LETTER AND SPIRIT: ST BENEDICT'S RULE FOR OUR TIMES

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FOR FIFTY years and more, the Benedictine Rule, and the way of life for which it legislates, has been subjected to close and expert examination. In the pages which follow, we have availed ourselves of the results of all this intensive research, in order to give a straightforward and coherent account of the purpose of St Benedict's Rule, and the means proposed therein for attaining it. We hope that, by so doing, we can provide significant signposts towards the same goal for men and women of our own day.

It is worth remarking, first, that St Benedict himself did not 'start from scratch'. Many chapters of the Rule and a skeleton of its Prologue were borrowed from what is called *The Rule of the Master*, but with a host of important additions and omissions. Half a century's careful research has not yet discovered a name for 'the Master'; but the following points have been established with a high degree of probability. He was an abbot, settled somewhere south-east of Rome, and thus in the vicinity of St Benedict's own foundation at Monte Cassino. His rule was written before Benedict's, but not very long before it. There is now no question that our Saint's Rule depends on the Master's, and not the other way round, as was taken for granted over many centuries. However, such dependence does not, as might be thought, detract from the originality of St Benedict. The more closely the two Rules are studied side by side, the more admirable appears Benedict's discrimination and judgment in his choice of material. Nor is it simply a question of choosing the best and leaving aside the turgid and the mediocre: his own insertions, as we shall see, reveal him to be a pre-eminent guide in his own right. In fact, we are presented with a fascinating picture of a man of deep humility, always ready to accept the text of another when he sees that he cannot better the expression, and of bold initiative, equally ready in his own assurance of the truth, to overturn the material at his disposal.

Secondly, as one noted scholar has remarked, the Rule presents us with 'a bundle of elements': the vows, prayer, *lectio divina*, flight from the world. The tendency has been to departmentalize the

spiritual and religious life, to analyse in minute detail, to label carefully. The result has been a partial failure to see and to understand how they fit together. This is possible only when we actually live the life. The best way to show our gratitude to the scholars is to live by their discoveries.

Monasticism as lived is always an accommodation of the Rule to the situation, to the ethnic group, to modern needs and conditions, as well as to the struggles and triumphs of the past. An english monastery will never be the same as one in Spain, Austria or France, let alone those in other continents. The character, the history, the environment are all so different. Yet it is important now and then to gather all the various threads: to see whence they came and whither they are going, particularly in a great centenary year. It is a way of life, then, that is the subject of our enquiry; and space limits us to an examination of the main strands. But we hope, from our reflections on these, to glimpse the same goal which St Benedict saw, and to transmute it into a vision for our times.

I. THE GOAL

The Prologue to the Rule, which St Benedict distilled word by word and with great economy from the far more prolix 'Rule of the Master', is the most obvious place to begin our search. It has the ring of an abbot's talk to novices just starting out on the monastic journey. It takes us to the root of the life. At the same time, it is couched in biblical, Old Testament, language, and we have to interpret. The theme is set in the very first paragraph: a 'return to your loving Father from whom you have strayed'. Here we are at the threshold of the Gospel. Jesus himself begins in the same way: 'The kingdom of God is at hand; repent (return, *metanoia*) and believe the Gospel' (Mk 1,15). St Benedict is insistent: we must rouse ourselves from sleep, the hour for action has come. Then follows a very important phrase, 'Let us open our eyes to the divine light'. But the word is stronger than 'divine'; it means 'divinizing', that is, 'making Godlike'. He is referring to the life or light that comes with Baptism, a sharing in the divine life of Christ.

To encourage the beginner, St Benedict adds that if the monk makes this initial move, so important for his salvation, he will hear God say, 'Before you call upon me, I shall say to you 'Lo, here I am'. It is not merely that we are seeking; it is God himself who is beckoning. 'What can be sweeter to us, dearest brothers, than this voice of our Lord inviting us? In his loving mercy the Lord is showing us the way of life'. A zest and an urgency in the Prologue carry us along. Only once does the text speak of walking along the

path to God; no, we must run: run while you have the light of life; seek after peace and pursue it; run there, to God's kingdom. Unless we run we shall never arrive. But when the Lord enlarges our hearts — our understanding — we can run in the way of his commandments (Ps 118,32).

Quite simply the Rule is crying out to the monk to love God above all things. The same demand is made at the beginning of the list of 'Instruments of Good Works' (ch 4): the first is 'to love the Lord God with all one's heart, all one's soul and all one's strength'. At the end of the Prologue we read that 'as we progress in our monastic life and in faith, our hearts shall be enlarged, and we shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God's commandments'.

It is important to notice too that for St Benedict the words 'Lord', 'God' and 'Christ' are almost interchangeable. So at the end of the Prologue we read: 'we shall share by patience in the sufferings of Christ, that we may deserve to be partakers of his kingdom'. In the fourth chapter, already quoted, we find, after the injunction to love God with all our heart, that we are 'to prefer nothing to the love of Christ'. This is a refrain that can be found in many places in the Rule. In the Prologue we are urged to 'fight for Christ, the true King, renouncing your own will'; in chapter 5 monks are said to 'consider nothing more precious than Christ'; in chapter 72 we are reminded to 'put nothing whatever before Christ, who leads us to eternal life'. This teaching is entirely biblical. Jesus, the Incarnate Word, is central to St Benedict's spirituality.

Holiness

A reader may stop at this point and exclaim, 'But this isn't being a monk, it is simply being a Christian'. He is quite right, for of course a monk is aiming at being a Christian. All the means monastic life provides are directed to this end. This assimilation to Christ is the very essence of christian holiness. The monk is never a 'horizontalist'. He knows well that the command to love one's neighbour is one that follows from the first. 'This is the commandment he gives us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother' (1 Jn 4,21).

If we carefully reflect on Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (ch 5) we shall find that we are, in virtue of our Baptism, made holy, called to co-operate in and graced for our growth in holiness:

> The followers of Christ have been called by God, not in virtue of their good works but by his design and grace; they have been justified in the Lord Jesus and have been made sons of God in the Baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly

> sanctified [that is, 'made holy']. They must, therefore, hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God.
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> The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life . . . to each and every one of his disciples without distinction. 'You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5, 48). For he sent the Holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul, with their whole understanding and with all their strength (cf Jn 13, 34; 15, 12). *Lumen Gentium,* 40

In other words, the first holiness is a pure gift of God. By that gift we are transformed into his likeness and share his own divine life. The next step is our willingness to become what we are, actually to share in that divine life by virtuous action. When the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says, 'It is not what you have been, nor what you are, that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you desire to be', he has caught the drift of Benedict's Prologue. We have 'to serve God with the gifts he has given us'; and further on we are reminded that 'God has designed to count us among his sons'. Even more important, as we have already seen, is the Rule's call to us to 'open our eyes to the divine-making light', *deificum lumen.* Here is the heart of the christian revelation on the effects and the nature of Baptism: we are so transformed in our nature that we are raised up to a new kind of humanity, that of the 'Second Adam', Christ, the 'new man'. Having 'died with Christ', we are raised up with him and in him through a symbolic dying and rising again by our immersion in the waters of Baptism. It is so difficult for us to realize this, perhaps even to accept that it is possible, that both Jesus and his followers cast around to find ways of explaining this marvellous mystery.

The transformation begun in Baptism is reinforced by the Eucharist, which is not only a daily reminder that we are incorporated into Christ; it also effects that incorporation. Our transformation radically changes our life's objective. We have been raised up to share in the life of the Holy Trinity, a life of infinite love between the persons, infinite because God is infinite. If that life in us is activated and does not merely remain something hidden away or smothered by the cares and evils of this world, the soul is drawn upwards irresistibly towards the Godhead. This is what conversion is about: 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (Jn 6, 44). And again, 'This is the love I mean: not our love for God but God's love for us, when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away' (1 Jn 4, 10).

Commitment

In the New Testament Jesus is always appealing for a real and profound commitment, and astonishingly enough it is a commitment to himself: 'Come, follow me'; 'Simon Peter, do you love me more than these?' For Paul too, the commitment is to Jesus; it was Jesus who spoke to him in that blinding experience on the way to Damascus. John records that Jesus claimed to be not only the Way but the Truth also and the Life. When Philip asked, as Moses might have done, 'Show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied', Jesus replied, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father'. St Benedict's outlook is equally christocentric.

The apostles' response to Christ's call was sluggish, often uncomprehending, and made in fits and starts. The whole of Benedict's Rule demonstrates that he too is aware of the gradual character of many a vocation. We aim for the stars; but we know that, human nature being what it is, many will be scrambling up the lower slopes with difficulty.

This commitment to God in Christ means, first, that we are to go on loving God all the rest of our life; and secondly, to love all others as we love ourselves. In the christian ethic these two are absolutes and are inseparable. They are the root of all christian activity. Our Lord's own life exemplified this by a rhythm of prayer and of compassion for all humankind. Human beings are not transients or shadows destined to fade away, but creatures of God who have an eternal destiny. They have been saved by Christ. They are our brothers and sisters, most precious in God's sight. Jesus died for them all without exception.

A Benedictine is one who has chosen a particular way of fulfilling this double commandment of Christ: that is, a settled framework specifically designed to simplify the task. The Rule, tried and proved full of wisdom over the centuries, provides the framework, the guidelines, the path which saves our waywardness from leading us into either exaggeration or lukewarmness in our search. By Baptism we are already set for the journey, and fully equipped. The journey is long, the traps many, human nature lame. If, however, we are eager for the search, the Rule of St Benedict is one of the sure ways: it is designed to aid and abet the fulfilment of these two commandments: loving God and loving our neighbour. It is, however, patently clear that the emphasis is put on the first. Could this be part of the wisdom of its author, seeing that ways of loving one's neighbour are numberless and have to be decided 'in the field', while ways of loving and seeking God have been carefully mapped, and were already so mapped in St Benedict's day? True or not, we have ample guidance for both in the Rule, and we begin now with its proposals for the former: the search in prayer for the living God who loves us first.

II. PRAYER

It is often alleged that St Benedict is not very informative about personal prayer. We might begin by observing that his advice is certainly of the simplest kind; but we might add that this may be an advantage for those of us who have been over-exposed to the analytical, self-conscious approach of writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Secondly, we need to distinguish between personal prayer, and prayer offered in physical solitude — 'private' prayer.

St Benedict gives only two short chapters (20 and 52) which refer expressly either to private or personal prayer. He writes with extreme caution and economy of words. It would, however, be naïve of us to imagine that he had little or no acquaintance with the firmly established eremitical tradition — the prayer of the Desert Fathers. For as we work slowly through the Rule, there gradually emerges from the pages an extraordinary sense of depth; and it becomes clear that the substance of prayer permeates all that he writes, even though he seldom uses the word *oratio*. First, there are more than twenty places in the Rule where personal prayer is discussed, laconic though these may be. Further, in other areas of the Rule, especially in the Prologue, in the chapters on Obedience and Humility, and in other references to the topics dealt with, prayer is always just under the surface. In fact, we find that obedience and humility presuppose and involve prayer.

All true prayer, whether it is offered in common or in private, must be personal. The sheer quantity of monastic prayer is, on this reckoning, impressive. There are about four hours of communal prayer (*opus Dei*), two-and-a-half or three hours of *lectio divina*, private prayer and sometimes Mass, amounting to eight hours a day. All this undoubtedly puts Benedictine life in the category of the *ex professo* contemplative; which it need hardly be said, is in complete accord with all the monastic traditions of East and West. Monks were and are those who pray, who seek God in prayer.

We are not, of course, speaking of 'the order of the day' in any chronological sense, or even of the timetable which the text of the Rule supposes, with the exact balance between the various elements of the life as there established. St Benedict was legislating for his own time, the last decades of the sixth century, and for his own region, southern Italy. The point is that whatever the details of his Rule, prayer was central for Benedict and for his monks, and it did occupy a notable part of their time. Following tradition means development, adaptation and right interpretation, as the Council teaches with regard to the relationship between Scripture and tradition (cf *Dei*

Verbum, 8). Fundamentalism kills authentic tradition. It is for us to grasp and interpret the substance of the Rule's teaching within the context of our own time and conditions. Only in this way will we help those who follow to carry out a similar transposition for theirs.

The Presence of God

The sense of God's all-embracing presence permeates the Rule from the Prologue to the end. Prayer is a conversation, whether with words or without, between God and us, a sharing of love and of life, of sorrow and of joy, a mystery of union. So the first step is to realize by faith that God is here. For St Benedict it is as much, and more, a matter of God seeing and knowing us in the full scriptural sense of the word, as of our being aware of him. He is there before we call upon him. 'God is beholding us everywhere' (ch 7), but with love. Yet he remains the judge who will require an account of our sins.

It is for us to follow this lead, to expand our understanding of this basic insight of St Benedict. God is present everywhere, in the smallest creature and in the furthermost expanse of the heavens. Whatever we look upon, there is God: hidden, yes, but giving signals of his presence: and most intimately in his creatures who know and love as he does. Every good and lovely thing is a reflection of his supreme goodness and loveliness. We experience God in every act of his creation, in the majestic mystery of the world's slow evolution. He is there as we walk in the fields or in the forests and tread the timid wild flowers or climb the mountains to stand over all he has made; as we peer into the deep ocean or the deeper star-crammed sky; as we listen to the silence of the night or are still before the ungovernable roar of cities.

God is everywhere, even in sin. We could not sin unless we existed, and it is God himself who is for ever keeping us in existence. God is allowing us to act with freedom; the very freedom that is his gift we spoil by sin.

God is present in the tearing mystery of death, in our pain and in every human sorrow. His Son shared and shares these with us, to show that all is in his hands, to be sanctified and to sanctify. For all that, the agony of the world plunges us into mental confusion. How can this be, and God be infinite love? It is the agony of our time, our Dark Night.

For us Christians the presence of God is Jesus, the Risen Christ, present now in each one of us. This is the wonder-mystery of Christ's work. We are the dwelling-place, the temple of the Holy Trinity. The word is implanted in us, the seed. As St Basil, who was St Benedict's favourite guide, wrote: 'The pupils in the School of God's commandments, having received this Word, are by God's grace enabled to exercise it with care. . . . Having received a com-

mandment — to love God — we possess the power implanted in us at the moment we were created'.

We may fittingly conclude this section with a quotation from another monk saint, a Benedictine if ever there was one, St Anselm:

> Enter into the innermost chamber of your soul, send out everything save God . . . and having shut the door seek him out. Speak now, my whole heart, speak now to God. 'I seek now your countenance, O Lord, your countenance I seek'. Lord, you are my God and my Love and never have I seen you. You have created me and re-created me and you have given me all the good things I possess, and still I do not know you. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you (*Proslogion* ch 1).

This is the secret, unforeseeable way of contemplation.

Compunction

St Benedict himself had the gift of tears, and he expected his monks to pray for it. Sorrow for sin comes high up in his list of ways of praying: not in any intellectual 'order of priorities', but simply the spontaneous result of his getting close to God, the all-pure and holy God. It is the expression of authentic humility: 'Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man'. St Benedict's anguished concern, repeated in different forms over and over again, is not so much with any particular past sin, but simply with his and our sinfulness — our rooted desire to be independent, to do our own rather than anyone else's will, even God's. This seems to be the meaning of those early lines in the Prologue: 'Listen . . . that by the labour of obedience you may return to him from whom you have strayed by the sloth of disobedience'. At the centre of our being are those roots of the seven deadly sins, all ready to sprout anew. But we have hope; we trust in the infinite mercy of God. The Prologue continues, 'Behold, in his loving mercy the Lord shows us the way of life'; and the last of the *Tools of Good Works* is 'never to despair of God's mercy' (ch 4).

Prayer as Dialogue: lectio divina

We sometimes wonder how people manage to have a dialogue with God. Surely only the saints are able for that: a St Catherine of Siena or a Julian of Norwich. St Benedict shows us how. For him Holy Scripture is God speaking to the soul. The Bible is inspired by God himself. When we read it, we are listening to God. The very word 'obedience' has the fundamental meaning of 'listening': listening to God in order to carry out what he has commanded. This dialogue approach is quite clear in the Prologue: 'The Lord . . .

says, 'What man is he who desires life and longs to see good days?' And if hearing him you answer, 'I am he', God says to you, 'If you will have true and everlasting life . . . seek after peace and pursue it . . . then my ears will be open to your prayers. And before you call upon me, I shall say to you, 'Lo, here I am' (cf Ps 33).

This use of Scripture comes directly from ancient monastic tradition. One of the ways of praying among the Fathers of the Desert was the use of a phrase or sentence from the Bible. This they would repeat as a prayer, squeezing it until all the spiritual juice had been extracted. The most famous of them in the western Church is that with which monastic choirs have always been accustomed to begin every Office: 'God, come to my assistance, O Lord, make haste to help me'. We may compare the western interest today in the 'Jesus Prayer', or even in the 'mantras', the incantations of the non-christian eastern religions.

How do we translate the latin phrase *lectio divina*? In the time of Benedict, it is commonly held, *lectio divina* referred to the 'meditative' reading of Holy Scripture alone. But in monastic terminology it soon came to include the scriptural commentaries of the great Fathers. Later still, it comes to mean all 'reading that leads to God', after the manner of St John of the Cross's phrase *vuelto a lo divino*, which he used of a pastoral poem he found and twisted into a poem about Christ, 'turned Godwards'.

Reading can be merely informative, but even that can be the beginning of a Godward motion of the heart. Often it remains a worldly exercise, and not infrequently a vain exercise, in the sense that we want to be 'in the know' about a book or an event. This is part of the attraction of such magazines as *Time*. Yet even such can lead to prayer.

It has been said that each person has his own way of doing Godward reading, so it may not be out of place to mention some of the ways that have proved helpful to me. When very young I was made aware that the writers of the New Testament were endeavouring to describe one of the supreme mysteries of our faith in very different ways: the mystery of sharing God's life in Christ. So it was a fascinating exploration to collect all the different insights spread through the New Testament, from being members of the kingdom, to sonship, to the spring of water, to the vine and the branches, to the image of the body and the head. On another occasion it was borne in on me that humility was a first consideration. So once again I set off gathering everything said on that. The Jerusalem Bible made these searches even more exciting and fruitful. Then the biblical dictionaries began to come out. But they make it too easy, too quick, ready-made. Note how the Rule, in chapters such as that on humility, gathers short biblical sentences, prayer-filled, like those used by the Desert Fathers.

At other times it was a depth-search: what is the full meaning of such texts as the first half of chapter 2 of the Letter to the Philippians, or of the first half of 1 Cor 13? At other times I was drawn to penetrate to the human character of Christ, to imitate his ways, his prayer, his compassion, his courage, his littleness. . . . Another fruitful vein was to accumulate the titles of Christ and ponder over them, with some research into the Old Testament background, but primarily to use them as stirrings for the heart: the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man, the Way, the Truth, the Life, our Peace. . . .

My experience of the Fathers is probably similar to that of many: a mixture of intense delight — as in the Letters of St Ignatius of Antioch — and surprised boredom. St Augustine (except when contentious) and St John Chrysostom rarely disappoint, the one for his warmth and insights, the other for his realistic approach to the life of Christians.

I have always liked the lives of the saints: to begin with, their ways of dying, but more recently their first steps towards God. The fully fledged saint has reached a stage to which one cannot aspire, but the first faltering steps are revealing and heartening. The two Teresas are outstandingly helpful in this.

We read to understand God's ways and to stir our hearts to respond to that divine love. Read . . . understand in love . . . wait upon God's response. The Holy Spirit not only comes to the rescue as we stammer our prayers; he also guides our minds and hearts as we read, kindling the fire of divine love in us. We long to be united with the God who is Love. Throughout the day those words of fire, words inspired by the Holy Spirit, go before the monk like the pillar of fire before the Israelites, as they moved forward through the desert towards the promised land. We mull over these words, 'chewing' them, making an extended meditation.

We have to recapture this patient, meditative, concentrated way of reading. Godward reading is one of the main props of the central activity of the monastic round, prayer. Cut it out and the wells dry up. Indeed for many it has been the very first experience of personal praying.

Jesus's Prayer

The teaching of the Rule that we have been examining is very close to Jesus's own. One outstanding characteristic attitude is his constant awareness of his Father. The temple is 'his Father's house'. At the beginning of his public life, he stresses that the kingdom of God is at hand; it is among his disciples, it is within. He is not content simply to 'do good', namely to comfort the afflicted, heal the sick, raise the dead to life. He seems to be drawn to the desert to be

with his Father, to pray.

He prayed not merely to have a rest, to restore his mental energy. Jesus's humanity was made for God. He was the Beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased. They had a relationship of love, and of understanding. No one, Jesus said on one occasion, knows the Father except the Son, and no one knows the Son except the Father. This word 'know', especially in such a setting, has a very profound meaning of love. Their union was total, but Jesus as man had to express it as man, in prayer. The Rule is one of those great documents of the Church which try to ensure that at least some of Christ's followers will carry on this union. The Body of Christ, the Church, also needs to keep on searching for God the Father.

The monastic practice of short prayers is also grounded in our Lord's habit of praying in little repeated sentences, as, for instance, in those words recorded by the evangelists of his agony in the garden: 'Not my will, but thine be done'. One suspects that the lapidary sentences of the Our Father are meant to be said in the same manner.

The whole of a monk's life is wrapped in prayer, from the very early Office to late Compline. Not only is the *Opus Dei* sprinkled throughout the day; St Benedict also wishes prayers to be said for waiters, for travellers, for the arriving guest, for the refectory reader. Everything is an occasion for meeting Christ.

Underlying it all is a spiritual longing, like a deep-flowing river in the caverns of a mountain, an abiding search for God himself. This is the work of every Christian, but specially of monks who make it their central purpose, goal and activity. It is this unity of purpose with Christ, a unity in which the mind and heart are Christ's mind and heart, with nothing else standing in the way, that gives power to the apostolate. Without it, all the rest is 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'.

III. THE DIVINE OFFICE

The Divine Office has undergone a considerable number of changes throughout the centuries. St Benedict, for instance, urges his monks to recite at least 150 psalms a week because the ancients would do the same in a day. It is possible that individual fathers of the desert did so, as did in all probability St Columba on his bitterly cold island off the coast of Scotland, standing in freezing water the while. But the early desert fathers certainly did not recite this number in the oratory together, whatever they may have accomplished in the privacy of their cells. We know from Cassian that some of them recited in common only twelve psalms of a morning and twelve at dusk.

The attitude of these earliest of monks was to use the psalms not so much as prayers in themselves but rather as material for praying on. This is eminently reasonable, since if the psalms are studied with care it becomes clear that only about half the material is direct prayer, addressing God in the second person. Very often the psalms are talking about him, or even about our enemies and what we would like to happen to them. The way the early monks prayed the psalms varied, but sometimes one monk would recite or sing a psalm and then all would prostrate on their faces on the ground for a time to utter inward personal prayer.

By the time of St Benedict, two hundred years later, a complicated development had occurred, too long to examine in detail here, but important for our purposes. In the first place, the monastic choral practice had repercussions on the clergy, particularly in the cathedrals, and vice versa. The ordered prayer in choir that St Benedict so carefully and beautifully arranges is the end-product of this reciprocal development. The important thing is not so much how he sets out the psalmody as his attitude to what he organizes. The monk has become the representative of the Church, praying the prayer of the Church. St Benedict has accepted much from the Church in Rome; he also borrows hymns from the cathedral of Ambrose in Milan. Those previous silences and prostrations between the psalms and at the end of the readings have disappeared. The psalms are the prayer now, not the spaces in between.

It may be that Benedict in his prudence was counting the cost of frequently lying prostrate on the cold ground, in the pre-dawn freezing air on the top of Monte Cassino. He was legislating for beginners. To get the psalms 'by heart' in the full sense of the word was the important thing; depth in prayer would follow. The psalms he loved so much — no part of the Bible is more quoted by him — have great richness of spiritual content. They sum up the spirituality of the Bible; they express every mood and desire of the humble

christian soul; they were the prayer of predilection of Jesus himself. They are the prayer of the Church, his Body. They expand the human heart: instead of concentrating on our own puny needs, we are carried along to pray for the needs of the whole world. We also see our own situation in a multitude of different lights: hope, sorrow, love, joy, communion, peace.

As we recite the psalms we hear the voice of Christ as he murmured one on the cross; we hear echoes of Mary's hymn to humility at the Visitation. We know that the apostles recited them and that the great saints down the ages have been nourished by them: Benedict himself, Cuthbert at Lindisfarne, Gregory in Rome and Boniface in the forests of Germany, Gertrude in her convent and Jeanne de Chantal at Annecy, Bruno the Carthusian, Francis the Jesuit missionary. Today the whole Church recites them with Christ.

How fitting they still are to human life! When we may be oppressed by ceremonial splendour we hear the psalmist say, 'A sacrifice pleasing to God is a humble and contrite heart' (Ps 50, 19). When we feel abandoned the words come: 'Thus even my friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has turned against me' (Ps 40, 10): we can hear Christ thinking this after the Last Supper and the great betrayal. Or when spring comes, the joy of the psalms fills our hearts with gratitude to God: 'O praise him with sound of trumpet, praise him with lute and harp, praise him with timbrel and dance, praise him with strings and pipe' (Ps 150, 3-4). Psalm 118 is repetitious; but turn 'obedience' into 'love', which is what it really means in a biblical context, and it becomes a wonderful hymn to God's love.

The one place where St Benedict is eager that we should be free to modify his arrangements is in the ordering of the Divine Office. We should not be hesitant in doing so. but we must know what we are gaining and losing. The readings are now one of the great anthologies of the world. They include all the great passages from the Old Testament, from the primitive and profound accounts in Genesis which set the scene for the history of mankind: men fleeing God, God seeking men with unhurried pace, patiently, persistently, through the story of man's lack of love and God's excess of love.

The New Testament words come to us like catches of music, now brave and strong, now painful and sad, but always with the motif of triumph, sometimes muted, sometimes clear. No man ever spoke as this man spoke: that is how we feel as year after year those simple, homely, infinitely beautiful words of Christ enter into our consciousness. We must listen with an open ear, unimpeded by evil desires, ancient grudges, despair; we must listen with eager, hopeful love.

Then we have the collection of christian writings, from Ignatius of Antioch, that man on fire for martyrdom, to his namesake of Loyola, aflame to serve Christ the King; from Augustine to Thomas

Aquinas; from Clare to Thérèse; from Louis of France to Thomas More; from Francis of Assisi to Vincent de Paul. In almost every case the quintessence of their wisdom is there.

Just as the seasons of nature move slowly past in their varied cycle, so too the liturgical seasons come to meet us: gentle and subdued and loving at Christmas, smiling and triumphant at Easter, deep and hidden and strong at Pentecost, each with its appropriate texts and celebrations. And all the time we are not alone, but surrounded by the choir of heaven and the Church on earth. The mission of the Church, as Vatican II pointed out, and the goal of its apostolic work, 'is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his holy Church, to take part in her holy sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10). The Divine Office is part of that continual surge of praise towards God that goes up all over the world. The distribution of the 'hours' of the Office aims at the sanctification of the whole day and night. Once again we meet this idea of 'constant prayer', not just of individuals now but of the Church as such. When we say, 'of the Church', we rightly think of the whole Christ, Head and members, in heaven and on earth. This grand design and action are easier to experience when we pray in choir with many other members of that Body than when we pray alone. We become aware of the whole Church spread across the world, a gentle cloak of mercy, as Shakespeare might have said, coming 'as the gentle dew from heaven'.

And yet one has to admit that there are times when the Divine Office in choir is a penitential service, especially for those with an acute sense of pitch or of time, or both, and for those who are more aware than others of the delicate elements in the beautiful rendering of the chant. This might be put the other way round: those without a sense of pitch or time, or of the niceties of a beautiful rendering, can also be acutely aware of their own deficiencies and of the pain they cause to their neighbours in the choir. Should we in exasperation say that this malaise is enough to destroy the other values of choral office? No; for these difficulties are among the greatest sources of sanctification for those engaged in choir. Here is the perfect place for accepting with patient love the infirmities, both physical and temperamental, of our brethren. It is not easy, but extremely rewarding. In this respect the Divine Office is a sacrament of the whole monastic life. The aesthetic value of the singing must take second place. Rather, we are compelled to seek the ultimate reason for what we are doing: namely, carrying on a conversation of praise and love with God. A rendering that is mediocre from the artistic point of view will be most acceptable to him if our hearts are intent on sharing as best we can in the great harmony of the Church's song.

IV. THE EUCHARIST AND MONASTIC LIFE

The Rule and the Eucharist

Today in every religious house, and for every zealous Christian, the Mass is central. This was already the case centuries before the Second Vatican Council called the Eucharist 'the source and summit of the christian life'. Yet the Holy Rule mentions it only in passing. This gap in the Rule should not surprise us when we remember that Antony, the father of all monks, may have gone for months out there in the desert without Mass or even Communion. Here we have an excellent example of development in the spiritual life of monks down the centuries.

Yet it might be rash to judge that St Benedict was unaware of the meaning and importance of the Mass from the bare fact that he scarcely mentions it. Except for 1 Corinthians, neither does St Paul. Silence is a poor argument. But is St Benedict silent? He has a curious way, when listened to closely, of showing in an oblique manner that he is quite aware of a subject from an angle different from our own.

When we truly grasp the meanings of the Eucharist that have been clarified for us in our day, it may surprise us to find that St Benedict, when writing of other matters, is in fact drawing upon the riches of the Paschal Mystery gathered up for safe-keeping in the Mass. His teaching on community life, on compunction, on the vows, on humility and obedience, on silence, all stem from meditation on the Paschal Mystery. An immediate example may explain the point: when the young monk has pronounced his vows and signed them, he places the very document upon the altar of the Mass (ch 58). His whole life becomes by that simple and meaningful act a sacrifice united with that of Christ.

Our understanding of the Mass today

How do we understand the Mass today? Clearly an answer to that question here has to be summary. In some way it makes present for us the redeeming act of Christ. What was sacrificial about Jesus's death was his loving acceptance of it as part of the fulfilling of his Father's will. It was the inevitable culmination of his life if he was to carry out the commission he had been given by the Father. Here we are at the bed-rock of Christ's life: his obedient love even to the death. As St Thomas Aquinas pointed out, Jesus satisfied for our sins by showing enough love to his Father to make up for all our lack of love; and this was supremely shown in dying, when a man gives all. Love is shown by obedience.

Jesus died once, and thus through his obedience to the Father won

the victory over sin; but this victory had still to be applied to and accepted by those for whom he died. He did not want this to be done without our co-operation, without the opportunity being given us to make a free assent. Thus in every age and for every generation this sacrifice is made present, so that every man, woman and child may come to it and say, 'I want to be at one with Christ in his perfect self-giving to the Father'.

The same note is struck at the beginning of the Prologue, in those words which sum up the history of man: 'By the labour of obedience return to your loving Father, from whom you have strayed by the sloth of disobedience'. If we remember that for St Benedict obedience is love, the parallel is complete. The golden thread in the Rule is the loving appeal to obedience; the golden thread in the life of Jesus, our Way, was this same loving obedience that led first to his death and then to the glory of the resurrection.

The various elements of the Eucharist

It is remarkable how closely the monastic life mirrors the Eucharist; to select a few of the elements of the Mass will make the parallels clearer.

The penitential rite. One of the most distinctive characteristics of monastic spirituality is the sense of sin. The penitential ground is necessary for the first step towards renewal and conversion. A monk should always be conscious of his unworthiness before God. The Eucharist begins precisely with an avowal of it. The two *Confiteors* of the old Tridentine Rite have been fused into a clear unit in the new, rightly placed at the threshold of the sacred action. What makes it so moving and effective is that here the community is assembled to admit their weakness, to ask forgiveness of God and of one another with united prayer. One becomes more and more aware that unless we truly recognize our need for salvation, for the saving grace without which we can do nothing, God in a sense cannot act, for we tie his hands. As St John of the Cross used to say to his penitents, we tie his hands by our lack of trust: in our day, we might add, by our lack of sorrow.

The scripture reading. The next great moment is the reading of Sacred Scripture. It is the Lord's daily message or word to his friends, the People of God. At this moment we are all on the same level, all listeners, receiving food for mind and heart. At this point in the Mass, St Augustine in his cathedral at Hippo used to go and join the congregation in the nave, sitting among them to hear God speaking to them all.

The silence. Those silences in the stillness of the Church after the readings, when only the Spirit speaks, are among the most precious moments of the celebration. We might say that they gather together

all the silences of the day. They remind the monk that silence is for greeting the Lord in our innermost being where he reigns, waiting for us to worship, to listen, to assent, to plead, to praise and to thank. From the readings at Mass we collect food for the pilgrimage of each day: some phrase or some episode that has been most appropriate to our condition.

The Offertory. The little sub-rite of the Offertory has gradually gained significance until today, when it is a suitable introduction to the great theme of the Mass. There is nothing new, but a more profound interpretation. The bread and wine stand for us and all creation. In a few moments the bread and the wine-and-water will become the Body and Blood of Christ. We are reminded of that moment in a young monk's life when he places his vows, the statement of his oblation, upon the altar (ch 58).

The Canon. The Eucharistic Prayer is the centre and climax of the offering. 'All the faithful by offering the Immaculate Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also with him, should learn to offer themselves as well. Through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever closer union with God and each other, so that finally God may be all in all' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 48).

At the heart of Jesus's sacrifice on Calvary was his obedience to his Father. He laid down his life of his own accord (Jn 10, 18). The whole life of a monk, and all his actions, are directed to following the divine will; but the Eucharist brings it all to a point, uniting every hour to that obedience of Christ, whose life every Christian shares. Indeed, every Christian aims at conforming himself to the mind of Christ; this is what obedience is about.

Communion. A sacrifice is the creature's humble gift of himself to God, but implies also a return gift from God to the creature. In the jewish tradition this return gift is a share in the life of God; but never is this more clear and absolute than in the return gift of the Eucharist. The return gift is Jesus, to be assimilated to us as food; or, better, we are assimilated to him in order to become one being with him, yet without ceasing to be ourselves.

The Rule shows an intense awareness of this union of Christians with Christ. The abbot in a special way represents Christ in the community, but all the brethren are Christ, and in a particular way the sick and the old. St Benedict sees Christ in everyone: guests, pilgrims and the poor. Every time the Eucharist is celebrated, this doctrine is acted out at the moment of Communion, as we share together in the life of Christ by the reception of his Body and Blood. A Benedictine Community — indeed, and christian community — is meant to be a witness to this mystery of the raising up of us poor separated individuals into a marvellous union with Christ, a union

of all who say yes to him. It is here at Communion that the Christian or the monk or the religious receives the power, the power which is Christ, to live together with his brothers and sisters in a loving relationship where jealousy and envy, anger and contempt are wiped away, where caring, honour and love have taken their place.

Beyond the little group present round the altar, there stands the whole assembly of the faithful, those in heaven and those in the stage of purification here on earth or after death. All who are united with Christ are in a real sense present; they share in the mutual love that is generated by the love Christ shows us in the Eucharist. They are supported in their prisons, on their death beds or in their hunger pains, their tortures and their tragedies.

Some years ago a missionary priest visited our monastery at Ampleforth. He had recently been freed from a prison in China where he had been held in solitary confinement for four years. He asked if he might speak to the school. Before he began to describe his experiences he said he had one most important thing to say: he thanked all present for all the prayers we had said and particularly for the masses we had offered for the suffering Church in China. It was a solemn moment, as not a few of us knew we had not prayed enough. He went on to tell us that without those prayers he and others could not have survived either spiritually or mentally.

A monastery is a place of intercession, a place of community, a showing of the meaning of the Church to the world. It is not a place where one fights for one's own rights, but where one prays for the rights of others, loving all mankind by the power of the Spirit of love. *The Eucharist effects our redemption.* The Eucharist is not only a reminder to us of our redemption, but a means of effecting it. 'It is through the liturgy, especially the divine Eucharistic Sacrifice, that the work of our redemption is effected' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2). Our salvation is effected through our repentance, our sharing in the humility and obedience of Christ, and by our receiving of the very life of Christ through the sacrament of Communion. The memory of our sins is blotted out, and all that remains is the memory of that all-embracing love of Christ in his sweet dying, his complete giving. Since his fair, radiant face, transfigured now, is so loved by the Father, the dirty past of our sins and those of mankind is no more; while by our yes to the welcoming gesture of those outstretched arms we are encircled in the glory of his redeeming power.

The paschal meal pointed towards the promised land. The new Pasch, our meal with Christ, looks towards the new promised land of paradise. Each day we are, by faith, with Jesus in paradise. We hear an echo of this in those words of the Rule concerning Lent: the monk is to 'look forward with the joy of spiritual longing to the holy feast of Easter' (ch 49).

V. THE LOVE OF PEOPLE

The New Testament ground

Nothing in the New Testament is clearer than this: that a Christian who does not love his neighbour cannot possibly be in love with God. St Matthew records Jesus's parable of the Last Judgment. The test for entry into paradise is whether we have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked . . . and the reason why we should do that is that these people are Christ himself: 'When you did that to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me' (Mt 25,40). We are invited to go out of our way to love those who need it most. St John in his gospel records the solemn words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper, giving them 'a new commandment': his disciples were to love one another as he had loved them (Jn 13,34). He loved them to the length of dying for them. He promised that if they followed him in this, he and his Father would come and dwell — that is, live on — in them. Thus the true Christian, the one who loves to the limit, shares the very life of God. An awesome demand, and a still more glorious reward (cf 1 Pet 1,3-9).

The First Letter of John provides us with an even deeper insight into this matter. We ask ourselves, Why is loving so important? The answer there is quite simple: because 'God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him' (1 Jn 4,16). If we long for God, then we shall find him by loving, because all true love is a sharing in the life of God. St John goes on, 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love comes from God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God' (4,7).

The whole Rule is infused with these truths of the christian faith: everyone is a carrier of Christ. Benedict also seems to have had the sensitivity of St Paul in this matter of living by love, for his way of treating people recalls the famous hymn: 'Love is patient, is kind, it is never jealous, never perverse or proud. It is never insolent; does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury; takes no pleasure in wrong-doing, but rejoices in the victory of truth: sustains, believes, hopes, endures to the last' (1 Cor 13,4ff).

The Rule is shot through with this primary concern for the brethren. One might expect a rather dull collection of regulations of an administrative kind. In fact the grey sky of the sixth-century text is illuminated by the warmth of the love that St Benedict directs towards every situation and every type of person. The 'Rule of the Master' never even got round to suggesting that the monks should love one another and the abbot. The Benedictine Rule is the exact opposite; it is continually directed towards friendly human relationships (see especially ch 27,64,71,72).

Still, it is easy enough to repeat that monks should practise mutual

love and that they should love their abbot. The Rule goes far beyond that generalization. It shows how this is to be done by innumerable little touches, all of which, and particularly the consideration for people outside the community, are almost without exception St Benedict's own contribution to the composite Rule. Even in those passages taken from the Master, it is often the case that a phrase or two is added which graces the whole with a feeling of loving concern. For example, in the chapter on the cellarer, whose position of responsibility brings him into close contact with all the community, the Master is concerned only with the cellarer's relationship to the abbot. Our Rule, on the other hand, seems always to be sensitive and concerned for the monks. Twice it slips in helpful comments: 'Let him not vex the brethren; but if any brother chance to make an unreasonable demand, let him not vex him with a contemptuous denial, but reasonably and humbly refuse the improper request'. And a little further on: 'If he has nothing else to give, let him give a good word in answer' (ch 31).

Again, in the description of what kind of person the abbot should be, the really human comment belongs exclusively to St Benedict: 'Let the abbot realize what a difficult and arduous task he has undertaken, of ruling souls and adapting himself to many dispositions. One he must humour, another rebuke, another persuade, according to each one's disposition and understanding' (ch 2).

The final example is at the very end of the Rule, the distillation of Benedict's wisdom on mutual love within the community — 'Of the good zeal which monks ought to have'. There we read:

> Just as there is an evil zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and eternal life. Let monks, therefore, exercise this zeal with the most fervent love. . . . Let them bear with one another's infirmities with great patience, whether these are of body or character. Let them vie with one another in paying obedience to one another. Let none follow what seems good to himself but rather what is good for another. Let them practise fraternal charity with all purity. Let them fear and love God . . . and prefer nothing to the love of Christ (ch 72).

Open to the world

The chapter on guests, it has been pointed out, has a peculiar hesitancy. It begins with great openness, but ends on an anxious note. At first, it sounds as if St Benedict expects all the community to rally round the newly arrived guest, as they would, he imagines, around Christ himself. 'Let all guests that come be received like Christ, for he will say, 'I was a stranger and you took me in' (ch 53).

This is a splendid start. Here is Christ at the door, the Christ from the world outside. 'Let fitting honour be shown to all, especially to those who are of the household of the faith and to pilgrims'. Even though Christians are due special treatment, the pagan, the 'outsider', is not to be turned away. Twice we have had the word 'all' to show how a monastery should have its receiving arms wide open. There is an echo of Paul's exhortation to the Galatians: 'Let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith' (Gal 6, 10). According to St Gregory's *Dialogues* (14), even the Hun Totila was well received at Monte Cassino. So what do the community do? 'As soon as a guest is announced, let the superior and (*vel* in the Rule usually means 'and') the brethren meet him with all charitable service'. It must really have been worth the mighty climb up that mountain to receive so warm a welcome. But that is not all: 'First of all let them pray together, and then let them unite in the kiss of peace'. At this point is there hesitation, or simply a desire to avoid confusion or too effusive a welcome? The problem is that the devil may be coming in too. The united prayer would show. The sense of Christ's presence in the guest is so great that the Rule says the greatest humility should be shown; the monks should bow their heads or even lie prostrate on the ground, 'and so let Christ be worshipped in the guests'. Once again the community are brought in: after the abbot and the guest master have read Scripture with them and given them a bite to eat, the community reappear 'to wash the feet of the guests'. Poor men and pilgrims should be given special attention, 'because in them Christ is more truly welcomed'. Then at the end of the chapter the warning note is sounded, as though the euphoria of the beginning had proved too exciting: 'Let no one without special instructions associate or converse with guests'.

Such a *volte face* has its counterpart in most monastic experience. A reform, a new insight is inaugurated, only to be countermanded. Fear or excessive caution creeps in, and the buds of spring are blighted. We leave St Benedict standing there at the entrance, looking towards the world. It will be others who will follow his vision more resolutely.

Why do we find this intense fear of the world, this *fuga mundi*, among the early monks? There are many reasons, one of which goes very deep. In Cassian we read that to love God is to rid oneself of every other love, to reach *apatheia*, which was freely translated by him as purity of heart, a state in which the only desire was for God. But the way to it was by continual prayer. Anything that could upset one's calm and recollection should be avoided. St Benedict, and indeed all monks and nuns since, have been caught in this tension between the two Christs: the Christ of prayer and the Christ who is the pilgrim at the door of their lives.

St Basil visited the hermits of Egypt and came to the conclusion that the second commandment was not sufficiently kept. In his monastery he provided a hospital, orphanage and hostel for travellers, so that his monks could show their love for their fellow men, keeping, however, the monastery itself as a refuge, so that they could be close to God in prayer. It is noteworthy that the only Father of the Church St Benedict mentioned by name is St Basil, whose wisdom he venerated (cf ch 73).

This is not all, for two other factors helped the monastic ideal to evolve in the direction of a more flexible attitude towards the outside world. The first is recorded in St Gregory's little Life of St Benedict (*Dialogues*, 8), where in it is said that Benedict preached continually (*praedicatione continua*) to the great number of people who lived round the mountain of Cassino. True or not, this is the image that St Gregory projected of his hero, an image taken up by all future generations. Benedict himself was a missionary, but only round his monastery. St Gregory himself, though mourning his own loss of solitude, did not hesitate to send Augustine and forty other monks to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons.

The second pointer towards things to come is the presence of a considerable number of boys in the monastery at Monte Cassino. This is also clear from Gregory's *Dialogues*, but even more so from the repeated mention of boys in the Rule itself (e.g. chs 30, 37, 59). If there are boys around, they have to be taught, supervised and controlled, a very time-consuming occupation. Here we have the seeds of another great Benedictine work. This is not to say that all educational developments within the Federation of Monasteries have been beneficial to the monastic spirit; all life is a balance of worthwhile things, and monasticism is no exception. What we wish to stress is that the Benedictine ideal, from its very origins, evinces a shift away from a total flight from the world towards a new stance of openness towards it. Such opening out onto the world, and the various activities demanded by it, has flourished in a remarkable way the world over, century by century; and in none, perhaps, so much as in our own.

VI. OBEDIENCE: THE BRIDGE

Obedience is not an isolated virtue, nor is it the be-all and end-all of religious life; yet it is an integral part of the complex process of reaching out to God.

There are many kinds of obedience, but that of which St Benedict speaks is obedience to God and no one else. There will be mediators of God's command — the Church, the Rule, the abbot — but unless the monk sees the command as coming from God, it is all in vain. The monk is one who 'renouncing his own will to do battle for the true King, Christ, takes up the strong and shining weapons of obedience' (Prologue). Later in the Prologue the imagery of fighting changes to that of love, for true obedience is love: 'We shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God's commandments'. In chapter 5, love again is the motive: 'Obedience becomes those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ'. There are certainly other reasons — fear of hell, hope of heaven — but the heart is love for God: 'The obedience given to the superior is given to God' (ch 5).

We cannot expect to have private revelations telling us what to do at every turn. God's word must come through the channels established by his Church, which is Christ in the world. One of these channels is the abbot of a community, who has been authorized by the Church to look after this particular group of Christians living together under vows.

A Christian who by the promptings of God has come to seek him in earnest will not only seek him in the stillness of his soul, in an inner search, a search for the presence; he will also see with increasing clarity the frightening reality of his own sinfulness and wretchedness before the all-holy God: 'Depart from me, O Lord, because I am a sinful man', or, 'What shall I do to be saved?' It is then that the monk listens. 'What shall I do? What do you want of me? Here I stand, ready to do your will, O Lord'. It is in this experience that obedience is born. Already in St Benedict's first degree of humility we are reminded that we ask God in prayer that his will be done in us (ch 7). Here is the vital link between activity and prayer, whatever the activity may be, whether it is the purgative activity of getting rid of vice, or the practical activity of running a farm or a school. We set our minds and hearts in prayer to do God's will in whatever way is required. In the second degree St Benedict quotes our Lord's own saying, 'I came to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (Jn 6,38). This leads on to the third degree: 'that a man for the love of God subject himself to his superior in all obedience'. This has, of course, an ascetical value, controlling our unruly selfish tendencies; but the motive that counts throughout is love for God. We want to find out what he wants, in order to do it.

It will be seen, therefore, that obedience in the Rule is a kind of bridge between human activity and the life of prayer. Activity is made holy by the prayer of conformity to the divine will, and prayer is given substance by a life lived under obedience. The two become almost indistinguishable. This is the impression we derive from Christ's life as recorded in the Gospels, particularly that of St John. It is most instructive for us, and especially for those of us who find ourselves trying to balance the two halves of the christian life, prayer and work.

Jesus comes out of obscurity at about the age of thirty, with a mandate from his Father to carry out the plan of restoring mankind to union with the Father, beginning with the chosen people. His public life is hectic. In the Gospel of St Mark the urgency, the hustling by the crowds, is most evident:

> That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door (1,32).
> In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there (1,35).
> Jesus could no longer go openly into any town. . . . Even so, people from all around would come to him (1,45).
> He went out again to the shore of the lake, and all the people came to him (2,13).
> Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lakeside, and great crowds from Galilee followed him. From Judaea, Jerusalem, Idumaea, Transjordania and the region of Tyre and Sidon, great numbers, who had heard of all that he was doing, came to him. And he asked his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, to keep him from being crushed. For he had cured so many that all who were afflicted in any way were crowding forward to touch him (3,7-10).
> He went home again, and once more such a crowd gathered that they could not even have a meal. When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind (3,20-21).
> Again he began to teach by the lakeside, but such a huge crowd gathered round him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there. The people were all along the shore, at the water's edge (4,1).
> Jesus said to his apostles, 'You must come away to some lonely place by yourselves and rest for a while', for there were so many coming and going that the apostles had not time even to eat. But the people on the shore reached the place before the little party with Jesus, and from every town they all hurried to the place on foot and reached it before them. So as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd (6,31-34).

That is the picture of the pressure upon Jesus in his missionary activity. Over and over again he and the apostles slip away to pray. But it is St John's Gospel that gives insights into Jesus's own thinking during all this work. The will of his Father is paramount, enveloping his whole life. His life becomes a prayer in action, like the *Fiat* of his mother Mary.

> My food is to do the will of the one who sent me (4, 34).
> The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing, and whatever the Father does the Son does too (5, 19).
> My aim is to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me (5, 30).
> I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of the one who sent me (6, 38).
> I do nothing of myself: what my Father has taught me is what I preach (8, 28).
> As long as the day lasts I must carry out the work of the one who sent me (9, 4).
> The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again; and this is the command I have been given by my Father (10, 17-18).

When the end came, he could say, 'It is accomplished' (19, 30): that is, he had accomplished what his Father had sent him to do. The obedience was complete. The same understanding of our Lord's life is expressed by St Paul in the celebrated hymn in Philippians, 'obedient unto death, even death on a cross'.

The deep impression that we received from even a cursory examination of these texts is the intimate relationship between Jesus's prayer and his activities. It is as though there were a strong underground river flowing just below the surface of his consciousness, which erupts into springs of prayer at the slightest provocation.

There are some whose primary activity is the practical apostolate, and for these an urgent need is to tap this reservoir of prayer and union with God. Perhaps there has never been a time that needed this prayer-element more than our own. It is strange that those who practise it are straying into activism; whilst those on the fringes of the Church are seeking a sign of prayer to follow, and, not finding it within the Church they know, are wandering off into non-christian paths of hinduism and other contemplative initiations.

Monks become monks in order to find God. Whatever else God may call them to, it is never contrary to this, their vocation.

VII. THE RULE AND THE ABBOT

According to the Master, from whom St Benedict borrowed so much, the Rule is completely subject to the abbot. This is not the case in St Benedict's plan. Here the abbot is advised 'to keep this present Rule in all things' (ch 64). He is the interpreter of the written Rule. At the same time he is 'believed to be the representative of Christ in the monastery' (ch 2). While he is both elected by the brethren and ratified as abbot by the local bishop. he represents Christ. He is not just a functionary; Christ is speaking through him. In that age, still close to the early Church, the Spirit was known to speak to any who shared the life of Christ through grace, more especially if he was one chosen or blessed by the authentic leaders of the Church. He was a charismatic person, not in the sense of someone rising up outside the hierarchical Church, but simply in virtue of his office. As St Paul would have said, he had the charism of his office, just as the teacher, the administrator and the preacher had (cf Rom 12, 6-8). For St Benedict there is no division between the hierarchical Church and the charismatic Church or Church of the gifts. The abbot has, as it were, a foot in both camps: he is both charismatic and hierarchical. Because of the latter he shares in the authority of the Church, under the bishops, the apostles and Christ; because of the former he can be assured of guidance and insight to instruct his monks, not only in matters of the Rule but also in the teaching of Christ, the Gospel: 'To intelligent disciples let him expound the Lord's commandments in words; but to those of harder hearts and ruder minds let him show forth the divine precepts by his example' (ch 2).

The rule of the abbot is to be in no way rigid. He must adapt to the temperament of each monk (ch 2). He must be concerned that no one is overworked, such as the waiters or the cooks; allowances must be made when the harvest is on; even extra wine should be given if the heat is excessive (ch 40). St Benedict strongly urges the abbot to make a different arrangement of the psalms if he thinks fit (ch 18). He may not be a man for all seasons, but he is certainly expected to be a man for all monks.

In a decadent period, that of the crumbling Roman Empire, a time of trouble and of tyrannical government, St Benedict's Rule stands out like a torch of liberty. The third chapter of the Rule is outstanding, and, possibly because of the Rule's later illustrious history, was seminal to medieval and thus to modern democracy. In the first place, the abbot is elected by all the monks. Once elected and confirmed in office by the Church, he must not act like a dictator. When some business is to be decided, 'let the abbot call

together the whole community and himself set forth the matter'. Having heard their views, he must decide: 'Let the decision depend on the abbot's judgment'; but he not only expects all to give their opinion; he also takes it that the young could well have the answers: 'The reason why we have said that all should be called to council is that God often reveals what is better to the younger'. We are very far here from the authoritarian despotism of later ages in Church government.

The Second Vatican Council inaugurated the modern tendency to consultation: consultation by bishops of their priests, of the bishops by the Pope, of the faithful by their bishops: in fact, a complete network of relationships. The third chapter of St Benedict's Rule reminds us that this is a return to the practice of the early Church. St Ambrose had been acclaimed by the faithful of Milan as suitable for the bishopric a century before St Benedict. The same thing occurred in Rome, when St Gregory was acclaimed for the Holy See itself, less than fifty years after St Benedict's death. A monastery is almost a miniature Church, and the relationship between its members is one of trust, mutual support and co-operation.

This subordination of the abbot to the Rule brings him into the midst of the community. Much of what is said of the abbot in the Rule applies not only to him but to all the monks in their relations with each other, particularly in the demand for mutual respect, considerateness, patience and care.

St Benedict would have us preserve the structure in its main outline at all costs. Vatican II would also have each Order preserve its identity; and, while giving the bishops some powers with respect to the Orders, was firm that the bishops should not force them to undertake any work contrary to their charism.

VIII. ASCETICISM: FROM ENDS TO MEANS

As we pass from the two great commandments of loving God above all and our neighbour as ourselves, the two ultimates of the christian life, we find ourselves in a world of means. Apart from those two loves, nothing else from the 'bundle' of virtues and counsels is an absolute. All have real value only in reference to those two commandments. Each moral virtue can do no more than point towards love. True, one saint has concentrated on this virtue, another saint on that: St Francis on poverty, St Philip Neri on joy. One can only say that in the phenomenon of sanctity there comes a point when all ends and means coalesce and become one long united work of love, inextricably interwoven. For the motive makes all our actions valuable, and in the christian life the motive of love must sooner or later become all-embracing.

In ascetical practices such as fasting, austere living, vigils, self-flagellations, and careful keeping of the minutiae of the law, it is the negative elements that at first appear prominent. They are part of the purgative way, or the active way, as the ancient ascetics of the desert called it: the task of ridding oneself of all that could impede the coming of God into the soul. Being only means to an end, only the clearing of the ground, they must not be exaggerated or turned into idols.

One side of St Benedict does seem to reflect a negative attitude, one which is a questionable inheritance from the egyptian desert. Such phrases as 'to chastise the body', 'to love fasting', 'not to seek soft living', all point in that direction. But he was not out to kill the body, only to tame it; and even that was not his main reason for encouraging restraint. He wanted his monks to find a way of sharing in the sufferings of Christ; they are to 'deny themselves in order to follow Christ'. This is made even plainer in the Prologue, where we are promised that 'never abandoning (God's) rule . . . we shall share by patience in the sufferings of Christ'.

Although there is austerity in the Rule, especially for us who are accustomed to greater luxury, it is probable that the restrictions were not much different from those found in St Benedict's day among the local people round Monte Cassino. When we are reckoning the levels of relaxation permissible in a monastery, the Third World, with its staggering material poverty, should always be in the forefront of our minds. In St Benedict's time, too, there was great poverty in Italy, the poverty consequent on frequent, recurrent wars. He was not concerned with community wealth; he would be concerned with survival. It was personal simplicity of living that he desired.

St Benedict thus expected considerable austerity in his monastery, yet at the same time a certain relaxed attitude towards physical privations is also discernible. This has often been noted, but we must repeat it here, both for completeness and in order to correct the picture of monasticism which has sometimes been painted in extremely lugubrious colours. St Benedict's monks did not sleep on the floor but had, not only a bed each, but a mattress, a blanket, a coverlet, and, to crown all, a pillow. What italian peasant of the time had any of these? As for drink, St Benedict, though himself favouring water as a more suitable monastic drink than wine, says that 'as monks today cannot all be persuaded of this, let the Rule allow for this weakness, and those who wish it have a hemina of wine a day' (no one knows now how much or how little that was). One might have thought that the monks serving at table could reasonably wait until after the meal to take theirs, but not so St Benedict; he even makes provision for this: 'Let the weekly servers, an hour before the meal, receive each of them, over and above the regular allowance, a drink' (presumably wine) 'and some bread, in order that at the meal time they may serve their brethren without murmuring and undue hardship' (ch 35).

Towards the end of the Prologue, a short passage, not found in the Rule of the Master, seems to express perfectly St Benedict's own mind on this subject:

> In founding this school of the Lord's service we hope to ordain nothing that is harsh or burdensome. But if for good reason, for the amendment of evil habit or the preservation of charity, there be some strictness of discipline, do not be at once dismayed or run away from the way of salvation, of which the entrance must needs be narrow. But as we progress in our monastic life and in faith, our hearts shall be enlarged, and we shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God's commandments.

All of this harmonizes with a sentence at the end of the Rule: 'Whoever you are, hastening towards your heavenly country, fulfil by the help of Christ this little Rule which we have written for beginners'.

St Benedict, realizing the weakness of human nature, was constructing a way of life which, from the physical point of view, was not particularly hard for the people of his day, in either food, sleep or work. But he was demanding something much more important; on two points of interior asceticism he was adamant: poverty and obedience.

Many years ago a holy monk of my monastery, now dead, became convinced that he was not leading a sufficiently austere life, that he

was not truly mortified. So with the permission of the abbot he went to another monastery where the life was, in all outward respects, far harder: the monks rose earlier and ate far more frugally; the manual work was more exhausting and the silence almost complete. He disappeared from view. But some months later he returned, convinced that although life in his own monastery did not approach in austerity that of the monastery to which he had gone, such austerities were not for him. They did not lead him nearer to God but left him too exhausted to be concerned about anything, let alone God. He returned at peace, and the community learned a lesson by his experience. Means are to be used if they help to achieve the end in view.

For those of us who live with other people, human relationships should provide enough asceticism for all but the most zealous for physical suffering. Quite apart from those difficult people who provide what St Benedict calls opportunities for patience, consider the asceticism involved in such ordinary features of life as the telephone, with its tyranny and apostolate; the deaf; the gloomy; the fussy guest; the job and its tedium (most study is a grind); the pupil who is a dunce. To care: that is the asceticism for today.

Jesus himself likewise seems to project a double image. On the one hand he is the man who has nowhere to lay his head; he scarcely has time to eat; he is for ever on the move from village to village, completely exhausted at the well of Sichem, up till all hours of the night and away before dawn in the morning; dying on a gibbet for us. He tells us to follow in his footsteps. But how? Not, it seems, in the fierce austerity of his life, but in that 'I am meek and humble of heart'. Here unequivocally is Jesus's aim, an interior conversion, from pride and aggressiveness to the gentleness and littleness of the poor. He is harking back to the beatitudes of his first sermons: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . blessed are the patient . . . blessed are the merciful . . . blessed are the peacemakers'.

Jesus does not tell Matthew to give up his good dinners and good wine; rather he joins in, sharing the feast with his friends. He attacks fiercely any outward show of asceticism: sour faces or visible signs of fasting. On the other hand he does say, 'Take up your cross and come, follow me'. A cross in Jesus's time was no ivory ornament in a boudoir, but a hideous reality; hundreds of them were by the roadside with the remains of men hanging there. Jesus was foretelling that those who followed him were liable to be killed for their faithfulness to him, as he was to be killed himself. If we would save our life we must lose it. The reward was everlasting life, but he was saying to all of us that we have to give up all to gain all. The acid test comes in time of persecution.

The Rule sees the best form of self-denial to be a loving patience

in the rough and tumble of life, in the acceptance of hard obediences and especially in a loving and patient acceptance of the idiosyncrasies of the brethren, whether they be of the body or of character. St Benedict links the problem with Christ's passion and death, as in the third degree of humility, where he says with St Paul, 'he was made obedient even unto death'. The virtue of patience, which we need so much in human relationships, is a sharing in Christ's passion: 'We shall share by patience in the sufferings of Christ' (Prologue).

In the Rule we find a quiet undercurrent of joy and the stirrings of the Spirit of love. How often that phrase 'most fervent love' occurs, and how unexpectedly yet how suitably in the chapter on Lent does St Benedict speak of the monk who is considering how to live a good Lent, as follows: 'Let him offer something of his own free will *in the joy of the Holy Spirit*' — a most revealing phrase (ch 49). He even repeats it, in slightly different words: 'Let him long for the holy feast of Easter with the joy of spiritual desire', with a yearning inspired by the Spirit.

IX. THE THREE MONASTIC VOWS

The three monastic vows — conversion of manners, obedience and stability — underpin the monastic structure. Conversion of manners is the seeking of God and his commandments to the best of our powers, according to the Gospel and within the framework of the monastic life. This covers all the vows, so that in a sense there was no need for further explanation; even obedience could be included. But obedience was considered so important by St Benedict that he mentions it separately. Stability had also come to be necessary as a separate vow, probably because of the unstable character of some monks in those unsettled centuries. A monk might come to the monastery to 'be converted' and live the life, put himself under the abbot, and then change his mind. The Rule requires commitment, permanence. Of course that vow includes stability of place, unless his abbot sends him on a mission. Travelling then, and for many centuries afterwards, was far more precarious than now. A journey from England to Cîteaux and back might take a good part of a year, while today a journey to Australia could take less than twenty-four hours, and one from England to New York and back less than a day. It was not exactly movement through space that the Rule was concerned with, as much as preventing escape from obedience to the abbot of one's monastery. Obedience and stability are concerned with commitment, with determination to be free of self and under the abiding will of God.

One might ask, 'Why express this in the form of a vow?' A vow is an outward declaration of intent; it is done publicly. The witnesses in this instance are the abbot and community of the monastic family we have chosen and which has chosen us. The Church, for whom the abbot stands, is witness. The ultimate witness is God himself, to whom the vow is made. The taking of vows, then, commits the monk before the Church and God himself.

Poverty and chastity are included implicitly in both Conversion of Manners and Obedience. They are part of the monastic way; and by vowing obedience to the Rule one obeys the injunction to accept poverty and chastity, and so too all the means to loving God and one's neighbour as well as possible.

Stability

Once the general relationship between the vows has been established, Stability deserves separate mention. It is a vow particularly pertinent to our time. In some ways our world seems as unstable as that of St Benedict. Yet true love is a totally trusting, almost extravagant gift of self, 'for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, until

death do us part', as the wedding service has it. So with stability: we accept all, no matter how difficult things may become. This vow is not merely a legal idea; it is almost a pity that it has a legal appearance. It is a generous abandonment of self to the care of God. How can we take it back? Can we not trust God to have care of us? All life has its shining periods and its dark shadows; and, strangely enough, it is not during the bright weather that we grow, but when the going is hard. Then we are stretched to the limit; then we see our need of God and cannot rest on the flimsy strength of our own powers; then we must rely upon his grace. It is then that our love is proved.

At the cross-roads we should recollect also how much we have received from our community: not merely education, but spiritual understanding and immensely valuable friendships and support. They have shared and borne our difficulties, rejoiced in our successes. We hurt that community by not keeping our bond.

It would be a strange life that did not have crises and Dark Nights. Rare is the marriage that has not been bleak at times, with the future looking grey. Yet those who persist in humility and love come out of the darkness into the golden calm of evening. So too with monastic life: in the middle period, when we think our gifts are being wasted or our strength is beginning to fail, and it is now or never if we are to assert our virility or our womanhood, then it is that instead of slipping away we should reaffirm our total gift to God. In its small way, but truly, it is now reminiscent of Christ's self-gift on the cross. Then no life is wasted; rather it is transfused with the glory of the resurrection because it has expressed to the full the true meaning of love.

> 'I am bound by the vows I have made you, O God, I will offer you praise' (Ps 55, 12).

X. POVERTY

Can anything new or useful be said about monastic poverty? Recent years have echoed with much agonizing over the subject. It does have its peculiar emphasis, its unusual position in the over-all scheme of monastic life. So, without intending to present, far less to solve, all the problems, we may here lay down a few guidelines.

Benedictines do not take a vow of poverty. And the cynic may say that this is fortunate, as they certainly do not keep it. Just as in the matter of austerity people expect Benedictines to live like Cistercians, so in the matter of poverty they expect them to live like Franciscans; but to each his charism.

Scholars are more or less agreed — though not to the precise wording — that 'Conversion of Manners' means that redirection of one's life which takes the baptismal vows in full seriousness and lives them out in the monastic way: in our case, the Rule of St Benedict. In other words, a Benedictine vows to aim at unlimited love of God and fervent love for his neighbour in a monastic setting. The setting is provided by the Rule, guarded and interpreted by the abbot of the monastery. One might say that it is a seeking of perfection to the limit. But to describe it thus is too self-regarding. As Christians we look towards God, and 'perfection' is seeking his will, expressed in the two fundamental commandments.

The Rule is strong on personal poverty. We must not consider ourselves to have anything as our own, says St Benedict, anything whatever; we have not even our bodies and wills at our own disposal (ch 33). Here we leap from the trivial — writing tablets, pens — to the most fundamental: our bodies and our own will. Here poverty meets obedience in total giving. The one is a sign, the other the reality. We give ourselves out of love.

Unlike that of St Benedict, our world is affluent (at the moment, and in the West). Consequently, there is a danger of community affluence, and the temptation for monks to behave like the affluent. What they want they can get. This can be a scandal. In an affluent community, fragality goes out of the window, and worldliness steps in by a wide open door. There is nothing like a christian community for producing communal wealth. In African-style poverty one would share the wealth thus accumulated with those who have none.

The Rule proposes a total self-giving. Things can become rivals to God, and he, as Scripture frequently tells us, is a jealous God (cf Deut 4,7;5,9; Exod 20,5;2 Cor 11,2). The Bible is here speaking in very human terms, the language of love. A lover is jealous and possessive, and sometimes rightly so.

XI. PURITY OF HEART

The phrase 'purity of heart' or its equivalent crops up several times in the Rule in connection with private prayer. We are to offer our supplications to God 'with all humility and pure devotion'; we must realize that 'we shall not be heard for our much speaking but for purity of heart and tears of compunction. Our prayer, therefore, ought to be short and pure' (ch 20). Again, in chapter 52: 'Let the monk go in (to the oratory) simply and pray, not in a loud voice but with tears and fervour of heart'.

'Purity of heart' is Cassian's careful translation of the stoic word *apatheia*, a very important concept for the Fathers of the Desert, and especially for their theorist, Evagrius of Pontus. They had adopted this word for the christian ideal of detachment, or non-attachment. At first sight, it seems a purely negative concept, and even in the context of the desert Christians it was somewhat ambiguous in meaning. It means passivity, self-denial, a refusal of desire; our word 'apathy' is derived from it. Cassian did not believe, any more than did Evagrius Ponticus, that such passivity was christian. The Fathers used it positively: purity of heart.

What St Benedict is saying when he relates it to prayer is that the monk cannot pray well if the desires of his heart — the deepest part of him — are not in harmony with his words. His life has to be at one with his professed intentions. Prayer and life cannot be separated; the one is the expression of the other. They are so close, in fact, that a good life is the substance of true prayer. It is, therefore, of supreme importance that we examine our heart to make sure that its loves are not an obstacle to the love of God.

The Rule says little about purity in our very modern sense of sexual purity. St Benedict would have anyone tempted about this (and what truly human person is not?) cast the temptation upon the Rock which is Christ, and so shatter it. He himself is said to have cast himself into a bed of brambles and nettles on such an occasion. Apart from that, he seems to ignore the problem, a remarkable restraint when we remember the stories current in his time on the sexual temptations endured by the Fathers of the Desert. 'Least said, soonest mended', must be St Benedict's prescription. The phrase 'purity of heart', however, has a wider connotation. Cassian took it from one of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God'. To see God is precisely the deepest longing of all the mystics, from Moses on Mount Sinai to this present day. And Jesus's condition for seeing God, in a glass darkly in this life, but face to face in heaven, is purity of heart. The heart is the faculty that has a deep penetrating grasp of

truth in love; supremely its purity is a clinging to God in love, for God is Truth, the ultimate Truth and Love.

To thrust any other love into the place of love for God is the great idolatry, and the great temptation also, because man's being is made up of a wild bundle of loves, each after its own object. Hearing seeks music; sight and touch and our other faculties seek art and sculpture, food and drink, human friendship and knowledge itself. It is possible to put these in the place of God, because he is a hidden God: love for him requires faith, and faith is not seeing. There is nothing to grasp. Some would therefore cry, 'Cut all the others out! Away with them! Purity of heart means one love and one love only: God'. Not so, however, St Benedict or the Benedictine tradition. Love is paramount. These loves must be given their rightful place in the hierarchy of loves. All are signals, symbols, signs of God's own love. He created them all, and what God creates is good. It is our use, or rather our abuse of them that is evil. Love is not to be denied but controlled by the power of grace, by our human judgment under the guidance of revelation and prudence.

St Benedict tells his abbot to love the brethren, and them to love and venerate him. They must love one another: the elder the young and the young their elders, with due restraint and chastity. True, we must love Christ, but in the eyes of St Benedict, and indeed in the light of the New Testament, everyone is Christ: the sick, the poor, the traveller, our neighbour. They are all Christ, and so all must be loved. St Benedict's world is a loving world. Purity of heart for him is a chaste love, a love in Christ, which comes from God and leads back to God, but certainly also goes out to people.

Jesus himself was no iceberg; he was an intensely loving person. He loved Martha and Mary, John and Peter; yes, even Judas. Remember too those loving expressions in the letters of St Paul; remember Francis and Clare, Jordan and Diana, Francis of Sales and Jeanne de Chantal, Teresa and John of the Cross. They were all warm, loving people.

So, to bring the matter home to ourselves. Purity of heart is to love God above all and in all, and to love all for him, but truly to love people too; for they are God's creatures, marvellous, astonishing creations, redeemed or redeemable, but never rivals of or substitutes for God.

Love includes sentiment and affection, but to be fully human it must be rational, seeing and loving the good in others. If our approach to others is primarily a quest for self-satisfaction, it is a false love and self-destroying. To love truly is to give, not to snatch. A test for our love is to see whether we can give our love to those we do not naturally like, whether we can see the best in them, pray for them, wish them well, think and say only good of them.

XII. SILENCE

At first sight St Benedict's little sixth chapter, 'On Being Quiet' (*De taciturnitate*) is unattractive, in that it consists almost entirely of warnings against the evil use of the tongue. 'Even when we speak of noble things, the prophet tells us to be silent', St Benedict says. How much more, then, ought we to avoid speaking evil 'because of the penalties of sin'. However, if we look more closely at the chapter, it is evident that he too saw silence in a very positive light. 'On account of the great value of silence, let leave to speak be seldom granted'. The value is not immediately apparent, but at the end of the chapter we find that to speak is fitting for 'the master', because he is the teacher. In other words, silence is of no value unless it is for listening: 'It befits the disciple to listen'. The teacher is God.

Silence and obedience are twin virtues. The former provides the setting for the latter. Until we are in the attitude of silent listening, we cannot hear the voice of God who is there waiting. The etymological origin of the Latin word *obaudire* or *obedire* is 'to hear'. By the time the word has reached us it has come to mean more than hear; it means 'to do', to put into action what we have heard should be done. There is, then, a third virtue that is party to the process: humility. We could be sullenly silent, not paying heed to anything but our hurt. Our pride slams doors and windows. Humility is the agent of liberation, opening the heart to messages from God coming through the superior, the brethren or events. Humility makes it easy to hear, to obey, to act.

Speaking too is a virtue. St Benedict urges young monks to encourage each other as they scramble out of bed. In the fourth chapter, the monks are encouraged to visit the sick, to relieve the poor, to help the afflicted and to console the sorrowful. It seem that there are suitable and unsuitable times for talking (ch 48). After Compline, they are expected to preserve a particularly high degree of silence, *summum silentium*, which must imply a lesser. The same is true for the oratory and the refectory: they are places of special silence. Yet even at night the Rule allows some exceptions. In practice there is much flexibility.

On the other hand, the injunction to be quiet, to be 'on the silent side', is very strong. Monks should keep silence unless spoken to (ch 7), where he also enumerates characteristics of speech proper to monks: it should be gentle, without laughter, humble, serious and sensible; not wordy and not noisy. As for loud and long laughter (ch 4) or 'buffoonery and talk that is vain and stirs to laughter' (ch 6), he condemns such things 'everywhere, with a perpetual ban'.

We need to know the reasons underlying both the stringency and the flexibility in St Benedict's rulings on speech. What rouses him to

the greatest indignation is noise: clamour or loud and prolonged laughter. He wants the monastery to be a place of quiet, so that the other monks, who want to be about their prayers, are not disturbed. The life should be full of prayer: this is extremely difficult when the silence is shattered with guffaws of uncontrolled laughter. The other kind of talking he deplores is frivolous chatter, and worse. The reason is that he recognizes in it a loss of the presence of God, a superficiality quite alien to prayer. We are so conscious of mind-sickness today that we suspect solemn, laughless people of being mentally unwell or on the way to a breakdown. But the taciturnity of the Rule and modern melancholia are easily recognizable as distinct. The former has a sprightliness, a gentleness and a joy which cannot be hidden, whereas the latter is like an advancing tropical rain-storm: unrelieved gloom. Nevertheless, we do sense something lacking in the Rule's picture of the perfect monk. In chapter 6, St Benedict is still much under the thought of the Master; one is tempted to think that had he written it later he would have recognized a friendly smile or a gentle and kindly remark, offered to cheer up a brother oppressed in soul by some misunderstanding or personal grief, as true love. A sad saint is no saint at all. Yet Jesus himself warned against vacuous laughter: 'Blessed are you that weep now, you will laugh for joy' (Lk 6,21).

Monte Cassino in the sixth century was a silent place: no planes hedge-hopping, no daily newspapers screaming from their headlines, no television or radio to cast their worldly nets into the still sea of the monastic mind. All was still. Travellers would climb and tell the news, normally calamitous. But the monks were not told these things. Today we have a different outlook: we believe it to be right that those who pray and share the sufferings of the Church and the world should know what the needs are.

Faced with the problem of an unjust or unwise decision on the part of a superior, and thinking how the monk should take it, St Benedict uses a beautiful phrase: accept the suffering 'with a silent heart' (*tacite conscientia patientiam amplectatur*). The monk is naturally besieged by thoughts of injustice; he is tempted to annoyance, anger, resentment, rage or despair. If he accepts it as the Rule suggests, the victory is glorious. So too, as the world's miseries are known, if the monk can pray for friend and enemy without rancour, a yet more glorious victory is won. He is sharing in the passion of Christ.

The Bible mentions no ivory towers for contemplatives. Perhaps they should be shattered, and those in the desert recognize their solidarity with the world around them, not by going into the world but by letting the reality of life in its stark sadness, despair and hopelessness be present to the one who prays. It makes that prayer more real, more insistent and compelling. It is true that television,

radios and papers are greedy wasters of precious prayer time. They also cut the addicts off from the community, just as card-playing can at recreation time. Some, seeing only black and white, would ban the lot as sly agents of the devil. It is fascinating to imagine St Benedict wandering through a modern monastery or convent. What would he have made of all these contraptions? Would he have said that at no time and in no place should these abominations be tolerated; or would he have said that just as in his day some monks could not do without wine, but had to have a health draught, so now news of the world and the Church ought to be allowed in due proportion? How that is to be done is a practical matter of some importance for the superior and the community alike. Distractions they are, but they are also the very flour out of which the bread of prayers is made.

Enclosure has been treated elswhere; but two points arise out of what has been said above. In the first place, it is not the question of grilles and keys, or of high walls round the property to prevent others entering, or the inmates leaping over the wall. The barriers of value are those which ensure that the work of praising God and pleading with him for others goes on unremittingly. This is a matter of time spent, not of the quiet that we get out of it. A distracted prayer, distracted owing to some charitable act performed, is just as valuable as prayer offered in utter tranquillity of heart. What matters is whether or not we fulfil our intention to praise, thank and petition God, not what we get out of it. If this is the case, what is needed is not high walls and grilles but clear times for prayer, sacrosanct and not to be eroded.

In the second place the contemplative, praying community is praying as part of the Body of Christ, the Church. The Church is all round the place where they pray. It is also praying for the world, and the world is pressing in all round too. Prayer would be perhaps more fervent if the praying community knew more of what was going on in the outside world. The prayer might not be such a comfortable prayer, nor as quiet as it was when no noise from without entered in. But it might be a more real, a more fervent prayer.

XIII. MONASTIC WORKS

The variety of monastic work

What works are suitable for monks and nuns?

Their aim is not continuous prayer, but an overriding love of God expressed in plentiful prayer, and a similar overriding love of their neighbour expressed not only in prayer and sacrifice, but also in work for the people of God and for the world. To ignore one's neighbour is not true love for God; nor is it wise, in loving one's neighbour, to forget God. They are people who have found that the way of life designed by St Benedict and expressed in his Rule helps them to keep to their purpose; people, that is, who need a community of like-minded brothers or sisters with whom to live, to share their prayer, their longings and their work. The qualities of humility, obedience, silence, stability, true conversion, chastity and poverty of spirit are the very bones and marrow of their corporate life. 'Works' must not cut across those.

In the monastery, the primary work is the prayer-life of the community, expressed in the Eucharist, the Divine Office and solitary prayer, all of which holds the community together and takes it to God in love. The next work is the obedient love the brethren give to God in whatever they have been chosen to do by their abbot, whether in the garden, the kitchen, the school, the library or elsewhere. A community may undertake a great number of different apostolic works at the monastery. The needs of the local church and people will contribute to the decisions about which works to undertake, as well as their suitability for monks or nuns.

In mission countries particular needs may include the training of builders, mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, bakers, electricians; the manning of outstations or new missions; the production of newspapers, pamphlets or catechisms; the running of leprosaria, hospitals, and training schools for nurses; the provision of medication in the area round the monastery; the promotion of agriculture; the study of local culture; the preparation of liturgical texts and ceremonies; the translation of the Bible and other writings; the training of catechists; the instruction of the local people in the Good News and all it means; the provision of the seminary and the whole process of training applicants for the priesthood and the religious life. St Boniface and St Lioba would have counted many of these amongst their apostolic undertakings, as their successors are doing in our own day.

Nearer home, a prominent work has been and still is the provision of schools for the young Christian, from nursery, through primary and secondary education, to college or university. This is the case

across Europe, in North and South America and in Australia; sometimes one department of educational work will be to the fore, sometimes another. Teaching has immense advantages: it can be done on the spot; it provides useful work for many different characters and gifts; it is a creative outlet and a community endeavour; it is extremely useful for the Church and for society. It also has its built-in dangers. Monks can be drawn away from their prayer-work in common; the world presses in; success can lead to over-growth, and monks can be drawn away from the monastery or overburdened. Nevertheless, it is good to know what the world needs, and better to be overworked than idle. St Benedict calls idleness the enemy of the soul.

As the Church and the world read the signs of the times, and recognize that we are reaching a dead-end without Christ, they are led to ask, 'Is there a way out through prayer, peace and love in community?' The result is the growth round monasteries of retreat houses and lay communities, conference facilities and dependent prayer-groups. All this makes the monastery what it should be, a spiritual centre. As people recognize this (especially the laity), we find a continuous flow of visitors coming to refresh their faith, to listen to talks on scripture, prayer, liturgy or the spiritual life.

Ecumenical developments in recent years have also created work-opportunities both in the neighbourhood or further afield: conferences, regular ecumenical group meetings or study. This too is a very suitable form of ecclesiastical activity, since a monastery is a place of peace where no one should hesitate to come, whether Quaker or Methodist or Anglican, Orthodox or Jew, Hindu or Moslem or atheist. People tend to congregate in the neighbourhood of a monastery, knowing that here they will find a strong liturgical life, wise counsellors and humane responses. In this interchange with the outside world, or better, with their fellow pilgrims on the road, monks and nuns receive in divine gifts as much as they give. The meeting of religious and laity is an occasion for mutual benefits.

A monastery is also, of its nature, a place where one can take stock of the situation in the Church. Monks and nuns are in a prophetic situation; though they are at the heart of the Church, that is, of its prayer, they are also onlookers, 'behind the lines' of the Church's multifarious activities. They can therefore look, see and judge. This can be a most valuable contribution for the Church: pope, bishops, clergy and laity all need someone to size up the dangers and have the courage to speak out. For such a task, the speaker has to be free. Prophets have always been an irritant, and have been abused and ill-treated in consequence. Yet the prophetic role is of the utmost importance. If it is performed with humility, clarity and charity, all benefit.

Giving retreats or conferences, and participating in symposia or similar meetings away from the monastery, are also very useful activities. If this work is overdone, the monk is drained of his prayerfulness and so of his usefulness; but this need not be more so in his case than that of the missionary who, equally absent from his monastery, knows that the prayer-work is going on at the centre, and that whatever value his own work has derives from the community's prayer at home. Moreover, both need to return to base frequently, and as soon as they can.

Some activities are survivals of an extreme necessity belonging to the past: for instance, work in parishes that were once out-stations in missionary territory. In these cases, a monk is unable to return to his monastery except occasionally; he may be tied down to the work where he is, more or less in isolation. In all deference to other opinions, this appears to be an anomaly which should be modified, either by creating a monastery on the spot or by the monk's return to base. To make such a change takes time, but one hopes, not unconscionable. In some instances, these distant missions or parishes have been replaced by others so near to the monastery that they can be served on a day-to-day basis. All Benedictine missionary endeavours have had as their primary purpose the setting up of monasteries in the territory served by the monks. So too the English Benedictine Congregation. In A.D. 1663, at their third General Chapter, they solemnly asserted that their aim in returning to the English Mission was to set up *monasteries*; the 'mission' or parishes were intended to be only temporary, and they called them 'accidents'.

The harmony of work and prayer

The Christian's aim in life is also that of the monk or nun: to love God with one's whole being in union with Christ, the New Man, whose sacrifice is all-sufficient, and as an outflow of that love, to love people, especially those who, as 'other Christs', are one's nearest and dearest.

To love God is possible simply by giving oneself continually to him, and doing what he wants. This giving of ourselves is expressed in prayer. Prayer is not primarily trying to get an experience of God. Like Moses, we cannot see him face to face in this life. We cannot see him in himself, in all his infinite power and glory and majesty, and survive the experience. We are midgets; we would be crushed or explode. It is wiser and humbler to leave it to God to decide what experience of him we are to have; we cannot force him to show himself. Are we the sort of people who have a right to a special revelation of God? Moses tried, and God did not show him his face. Yet Moses was one of the greatest saints; and what he did see so enveloped him in glory that when he spoke to the people afterwards,

he had to veil his face, because they could not look at him.

We, poor Christians with the burden of our sins, forgiven though we are, can only say to our merciful and loving God, 'See, here I am; I have come to do your will, O Lord'. To love is to give all we have and not to take it back; it is to wait on the word of God, ready to do whatever he demands of us and especially to strip ourselves of all that can be a barrier between us.

Instinctively and rightly, we worship him in union with the whole Church. We praise him for his infinite goodness, holiness, kindness and mercy; we thank him for our being, for our redemption and for all the gifts in the universe. Then we put our works into his hands: our prayer and our relationships with people, first with our own brethren whom we love so much, and then with all those who are linked to us in friendship throughout the Church and the world. We want to make everything we do as much part of our love for God as are the words we say in the silence of our hearts, or at the Eucharistic celebration.

If our work can be seen as fulfilling God's will, then our obedient love for that will is a prayer of enormous power. We are taking hold of God's creation and consecrating it. The world is not 'secular'; it all belongs to God who made it. Once we touch it with obedient love it returns to the loving order that God gave it. Our whole life thus becomes a sacrificial (that is, 'making-holy') prayer. However, this Godward motive can be stifled in the hurly-burly of work; it can be undertaken out of self-aggrandisement, out of vanity. It is for this reason that Benedictines need to be close to base in a more than geographical sense. They have to be close to God in the centre of their being, through the daily round of prayer.

With his habitual simplicity, Benedict says, 'Whenever you begin to do anything, say a prayer'. But of course he has more to say elsewhere. It is in the chapter on humility that we find his advice on how to achieve 'continual' prayer. In writing of the first degree of humility he reiterates the word *semper*, 'always'. God is continually keeping us in mind, but we also must always keep the fear of the Lord before our eyes . . . always remember all the commandments of God . . . always turn over in our hearts the eternal life awaiting us . . . guard ourselves always from sin. And the paragraph concludes: 'Let the good brother be always saying in his heart, Then shall I be spotless before him, if I shall have kept myself from my iniquity'. It is reasonable to suppose that by 'always' St Benedict meant 'frequently', because many quite ordinary occupations demand the whole of our attention. Yet at the same time there may be an undercurrent of awareness: one which is ready to surface as soon as our attention is withdrawn from whatever we are engaged upon. The constancy needed for this deep awareness is sustained by those swift

flights of prayer: the arrow shot from the bow, the tiny sparks leaping up from the burning coal.

It is often alleged that the contemplative way of life (that is, the withdrawn life within a strict enclosure) is hidden self-indulgence. What the inmates are striving after, so their critics contend, is a quiet which comes from complete withdrawal from all disturbing influences. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* fulminated against such criticism. It is a travesty of the truth, a failure to understand what enclosed religious are aiming at, whether Benedictine, Cistercian, Poor Clare or Carmelite. They are not there for a rest, but for a strenuous climb towards the God who, though dwelling within us, sometimes has to be reached by scaling a precipice of temptations and doubts. Contemplatives are seeking the joy of God's presence. But it is for all Christians to seek God's presence; for to want to be close to the one we love is human, indeed right. We are made for God. The ultimate aim of these 'contemplatives' is the same as that of all Christians, according to their graced capacity: to love and praise and thank the Lord with all their hearts in union with the perfect love and praise and thanksgiving of Christ himself.

Searching for God is like the work of one who, finding gold in a river, goes upstream until he finds the source; it is like the work of a thinker ever seeking the ultimate truth; like the traveller striding for the last horizon; like the mountain climber reaching for the highest peak. For a Christian, prayer is a reaching out to God who has shown himself in all his love in Jesus Christ.

The christian God is not remote, but within. This is the shattering truth. 'We will come and make our home in you', Jesus said at the Last Supper; and he told his followers he would never abandon them. The Eucharist is the sign of that intimate presence and effects it, renews it, deepens it. So the beginning of prayer is this ontological union; the fact that God, Three in One, is present.

But what sort of a God is this? Whatever else he is, he is infinite: infinite, therefore, in justice, in mercy, in beauty, in power and in wisdom. He it is who created all, and is for ever creating. Whatever now seems unjust will be made right beyond imagining and beyond desire in the life to come. Above all, God is love, and we are the object of his love. We know this from the life of Jesus, who died that we might live. God loved us first, and, once we know this, we seek him. In a sense we are always seeking him, because at the end of every trail we follow is God, the goal of them all and most especially of the trail of love. In all our love we want boundless love, even though we may misplace our longing. It is the God without a face that we are seeking. Having found him whom we have sought, we realize that we are in his presence, saying with the Prodigal, and with tears of compunction if we have been given that gift, 'Father, I

have sinned against heaven and before you; I am not worthy to be called your son' (Lk 15,18). This is prayer. The Lord will make a feast and embrace us, for God is love.

As long as God makes his presence felt in some way, there is no need to be concerned how to behave or what to say. The Holy Spirit will guide us (cf Rom 8,26). But at the times when our hearts are cold, when no response comes and we are anxious — have we done something to turn his love from us? — then it is that we should have some little plan of campaign to keep our attention and our heart upon that Presence whom we would not lose for all the riches in the world. These ways have often been rehearsed. Perhaps, we could take up the ancient way of repeating a word or a phrase: Jesus, love, God. . . . Before long even a word, the weightiest word, appears meaningless. All is silence before the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: a strange silence in which God is now close, now far, both All and Nothing. The ordinary happenings — people, things, work — become part of God: he is behind them and before them; God's love is moving, holding, giving peace, sometimes tearing apart, destroying a vanity or a false love, healing, showing the way, being the way. Then comes insight, confusion, a sense of futility or incomprehension; and suddenly, peace. God is all and in all.

But an experience does not last long; it is a mere glimpse. In any case, we seek not the voice or the sound of him, not the colour or the scent, but his presence. We seek him to say, 'I love you, do your will in me'. We seek him to know that his love is both source and end.

The world has wandered far from this 'work' of man, the Godly work of acknowledging God's sovereignty. Only those who, with serious intent, realize both the wonder of being a redeemed creature and the need to express it by their being and thought and action, will undertake this work of gratitude. When his disciples asked him how to pray, Jesus told them precisely that. He did not say, 'try with all your might to have an experience of God or reach the peace of withdrawal'; he said, 'in your cell, in withdrawal, simply praise and thank and love the Father who has such care and love for you, and pray for your needs':

> Christ Jesus, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven. He joined the entire community of mankind to himself, associating it with his own singing of his canticle of divine praise.
>
> For he continues his priestly work through the agency of his Church, which is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the whole world. This she does not

> only by the celebration of the Eucharist, but also in other ways, especially by praying the Divine Office (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 83).

We must add that this praise and thanksgiving and intercession also go on with loving, burning zeal in the hearts of all those hidden and dedicated people who pray ceaselessly for the Church and offer the hymn that Christ and the angels and saints sing: 'Holy, holy, holy God our Father, there is no end or limit to the wonder of your love'.

Conclusion

To enter the arena of monastic practice is a hazardous business. I come not to give battle but to parley. That is, I do not claim that my judgments and theories are the only right ones. I believe that there are many justifiable forms of benedictine monasticism, just as there have been throughout the long history of the Order. One would scarcely have thought such a statement worth the making, but apparently it is, because there are some who present their 'way' as the only way. Even in the desert there were many ways: the way of Antony, the way of Pachomius, the way of Shenouté and the way of Evagrius. Further afield there were Basil and Augustine, different again; they thought of themselves as monks, even if some today would question their claim.

The approach to the works of monks in the preceding pages has been partly empirical, partly a justification, partly an attempt to show these works in all their amazing variety, and partly an argument that they are the result of the flexibility of the Rule itself. It is the Rule's very originality that has made these many different developments inevitable. This is not to say that these particular variations on the monastic theme are the only possible interpretations of the Rule. It seems to be written in such a way that almost everyone can come under its protective guidance: everyone, that is, except the extremists.

Further, not all developments can be justified; there have been aberrations. Or, if they are to be justified, it will be on the grounds of the Church's extreme need in a particular time or place. This must have been the position at the time of the Reformation, when the Holy See agreed that english monks should join the other priests slipping into England to minister to Catholics under persecution. When Gregory the Great sent Augustine and forty companion monks to England at the end of the sixth century, it was for a double purpose: to convert the English and set up monasteries.

Nor are all developments the best possible. In assessing monastic undertakings, two criteria should be born in mind: that the work

should be within the framework of monastic life, and that the needs of the individual monk will vary. On the whole, those who need vigorous work should join a house that provides it; those who are strongly drawn to the contemplative way should join a monastery with that emphasis. But experience shows that over the years monks go through different phases in their spiritual lives; at one period they need considerable activity, at another, quiet. It seems, therefore, that a pluralist structure among monasteries and within individual houses is, if not of the essence, at least of the *bene esse.*

There is, nevertheless, a limit to the variety of 'monastic works' beyond which they should not stray. Speaking personally, I would say that any work which demands of a monk that he live in a city alone, or with one or two others, can be justified only on account of extreme necessity, however excellent the apostolic activity may be in itself. Some elements of the monastic life are present in such a situation, but too many are missing. When the circumstances that originally necessitated this kind of distortion have disappeared, the ordinary monastic life should be restored. Naturally, this takes time. Human beings are not pawns in a chess game; a great ship cannot change course on the instant. Even so a situation which may have developed over centuries cannot be changed overnight.

We might consider another extreme. Nuns have for too long been over-protected. No one denies that their privacy has to be guaranteed; what very many are denying is that they should be locked up like children in their nursery. These are grown women with mature minds; and if they are not, the reason is frequently an unnatural, over-defensive protectiveness of officialdom. It has been noted that very rarely have the nuns themselves been seriously consulted as to whether current practice suited them. They have lived now for centuries in a male-dominated Church.

The ancient tradition among nuns following the Benedictine Rule favours a far greater flexibility and freedom than is now allowed. They, like the monks, their brothers, have been open to the world. Sooner rather than later this restrictive situation will have to be remedied, not violently but carefully. 'Carefully' does not mean 'slowly', however, but 'with prudence'.

What of the innovations of our own time? The tradition of the Benedictine life is very precious. It belongs to the heritage of the Church, and monks of any age are in a sense only its custodians. Therefore, it must be with the utmost caution that anything which truly belongs to that tradition is jettisoned. In an age of change every element of the monastic tradition has been under scrutiny: the Divine Office, *lectio divina*, silence, withdrawal and poverty

We have to be critical in order to recognize the value of things: especially very old things whose ancient clothing hides rather than

exposes the value of what it conceals. Thus the value of silence, of reading, of the Office in common, may not be immediately apparent. It is even more important to discern the relationship between the integral parts of the monastic way of life. If we cut down one element, such as that of prayer, a serious distortion will have occurred. The same is true if we cut down on community living.

Humility and obedience are plants not native to the twentieth-century climate; but if we tamper with them, the whole monastic life begins to disintegrate. Moreover, both humility and obedience have been seen in a new light as a result of the contributions of psychology and the respect for the person which characterizes our modern attitude.

The Rule, hallowed though it is by antiquity and 'saintly use', is still a document of its own sixth century. We must not, then, be afraid to apply it and adjust it to the situation fifteen centuries later. St Benedict himself seems to have foreseen that there would be adaptations, particularly in the arrangement of the Divine Office, the time-table and dress. For this reason the use of the vernacular, the new arrangements of the psalms, the use of new readings and the omission of the cursing psalms, are, like many similar novelties, legitimate.

Jesus showed us by word and example that we must love God above all and in all; he prayed, he obeyed the Father at every instant; he died to do his Father's will. He is the Way. He taught us in word and deed that to love is both the Way and the End: to love God and to love our fellow men. He died on the cross out of love for his Father and love for us.

The Rule is one means of following Christ, the Way, along his way. To follow him is to walk the way of love and the way of the cross. For the monk and the nun, these two great commandments, which fuse into each other, are the first priority. All that they do is designed to make this life of love for God and for people the centre and heart of their living.

They ring their life round with prayer from dawn to dusk and in the night. Prayer in common brings that second half of love into the first; it directs their love for one another towards love for God. The Eucharist is the culmination of their life of prayer. But all through their waking hours, this prayer can go on at a private, personal level, like the echoes of a song through mountain valleys.

To build up this life of prayer there are precious supports. Silence supports it, the silence of the lover who is listening for the other's voice; so does reading, designed not to turn the mind into a private reference library, but to stir the embers of a fire that should be always alight. The virtues of humility and obedience, of which St Benedict makes so much, mirror the humility and obedience of

Jesus, his single-minded loving submission to the Father and his readiness to do whatever the Father asked of him.

From this love for the Father and readiness to do as he wills flows the love for our fellow men, especially for those of the family of the faith. The apostolate is born. Communion with God, when genuine, bursts out into love for those around us. What form the apostolate takes will depend on the form of life we have accepted as the way for us to reach union with God. The monastic way is one of much prayer; and yet monks have always been attentive to the needs of the Church and the world. This attention has broadened out into innumerable apostolic works, some more fitting than others. What the Church and the world are asking of monks is to be themselves, because the monastic life provides them with things which are found only with great difficulty outside it: precious things such as silence, peace, prayer, the sense of community, the sense of obedient living, frugality, chastity, stability, love. 'God is love, and he who lives in love lives in God, and God in him' (1 Jn 4, 16).[1]

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