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—Rowan Williams

“This discussion of the Rule of Saint Benedict is more than the stringing together of a series of pious paraphrases that are already familiar to the reader. It engages with the Rule by serious excavation of its scriptural foundations and also by setting it in conversation with the issues and difficulties of the contemporary world, both within the church and within postmodern society. The resulting conclusions are profound and stimulating, and accessible to the ordinary reader.”

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“Luigi Gioia’s meditations on the Rule of St. Benedict not only encapsulate and distill his long experience of the monastic life, but offer this wisdom, with striking theological profundity, to a wider reading public. Steeped in Scripture and tradition, but no less animated by modern psychological insight, this little book is an unusual spiritual gem that will stand the test of time.”

—Sarah Coakley

Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity Emerita
University of Cambridge

“In *Saint Benedict’s Wisdom* Luigi Gioia constructively lays out a Benedictine spirituality for the twenty-first century. Weaving together a rich tapestry of insights and experiences from his years as a monk and scholar, Gioia demonstrates anew that the wisdom of the Rule of Benedict remains relevant, not only for the monk, but for the church and even for the world. He shows that the Rule’s catholicity gives it a vantage point from which it offers guidance to all of humanity in how to live and love well. Gioia not only confirms the Rule of Benedict’s place among the Christian tradition’s sapiential literature, but *Saint Benedict’s Wisdom* itself is a product of wisdom, from the hand of one sufficiently wise to offer it.”

—Rev. Greg Peters, PhD, SMD

“An inviting, accessible, and above all wise investigation into what the Rule of St. Benedict, that treasure house of Christian spirituality, can teach us about wisdom. This subtle book is meant not simply for the monk or even the Benedictine aficionado but all Christians seeking the path to Wisdom, which is to say to God.”

—James Martin, SJ, author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

“Gioia’s forthright overview of monastic spirituality and its contemporary issues challenges all monastics to be a prophetic voice in the church and the world.”

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“At a time when all our forms of institutional belonging are being shaken up, my friend Luigi Gioia does a wonderful job at showing how St. Benedict’s wisdom is both centered and flexible, making it available for us as we feel out the new wine skins into which the Gospel is pouring us.”

—James Alison, Catholic theologian, priest, and author of
Knowing Jesus

Saint Benedict's Wisdom

*Monastic Spirituality and
the Life of the Church*

Luigi Gioia, OSB

translated by Barry Hudock



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*To Rowan,
who taught me the value of patience
in the hard work of sustaining difference
as the form of ecclesial love.*

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Introduction

What is being “made” in the workshop [of Benedictine monasticism] is souls—bodily human beings who understand themselves with growing clarity and are engaged in creating a durable life together.

Rowan Williams¹

I remember well how, at age 18, I spent the first months of my novitiate in a Benedictine monastery deeply resenting the piercing corridor bell that woke me up before dawn every morning for Matins. Struggling to emerge from my uneasy sleep, I would invariably wonder what on earth I was doing in that place.

It was just an initial reaction, and as soon as I had washed my face with cold water and recovered my wits, my resentment was replaced by a feeling of genuine excitement about the day that lay ahead. Then one day I came across a sentence from the Bible that changed everything: “Whoever gets up early to seek her [Wisdom] will have no trouble but will find her sitting at the door” (Wis 6:14, my translation).² I remember being immediately seduced by the idea that waking up early every morning was more than just obeying a rule or fulfilling a duty. It appeared to me as a step in a quest for wisdom, with the promise that my perception of things

1. Rowan Williams, “Follow St Benedict’s Rule,” *The Oldie*, December 30, 2019: <https://www.theoldie.co.uk/blog/follow-st-benedicts-rule>.

2. All Scripture quotations are from the New American Bible, Revised Edition, unless otherwise noted.

would change over time and I would start experiencing them in a deeper and more meaningful way—and especially that I would start enjoying those very things that I still found upsetting or irritating.

What endeared Wisdom to me was this image of her sitting at my door, ready to walk with me and to teach me how to find delight in God's presence and in the company of people. We are told that she is "daily [God's] delight, rejoicing before him always" and also that she "rejoic[es] in his inhabited world and delight[s] in the human race" (Prov 8:30-31, NRSV). Delighting and rejoicing: is this not what we are all looking for?

This book stems from that initial realization and is rooted in the following decades of life in several communities in Italy and France and of preaching retreats in monasteries all over the world, including China, Korea, Australia, Philippines, Canada, and the US. Wisdom is not just a quality we acquire, but something—or better, *someone*—we are called to become. This, I think, is the reason she is personified in Scripture. We become her by learning from her to find delight in the company of God and of our sisters and brothers and by opening our inner ears to the anointing within (cf. 1 John 2:20).

In the history of Christianity—or better, of the whole of humanity—Wisdom takes a bewildering variety of forms. This book explores the Wisdom that has developed in Christian monasticism owing to one of her greatest friends, the sixth century monk Benedict of Nursia (480–547), who describes the monastery as the *school* where monastics learn how to serve God, the *workshop* where they handle the tools of good works, and the *house* governed *a sapientibus et sapienter*, that is, by monastics who have become friends of Wisdom (cf. Rule of Benedict [RB] 53.22).

Even though the work that Benedict handed down to future generations is called "The Rule," and indeed contains a number of instructions and norms, it would be a mistake to approach it as a legislative text.³ None of today's countless communities of

3. In his recent, delightful book on Benedictine spirituality, Rowan Williams observes that historically the Rule has been understood as "a supremely useful

monks and nuns known as “Benedictine” treats the Rule in this way—in fact, their daily life is regulated by specific collections of regulations variously known as customaries, constitutions, or directories. Benedict’s Rule endures rather as a source of inspiration. Monastics tirelessly read, meditate, and comment on it to unearth its many gems of prudence and discretion. It should be seen as an instance of the literary genre known as “sapiential” (from *sapientia*, “wisdom”) or, better, of the sapiential vein that runs through the whole of Scripture.

We, too, therefore, shall expound the Rule’s spiritual insights in the light of the biblical books of Proverbs and Wisdom. People who read the Rule for the first time can find it dry, be put off by some of its prescriptive portions, and entirely overlook its spiritual value and its significance for the life of the church and of society today. A monk once told me that only with old age had he become able to grasp the real depth and breadth of Benedict’s wisdom.

Two principles have guided my own modest attempt to learn from this wisdom.

First, the conviction that the Rule is not meant to be read in isolation. It is not a self-referential text—if anything, it is totally “other-referential.” Its final chapter makes this clear by inviting monastics not to confine themselves to the reading of the Rule but to complement it with a variety of other Christian texts, not only from monastic literature, but by any of the *catholici patres*, that is, theologians, biblical commentators, or spiritual authors.

Second, and more important, it has become increasingly clear to me that the best way to disclose Benedict’s treasures of wisdom is to read his Rule in the light of Scripture, or rather, of the Word of God (this distinction is essential, as we shall see). Benedict’s mind, prayer, imagination, and memory were entirely molded by his continuous meditation upon Scripture. Famously, the Rule was described as the quintessence of the Gospel by the

digest of monastic *theology*” rather than “a self-sufficient ‘code’” (*The Way of St Benedict* [London: Bloomsbury, 2020], 91).

seventeenth-century French bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet,⁴ and indeed it is a tapestry of Scriptural quotations and allusions. However, the Rule's exceptional fruitfulness in this respect does not simply consist in the fact that it quotes the Bible but in its proven ability to teach us how to listen to the living word of God *through* the letter of Scripture.

This last point is the key to Benedictine spirituality and one of the main arguments of this book (especially in chapters 9, 10, and 11)—it is not an accident that the first word of the Rule is *Ausculta*, “Listen.” And its ambition of teaching monastics how to listen to the many ways God speaks to us can be detected especially in its emphasis on life, movement, keenness, zeal. Thus we shall see that Benedict sees monastic life as *action* (chapter 9) or as the conversion from a vicious to a *virtuous circle* (chapter 11), or again how the only way to establish whether people truly are called to embrace monastic life is whether they are willing to remain *entirely in motion* (chapter 3). This principle shapes formation (chapter 3), leadership (chapter 4), forgiveness (chapter 5), chastity (chapter 6), and prayer (chapter 7).

This decisive connection to the living word of God by which monastic life stands or falls lies behind the cornerstone of Benedictine spirituality—namely, the principle that “nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God.”⁵ We will discover that this sentence doesn't simply mean that “nothing is more important than the celebration of the liturgy.” If Benedict speaks of “*opus Dei*” (“work of God”) rather than “*opus hominis*” (“work of people”), it is because he is not describing something that *we* do, but something that *God* does! “*Nihil operi Dei praeponatur*” means that nothing is more important than welcoming the work through which *the Lord* constantly speaks to us (chapter 2, 11, and especially the Conclusion).

4. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Oeuvres de Bossuet: Sermons. Panégyriques. Méditations sur l'évangile* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1866), 435.

5. *Rule of Saint Benedict* 1980, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981) (hereafter, RB), 43.3.

It is, of course, always anachronistic to talk about “spirituality” in the case of any early Christian author like Benedict. Throughout the first millennium, Christians took for granted the identity between faith understood as loving and heartfelt trust in God (which we now call “spirituality”) and faith as beliefs, doctrines, and creeds (which we call “theology”). Today, we live in the aftermath of the divorce between theology and spirituality,⁶ and for our mindset there is no way of talking about prayer, interiority, experience of God, or self-knowledge without constantly having to make clear how they are related to God’s identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to Jesus’ reconciliation, to the church, and to Scripture (chapters 8 and 9).

Probably no epithet captures Benedictine spirituality more aptly than *healthy*, in the sense of “respecting and promoting the human flourishing of the whole person.” Many modern readers are nonplussed, for example, by the extent to which a spiritual text like the Rule is far more concerned with the body than with the “soul” or the “inner life”—that is, with the supposed “place” in us where we would have access to some form of immediate experience of God.

In fact, Benedict spends most of his time talking about eating, sleeping, working, reading, talking, smiling—even “nature’s needs” (RB 8.4) (that is, going to the bathroom!)—and especially about toiling in community life. He has no illusions about the inevitable hardships of life in common, otherwise he would not have poured out so much ink offering guidance meant to prevent character assassination (cf. his many passages on gossiping and grumbling) or to make clear that monastics should resist the occasional urge to kill or punch each other (RB 4.3, 4.70, and 70).

And yet all these factors are deeply “spiritual” in Benedict’s mind. For him, the healthiest way of seeking God is through community

6. I borrow this expression from François Vandembroucke in his article “Le divorce entre théologie et mystique: Ses origines,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 82 (1950): 372–387.

life, because he knows instinctively what phenomenology is rediscovering in our day—namely, that there is no access to interiority other than through interaction with our environment and others and no relation with God other than through the mediations of body, fellowship, history, and Scripture (chapter 8).

In so doing, the Rule echoes biblical and patristic writings on the nature of the fellowship that gathers all the baptized—that is, the church. This teaching was reclaimed by the Second Vatican Council, especially in the documents on the nature of the church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the relationship of the church with the world (*Gaudium et Spes*). The spiritual potential of these two documents remains largely untapped. The tumultuous reception of the council and the ideological battles about its application that are still raging often rely on superficial or secondhand readings of these documents. In fact, just like the Rule, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, too, should be read as sapiential texts—that is, as invitations not to be afraid of secularity or of taking processes and history seriously. Secularity, diversity, conflicts, and flaws are not to be feared but welcomed with a spirit of dialogue and especially with the greatest of ecclesial virtues, *patience*. Patience is paramount because God saves us through time, waits for us as long as it takes, walks with us, remains with us until the end of time with his reconciling, comforting, enlightening presence (chapter 12).

It is true that Benedictine monasticism advocates a measure of detachment from secular lifestyle. The purpose of this distance, however, is not to evade history or repudiate secularity but to cultivate a deeper solidarity with the world and a greater compassion for the sufferings of humanity. This distance is the space necessary to listen more attentively to the signs of times. Monastic life reminds the church of the priority of the desert in Christian action (chapter 2) and of the church's vocation to be the sign of a humanity which, despite its shortcomings, tries to remain open to the unendingly patient reconciling action of its Lord (Conclusion).

Finally, no honest portrayal of Benedictine monasticism can evade grappling with some aspects of its present crisis, especially

in the West, and its need for recovering the potential for renewal inscribed in its DNA (chapter 11). The renewal of monasticism is crucial for the life of the whole church. The most eloquent proclamation of the Gospel is a fellowship that does not need to be perfect (and never will be on this side of the eschaton), but that should nonetheless be able to give witness to the healing power of the good news of God's love for humanity. This is what Jesus himself proclaims when he states, "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The real mission of Benedictine monasticism is to preserve the priority of community life, not out of self-interest but because love—that is, lived fellowship—alone is credible (see especially the Conclusion).



CHAPTER I

The Monastic Vocation: Wisdom or Folly?

[Benedict is] reminding us that it's very problematic to try to be too spiritual too soon.

Rowan Williams¹

A promise not always kept

“Let whoever is inexperienced turn in here” (Prov 9:4, 16, my translation). In the book of Proverbs, we find this invitation on the lips of both Wisdom and Folly.² Their invitations are similar,

1. Williams, *The Way of St Benedict*, 41.

2. It is helpful to see the invitation in the context of the full passage:

“Wisdom has built her house,
she has set up her seven columns;
She has prepared her meat, mixed her wine,
yes, she has spread her table.
She has sent out her maidservants; she calls
from the heights out over the city:
‘Let whoever is naive [inexperienced] turn in here;
to any who lack sense I say,
Come, eat of my food,
and drink of the wine I have mixed!
Forsake foolishness that you may live;
advance in the way of understanding.’

presented in the same words, though the outcomes are diametrically opposed—life in one case, death in the other. So the key questions are how to distinguish wisdom and folly from each other and how free we actually are in making our choice.

The choices that determine our lives are inevitably conditioned. Absolute freedom, unbound by any constraint, remains a prerogative of God alone. We do not get to view our lives from an elevated tower, from which we can serenely contemplate all possible options and then make the best choices with utter detachment, complete neutrality, and total objectivity. Contingency plays a role in most of our life choices.

This observation is not incompatible with belief in YHWH. Certainly such faith makes us aware of a God who “probe[s] me” and “know[s] me,” who has “knit me in my mother’s womb,” and in whose book all our days are written (Ps 139:1, 13, 16). This God has a plan of salvation and desires life for each of us. This is a God who calls us. But this is also a God who takes history utterly seriously, through and through, a God who lets us take full responsibility as protagonists of our own lives and who therefore accepts that we will sometimes become tripped up by our own mistakes or negligence. This is a God who is great enough to be able to integrate completely—never pretending—our historicity, our fallibility, and even our sin.

. . .

Woman Folly is raucous,
 utterly foolish; she knows nothing.
 She sits at the door of her house
 upon a seat on the city heights,
 Calling to passersby
 as they go on their way straight ahead:
 ‘Let those who are naive [inexperienced] turn in here,
 to those who lack sense I say,
 Stolen water is sweet,
 and bread taken secretly is pleasing!’
 Little do they know that the shades are there,
 that her guests are in the depths of Sheol!” (Prov 9:1-6, 13-18)

If the call of wisdom were easily distinguishable from that of folly, there would be no problem. But the disquieting warning of the book of Proverbs is that sometimes the calls of wisdom and of folly resemble each other, to the point of being offered with identical words: “Let whoever is inexperienced turn in here.”

Leaving aside dishonest appeals from those who might try deliberately to deceive us, let us limit ourselves to considering for a moment those who claim to call in the name of wisdom. We can begin by observing that just because the one issuing the invitation says it’s offered in the name of God, that doesn’t mean it guarantees access to wisdom. Visitors to Harlem in New York City pass by buildings of many Christian churches with colorful names—First Corinthian Church, Canaan Church, New Mount Zion Baptist Church—one after another, each competing with the other. Each of them claims to offer the most authentic version of the Gospel message; each is sure it offers the genuine invitation: “Let whoever is inexperienced come here!” How can one discern which of them calls in the name of wisdom and which in the name of folly?

The boundary between wisdom and folly can become even thinner in the case of the monastic vocation. Monastic life is a response to a call. A monastery’s setting on a mountain or in a valley, its beauty, and the lifestyle that is led there all exert a charm, an attraction, a summons, and a call. A monastery grows only if new people continue to become part of it. Furthermore, it is not enough for a person to respond to this appeal once and for all. The dynamism of monastic life depends on a daily call that requires a continual response. It is a call to which one must incline one’s ear (as the prologue of the Rule of Benedict puts it) uninterruptedly: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience” (RB Prol. 1-2).

One enters a monastery to search for God—*Deum quaerere*—to seek life, and to make one’s days happy: “Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his

voice again: 'Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?' If you hear this and your answer is 'I do,' God then directs these words to you" (RB Prol. 14-16).

This is the promise made to a young person who knocks on the doors of a monastery. The monastic life is offered as the way of wisdom mentioned in Proverbs 9:1-6.

The truth, unfortunately, is often different. Many monasteries claim to offer wisdom but then fail to keep this promise. Anyone who knows monastic realities up close has witnessed this tragedy. How many young people enter a monastery to look for God and instead find pettiness, misery, worldliness? How many who are thirsting for meaning, guidance, and experience find themselves at the mercy of formators or guides who are incompetent, disillusioned, and sometimes even dissolute? How many seek wisdom but are unfortunately unaware of (as Proverbs 9:18 puts it) the dark aspects of the monasteries they enter? The boundary between wisdom and folly is often unclear, and the switch from one to the other can happen almost unnoticed.

So what is the meaning of such a scandal? How to reconcile such a paradox? We will proceed in stages and begin with a description of an ideal situation in which wisdom would be all on one side and folly on the other.

The school built by Wisdom

Benedictine monasticism is different from the many forms of religious life established in the early Middle Ages, which are more or less centralized and characterized by great mobility and specialization. Benedict of Nursia did not establish an order: rather, he gathered a set of principles about living an evangelical and ascetic life, the fruit of his decades of experience, into a short summary that has passed through the centuries as the Rule of Benedict. All those communities that have drawn inspiration from this Rule in various forms of life, often without any institutional link between them, have been known as "Benedictine."



CHAPTER X

Listening

Novice and senior monk are “obeying” one another if they are attending with discernment to one another, and the habits that shape their lives are habits of listening, attention and the willingness to take seriously the perspective of the other, the stranger.

Rowan Williams¹

At the structural center of the prologue of the Rule of Benedict, we find this sentence: “Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him ‘who has called us to his kingdom’” (RB Prol. 21, citing 1 Thess 2:12). The Rule is not self-referential. To show monastics the way to follow, Benedict points not to his own wisdom, but “*per ducatum Evangelii*”—that is, to the guidance of the Gospel.

The Rule’s deepest meaning is found in the context of a path of conversion that only the word of God can sustain and renew. Conversion, in fact, does not consist in adhering to the articles of a creed or to moral principles. These (which theology calls the “objective content of faith”) are a consequence of adhering to God in Christ and in the Spirit (the so-called “formal principle of

1. Williams, *The Way of St Benedict*, 35.

faith”), as the Gospels clearly show us. The meaning of conversion to Jesus for his disciples is illustrated by the story of the call of the first disciples. Jesus doesn’t begin by asking them to profess a creed or to observe a set of moral rules; he invites them to follow him, to dwell with him: “From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. He said to them, ‘Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men’” (Matt 4:17-19).

Conversion is a movement of dwelling in ever-deeper unity with Christ. It is not a path of progressive moral improvement, but a God-centered journey. The Rule speaks of a path of *dilatatio cordis*, a widening of the heart, and the only things that widens the heart are faith, hope, and love: “As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delights of love” (RB Prol. 49). Precisely because only the word of God can arouse and nourish conversion, faith, love, and hope, the Rule simply aspires to become the Word’s instrument, constantly referring to it. And so the prologue begins with the exhortation to listen to “the master’s instructions” and the “advice from a father who loves you” (RB Prol. 1), and it ends by specifying that the *magisterium* and the *doctrina* that must be taught are those of God: we must “never [swerve] from [God’s] instructions, then, but faithfully [observe] his teaching” (RB Prol. 50).

A whole range of actions then listed in the prologue have God’s Word as their subject. The Word shakes us awake every morning: “Let us get up then, at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say: ‘It is high time for us to arise from sleep’” (RB Prol. 8; cf. Rom 13:11). And it admonishes us: “Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out” (RB Prol. 9). The prologue gathers scriptural quotations not simply to support the master’s instructions, but to let God, through his word, invite us, seek us

out, and teach us: “You that have ears to hear, listen. . . . I will teach you the fear of the Lord. . . . Is there anyone here who yearns for life? . . . Let peace be your quest and aim” (RB Prol. 11, 12, 15, 17, quoting Rev 2:7; Ps 33[34]:12, 13, 15). In this way, the decisive questions are asked by God and the promises made in the Rule are reliable because God guarantees them: “Once you have done this, my eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen to your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am” (RB Prol. 18, quoting Isa 58:9). The master concludes by asking: “What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us?” (RB Prol. 19).

But the primacy of the Word in monastic life has a still deeper theological and spiritual foundation. In Christianity, a rule, a code of conduct, even a sapiential exhortation (which is the literary genre to which the Rule’s prologue belongs) do not have value in themselves, independently, whatever the author’s moral authority may be. If a rule, exhortation, law, or the simple fact of saying or knowing what to do was enough to save us, there would have been no need for God to become incarnate in Christ and, above all, to die on the cross. From the beginning, Christianity has been tempted to seek its own security in the Law instead of faith. Even today, Paul continues to insistently put to us the same questions he poses to the Galatians of his own day: “Does, then, the one who supplies the Spirit to you and works mighty deeds among you do so from works of the law or from faith in what you heard?” (Gal 3:5). Like the Galatians, we are constantly “so stupid” that “after beginning with the Spirit,” we “[end] with the flesh” (Gal 3:3)—that is, with the preference for justice at the low price of conformity and of rules instead of allowing ourselves to be provoked by Jesus’ constant challenge, his “but I tell you.” We prefer the justice “of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matt 5:20), believing that it’s enough to follow certain practices, forms, and rules, instead of constantly following Jesus, seeking no other security than to know that we are with him. We are justified, not just initially, but continuously, not by conforming to a rule, but by listening to the

word of faith, the Word that alone has the power to arouse faith, to awaken it, and to continually reawaken it, because *fides ex auditu*, “faith comes from what is heard” (Rom 10:17).

Holding fast

For this reason, among the first statements of Benedict’s Rule is not an injunction but an invitation to become aware of a fact: daily we are exposed to a call, to an appeal. It is enough for us to open our eyes to realize that there is a voice that continually—*now, today*—calls us and alerts us: “If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts” (RB Prol. 10, citing Ps 94:8). All day, especially in monastic life, we are exposed to an outpouring of God’s word through the celebration of the liturgy. But listening to it cannot be merely passive. The Word must be welcomed, internalized, meditated upon, allowed to settle in one’s heart: *inclina aurem cordis tui*, “attend with the ear of your heart” (RB Prol. 1). This “attending” or “inclining” suggests the movement necessary to listen better.

In this sense, there is a parallel between the Rule and the book of Psalms. Both declare from the beginning that the nature of our life depends on our relationship with the Word: “Blessed is the man who does not walk / in the counsel of the wicked. / Nor stand in the way of sinners, / nor sit in company with scoffers. / Rather, the law of the LORD is his joy; / and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:1-2).

Happiness, joy, self-fulfillment, the blossoming of all one’s gifts, a full life that is worth living—this is the meaning of the adjective *blessed* that begins this sentence. This kind of blessedness is the result of one’s relationship to the Word (*law* in this passage means “word of God”), the care with which we listen to it, the attention we give it. It is interesting that this psalm is not a prayer of thanks or supplication or trust; rather, it is simply the affirmation of a fact, that the success of our lives depends on where we decide to sink our roots. If our roots draw from the living water of the

Word, then we are “like a tree / planted near streams of water / that yields its fruit in season; / Its leaves never wither; / whatever he does prospers. / . . . Because the LORD knows the way of the just” (Ps 1:3, 6).

This perspective is typical of the theology of the Deuteronomist, insisting that the fundamental decision that determines the course of one’s existence is to love God and to walk in God’s ways: “See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I am giving you today, loving the LORD, your God, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and ordinances, you will live and grow numerous, and the LORD, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. . . . Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him” (Deut 30:15-16, 19-20).

The whole secret of Christian life is in this “holding fast to him”—in all circumstances, whatever our hearts might reproach us, and against every temptation to discouragement—because “God is greater than our hearts” (1 John 3:20). The secret of *living*, then, is to choose to remain united to the Lord by listening to his word, while being “wicked” means allowing oneself to be carried along by the force of inertia, by the current, by imitating what we see around us, by walking “in the counsel of the wicked,” standing “in the way of sinners,” or sitting “in company with scoffers” (Ps 1:1). We hope to hide ourselves among this “company,” but they are blown away “like chaff driven by the wind” (Ps 1:4), because they are not true communities, but are held together by nothing more than opportunism, self-interest, or fear. The “just,” on the other hand—that is, those who made the choice to listen to the Word—are welcomed into “the assembly of the just” (Ps 1:5), the *qahal YHWH*. This assembly is the community established on the call of God. Its unity is founded on the action and the fidelity of God, and for this reason it is a stable dwelling that reaches its fulfillment in the communion of saints for eternity.

Delighting and meditating

Even though this psalm speaks of the *just* and the *wicked*, the distinction is not primarily a *moral* one; it doesn't depend on acting, on doing, but rather on *what we find pleasure in* and *meditating on*: “the law of the LORD is [the blessed one's] joy; / and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:2). Here, too, the reference to “the law” means the word of God as a whole—not an external, restrictive imposition that binds one's freedom, but the set of words and testimonies that the Holy Spirit uses to instruct us, console us, guide us, and enlighten us, and which we act upon only if we have internalized it, only if it we love it. Paraphrasing the psalms that speak of love for the law, we might say this: “The word of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The word of the LORD is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple. The word of the LORD is right, rejoicing the heart. The word of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eye” (cf. Ps 19:8-9, but also all of Ps 119).

We are invited to unify our whole life through finding pleasure and joy in the assiduous meditation on the word of God. The verb *to meditate* means to murmur, to whisper: “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom; / his tongue speaks what is right. / God's teaching is in his heart” (Ps 37:30-31). The words in the original Hebrew suggest the cooing of a dove, *meditabor ut columba*: “Like a swallow I chirp; / I moan like a dove” (Isa 38:14). It is not primarily a mental meditation, but a repetition, a sort of chewing that slowly releases all the flavors. But the result of this meditation is not just taste but nourishment. It produces fruit; it is fecund; it gives life. Whoever devotes himself to it is “like a tree planted beside the waters / that stretches out its roots to the stream: / It does not fear heat when it comes, / its leaves stay green; / In the year of drought it shows no distress, / but still produces fruit” (cf. Jer 17:8). “The just shall flourish like the palm tree, / shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon” (Ps 92:13).

The last verse of Psalm 1 summarizes the endpoint of this journey: “The LORD knows the way of the just, / but the way of the wicked leads to ruin” (Ps 1:6). The asymmetry is intentional.

The first half of the sentence has as its subject “the LORD” and as its complement “the way”; but in the second half, “the way” is the subject. This expresses a profound theological truth: the positive outcome of a life is the result of the Lord’s action. Its failure is not caused or desired or even permitted by the Lord, nor is it a punishment; rather, it comes from having opted for a non-choice, from having surrendered to the force of inertia, from letting oneself be carried away by the group (“the wicked,” “sinners,” “scoffers”).

Also interesting is the verb that expresses the Lord’s action in our lives: *knows*. “The LORD *knows* the days of the blameless” (Ps 37:18); “I will rejoice and be glad in your mercy, / once you have seen my misery, / and *gotten to know* the distress of my soul” (Ps 31:8). The psalmist often confesses that the Lord “*knows* the secrets of the heart” (Ps 44:22). The Lord is interested in us, in our lives, in each of our actions. Nothing we do is too ordinary, too trivial for the Father: “LORD, you have probed me, you *know* me: / you *know* when I sit and stand; / you understand my thoughts from afar. / You sift through my travels and my rest; / with all my ways you are familiar” (Ps 139:1-3).

The believers constantly discover how the Lord accompanies them and assists them on their journey through the great desert: “It is now forty years that the LORD, your God, has been with you, and you have lacked nothing” (Deut 2:7). All of human existence unfolds under the sign of the Lord’s care and love: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer 1:5).

In this contrast between the attitude of the just and that of the wicked toward the Word, we find the results of the Gospel parable of the sower. Those whose hearts are a favorable soil for the Word—listening to it, meditating upon it, and putting it into practice—bear fruit: “Those sown on rich soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirty and sixty and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20). But for those in whom the Word cannot put down roots or who are among the brambles, the Word is immediately neutralized, dried up, suffocated, and unable to act (cf. Mark 4:15-19).



CHAPTER XI

Reform

Benedict is asking what it takes to develop people who can live safely, consistently and positively together.

Rowan Williams¹

What does it mean for monasticism to get involved in the process of “discernment, purification, and reform”² that Pope Francis has invited the church to embrace with decisiveness and courage? And which aspects of the reform of monasticism can, as a consequence, provide an example for the church as a whole? We will find an answer to these questions through a reading of the monastic experience in the light of Pope Francis’s 2013 programmatic apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, a document not only of great significance for evangelization but also one of striking spiritual depth.

Making life complicated

In one of the most suggestive passages of this document, Pope Francis writes:

1. Williams, *The Way of St Benedict*, 28.

2. Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (hereafter, EG) 30.

Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord's wounds at arm's length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people. (EG 270)

Pope Francis does not try to kid us; he knows that what he says will, if taken seriously, complicate our lives, even if it enriches them wonderfully. We must not hide the discomfort we perceive when we read the words of this apostolic exhortation. Indeed, it is meant to challenge everyone in one way or the other.

While Pope Francis is very popular in public opinion today, we must recognize that within the church he is met with an opposition that manifests itself in two forms. One is an open and sometimes angry resistance, like, for example, the one that has crystallized on some conservative fringes very active on blogs. The other is more insidious, adamant, and hidden. It does not dare to openly disagree but resists inwardly and reasons this way: we have lived well and comfortably in our roles, in our niches, in our domesticated form of the Gospel up to now—we can surely continue to do so undisturbed. Or with reasoning of this kind: it is a matter of a few years and then the pendulum will swing, and the institution's preservation instinct will prevail again, the waters will settle down, and everything will return to as before.

The first type of resistance masquerades behind a zeal for doctrinal orthodoxy, but it is often purely political. The second is strictly spiritual in nature. Realizing that we, too, are in some way accomplices in this second type of resistance shouldn't surprise us or scare us. If we discover this interior resistance even in ourselves, we needn't feel guilty, because in the end it is our habitual and inevitable resistance to the Gospel, to conversion, to the action

of God. It is an unavoidable reality in our life and the lives of those around us. We know it well, and the only valid response is to humbly recognize it, repent of it, and realize that neither legalism nor arid willfulness will dissolve our hardness, our rigidity, our self-defensiveness, but only the fruits of the Spirit. As Pope Francis said in the passage quoted earlier, we are called to know the strength of God's tenderness and let it bring down our barriers, help us overcome our fears, and persuade us.

To begin with, then, we can focus on some of the most suggestive and challenging passages of *Evangelii Gaudium* and try to listen to them for a moment without filters, without fear, paying attention to what they awake in us, what effect they have on us:

If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries. The work of evangelization enriches the mind and the heart; it opens up spiritual horizons; it makes us more and more sensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit, and it takes us beyond our limited spiritual constructs. A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others. Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary. This openness of the heart is a source of joy, since "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide. (EG 272)

We will see later how this call to mission applies to monastic life. For the moment, let us allow these texts to speak for themselves and let them resonate in us.

A missionary heart is aware of these limits and makes itself "weak with the weak . . . everything for everyone" (1 Cor 9:22). It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel

and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street. . . .

Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. . . . I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37). (EG 45, 49)

We could go on citing many more passages like these; *Evangelii Gaudium* is full of them. It is an inspired document, marked by a breath which, as we know, reflects not only the Pope's own thinking, but the long process of ecclesial and spiritual discernment of the Latin American church expressed in the historic Aparecida document of 2007.³

A moment of grace

We are now in an extraordinary moment of grace in the life of the church. The papacy of Francis represents and crystallizes an

3. Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, "Concluding Document": celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf.

awareness that he himself expressed: “We cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings” (EG 15). We “cannot leave things as they presently are” (EG 25).

His papacy represents the awareness of the need for a reform in the church, and it is interesting to note that while there are voices that persist in denying such need, Pope Francis constantly returns to this as evidence of a crisis, a crisis that is not only institutional and cultural but related to the very nature of the church:

The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. . . . Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way . . . to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 6).

There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s “fidelity to her own calling,” any new structure will soon prove ineffective. (EG 26)

There has been talk of a “new evangelization” for over thirty years now, but the reality has been one of inexorable numerical decline, an ongoing emptying of our churches, a growing irrelevance of Christianity from a cultural point of view, and, worse still, a growing corruption and counter-witness in our institutions. Even monasteries have been heavily marked by these same dynamics. Though there are communities that, thankfully, still prosper today, so many others have unfortunately entered a state of fighting for survival, incapable of renewing themselves, suffering continuous defections, in the grip of an apparently unstoppable decline.

Many have tried to attribute responsibility for this decline to the Second Vatican Council, and we watched this develop, powerless and dismayed, in the first decade of this second millennium,

to the point that an Italian historian does not hesitate to refer, somewhat provocatively, to a “Church of the Anti-Council.”⁴

That is, until the unexpected gust of evangelical freshness that broke into the church with the election of Pope Francis. Today we are experiencing a moment of grace, an unexpected positive juncture. On one hand, the ecclesial situation had precipitated to such a point that everyone recognized the need for reform, that things could not be allowed to continue as they were (cf. EG 25). On the other hand, the advent of a new, non-European model of evangelization and ecclesial life has begun to break the obsolete and formalistic approaches in which we were caught.

There is an authentically prophetic breath in this new model, a newness that gives hope. It does not seek solutions in a return to the past, but in a renewed relationship with the Gospel—that is, with the risen Lord and with his Spirit. It does not rely on institutional solutions, but on a process of discernment, purification, and reform and a pastoral and missionary conversion, expressed in two programmatic passages of *Evangelii Gaudium*:

To make this missionary impulse ever more focused, generous and fruitful, I encourage each particular Church [that is, each community] to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform. (EG 30)

I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. “Mere administration” can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be “permanently in a state of mission.” (EG 25)

It is therefore important that we allow ourselves to be reached and provoked by this prophetic breath, to let ourselves be drawn

4. Giovanni Miccoli, *La Chiesa dell'anticoncilio: I tradizionalisti alla riconquista di Roma* (Rome: Laterza, 2011).

by it into the necessary process of discernment, purification, and reform of our monastic communities, so as not to let this *kairos*, this moment of grace, this favorable juncture pass in vain.

A first step in this requires that we ask ourselves in what ways *Evangelii Gaudium* can actually be applied to monastic life. Monks and nuns, with legitimate exceptions, are generally not directly involved in pastoral care, mission, and evangelization. It might seem therefore that the passages examined so far do not apply directly to monasteries and that it would be difficult to find there a response and solutions to the crisis of our communities today.

The present crisis

To look for an answer to this question, we'll proceed by stages. Let's start by considering this question: Do the reasons for the crisis in our monastic communities run parallel to those related to crisis now experienced in the entire church that Pope Francis diagnoses in *Evangelii Gaudium*? Here are some passages that describe these reasons for crisis:

The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ. (EG 2)

The spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the

world or a passion for evangelization. As a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervor. These are three evils which fuel one another. (EG 78)

The other [danger] is the self-absorbed promethean neopaganism of those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past. A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others. (EG 94)

This insidious worldliness is evident in a number of attitudes which appear opposed, yet all have the same pretense of “taking over the space of the Church.” In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. In this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few. (EG 95)

Those who have fallen into this worldliness look on from above and afar, they reject the prophecy of their brothers and sisters, they discredit those who raise questions, they constantly point out the mistakes of others and they are obsessed by appearances. . . . [T]hey neither learn from their sins nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness. This is a tremendous corruption disguised as a good. (EG 97)

We don’t need to comment on these passages at length. They lucidly describe the situation not only of the church but also of mo-

nastic communities. They help us see the need to invest ourselves fully and generously in this process of “discernment, purification, and reform” and in the “pastoral and missionary conversion” to which *Evangelii Gaudium* calls us. We must not lose this *kairos*, this favorable moment. The Holy Spirit has unexpectedly awakened a dynamism in the church today. We must allow ourselves to be touched by this breath of freshness, not just personally but in our communities. Its impact may surprise us. Pope Francis tells us what might happen: “Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always ‘new’” (EG 11).

The right motivation

The important thing, however, is to do it the right way, for the right reason, with the right attitude, and in accordance with our charism, our identity. A second step in our analysis consists in asking another question: Why should we undertake this journey? It is important to ask ourselves this in order to avoid the first pitfall of any attempt at renewal in the church—that is, to rely on motivations and dynamisms that are both illusory and harmful for the spiritual life, such as a sense of guilt, an arid legalism, or a self-preservation reflex in our communities or institutions. There has been no lack of attempts at renewal in the church in recent decades, but many of them have failed because they have not been able to draw inspiration from an authentically evangelical dynamism. *Evangelii Gaudium* immediately and resolutely points to this evangelical dynamism, starting from its very title and opening lines: “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew” (EG 1).