today. New York: Doubleday, 2008.
- Bianco, Frank. Voices of Silence: Lives of the Trappists Today. New York: Paragon House, 1991.
- Bunge, Gabriel. Earthen Vessels: The Practice of Personal Prayer According to the Patristic Tradition. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002. _
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

²²⁷ RB 73: 8.

²²⁸ Paraphrased from RB 72: 11-12. The idea for concluding the paper with these two quotes was from the following work: Benet Tvedten, How to be a Monastic and Not Leave Your Day Job: An Invitation to Oblate Life (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 110.

- Chittister, Joan. The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1993.
- _____. Wisdom Distilled From the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today. New York: HarperOne, 1991.
- Clarke, John, trans. Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976).
- Cummings, Charles. Monastic Practices. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986.
- de Dreuille, Mayeul. Seeking Absolute Love: The Founders of Christian Monasticism. New York: Cross Road Publishing, 1999).
- De Sola Chervin, Ronda. Quotable Saints. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992.
- de Waal, Esther. A Life Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995.
- Escriva, Josemaria. Passionately Loving the World. New York: Scepter Publishing, 2002.
- Feiss, Hugh. Essential Monastic Wisdom. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999.
- Flannery, Austin, ed. Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996.
- Fry, Timothy, ed. RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict 1980: In Latin and English with Notes. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981.
- Hall, Thelma. Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988.
- Holdaway, Gervase, ed., The Oblate Life. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008.
- Hume, Basil. In Praise of Benedict. Petersham, MA: St. Bede Publications, 1981.
- Johnson, Maxwell, ed., Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005.
- Kardong, Terrance. The Benedictines. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier Inc., 1988.

- Keller, David. Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.
Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005.
- Kelty, Matthew. My Song is of Mercy: Writings of Matthew Kelty, Monk of Gethsemani.
Oxford: Sheed & Ward, 1994.
- Knolwes, David. Christian Monasticism. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969.
- Laboa, Juan Maria. The Historical Atlas of Eastern and Western Christian Monasticism.
Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003.
- Louf, Andre. The Cistercian Way. Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1997.
- Markides, Kyriacos. The Mountain of Silence: A Search for Orthodox Spirituality.
New York: Image Books, 2001.
- McGreal, Wilfrid. At the Fountain of Elijah: The Carmelite Tradition. London: Darton,
Longman and Todd, 1999.
- Merton, Thomas. Cistercian Life. Spencer, MA: Cistercian Book Service, 1974.
- _____. The Monastic Journey. Kansas City, KS: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel,
1977.
- _____. Praying the Psalms. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956.
- Monaco, Frank. Brothers and Sisters: Glimpses of the Cloistered Life. New York:
Marlowe & Company, 2001.
- Moore, Lazarus. An Extraordinary Peace, St. Seraphim: Flame of Sarov. Port Townsend,
WA: Anaphora Press, 1999.
- Nomura, Yushi. Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers. New York: Orbis,
1982.
- Oliver, John. Touching Heaven: Discovering Orthodox Christianity on the Island of
Valaam. Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2003.
- Pennington, Basil. Light from the Cloister: A Practical Spirituality for Practical
Christians Inspired by Monastic Practice. New York: Paulist Press, 1991.

- Ramsey, Boniface. Beginning to Read the Fathers. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.
- Roberts, Augustine. Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005.
- Swan, Laura. Engaging Benedict: What the Rule Can Teach Us Today. Notre Dame, In: Ave Maria Press, 2005.
- The Life of St. Benedict by St. Gregory the Great. Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1995.
- Thoreau, Henry David. Walden; or Life in the Woods. New York: Dover, 1995.
- Tvedten, Benet. How to be a Monastic and Not Leave Your Day Job: An Invitation to Oblate Life. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006.
- Vidmar, Johan. The Catholic Church Through the Ages. New York: Paulist Press, 2005.
- Ware, Timothy (Kallistos). The Inner Kingdom. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000.
- _____. The Orthodox Church: New Edition. London: Penguin, 1997.
- _____. The Orthodox Way. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1979.
- Ward, Benedicta. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987.
- Zondervan NIV Study Bible. Fully rev. ed. Kenneth L. Barker, gen. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.

Electronic Sources:

Benedict XVI, General Audience: April 27, 2005. Vatican Web Site. 15 March, 2010
 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2005/documents/hf_benxvi_aud_20050427_en.html>.

Benedict XVI, General Audience: 9 April 2008. Vatican Web Site. Accessed on-line: 15 March 2010.

<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf_benxvi_aud_20080409_en.html>.

John Paul II, Oriente Lumen. 2 May 1995. Vatican Web Site. Accessed on-line: 16 March 2010.

<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jpii_apl_02051995_orientale-lumen_en.html>.

Keating, Thomas. "Awakening of a Truly Ecumenical Conscience," Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin 31 (1988), Accessed on-line: 13 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=75>>.

Rossano, Pietro. "Dialogue between Christian and Non-Christian Monks: Opportunities and Difficulties," Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin 10 (1981), Accessed on-line: 13 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=21>>.

Steenberg, M.C. "A Gospel Motivation for the Monastic Life," Monachos.net, February 2001, Monachos, Accessed on-line: 12 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.monachos.net/content/monasticism/monastic-studies/90-a-gospel-motivation-for-the-monastic-life>>.

Westin, Carolyn. "Benedictine Spirituality," The Machray Review 6 (1998), Accessed on-line: 15 December 2009. <<http://www.prayerbook.ca/library/machray/issue6/machray6i.htm>>.

Other Sources:

The icon of Sts. Benedict and Scholastica on the title page of this paper was created by: Sr. Mary Charles McGough, O.S.B. (d. Sept, 2007) of St. Scholastica Monastery, Duluth, Minnesota.

The emblem on the title page is of the medal of St. Benedict. For an explanation of the history and meaning of this powerful and highly indulgenced sacramental of the Church see:

“The Medal of St. Benedict”, The Order of St. Benedict. St. John Abbey, Collegeville, MN. < <http://www.osb.org/gen/medal.html>>.