

“For those of us who were not fortunate enough to attend the 21st annual Monastic Institute in 2006, the present collection of its papers is very useful. Anybody who is interested in the future of monasticism will find these addresses and discussions quite fascinating. In this volume the old monasticism meets the new.”

— Terrence Kardong, OSB  
Assumption Abbey  
Richardton, North Dakota

*“One Heart, One Soul: Many Communities* captures a unique and lively conversation between monastics rooted in the Benedictine tradition and Christians from ‘new monastic’ and other intentional communities. To read this volume is to engage in lively conversation about community life with a variety of seasoned practitioners and teachers and those newer to monasticism or intentional Christian community as they reflect on the meaning and practices of their lives from various viewpoints of age, experience, denomination, gender, and culture. The presentations, panels, questions, and comments are informative, insightful, honest, and at times passionate as they explore questions of spiritual meaning and daily practice relative to traditional monastic values and their contemporary expression: the common life and table, obedience and authority, leadership, humility, discernment, and hospitality.”

— Katherine Howard, OSB  
St. Benedict’s Monastery  
St. Joseph, Minnesota

*“One Heart, One Soul: Many Communities* is the record of an early and exciting stage of a conversation that is surely going to continue. The dialogue partners are men and women, young and old, married and celibate, Benedictine monastics, Benedictine oblates, Catholic Workers, members of L’Arche, representatives of the ‘New Monasticism,’ and others living in intentional Christian communities. St. Benedict says, ‘Listen,’ and there is much here that deserves a hearing. The Spirit that set St. Benedict in motion is certainly at work in the twenty-first century. In this well-edited collection of presentations and discussions there are some strong hints of the directions that the divine Wind is blowing today.”

— Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB  
Monastery of the Ascension  
Jerome, Idaho



*One Heart, One Soul*  
**Many Communities**

Proceedings of the 21st Annual Monastic Institute  
School of Theology-Seminary  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota 56321  
July 1–7, 2006

Edited by Mary Forman, OSB

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## *Preface*

The summer of 1980 marked a major milestone for Benedictines worldwide as they celebrated the sesquimillennium of Saint Benedict with a two-week-long Monastic Institute from June 22 to July 4, 1980. Similarly, the summer of 2006 marked the sesquicentennial milestone for the Benedictine community at Saint John's Abbey and University. Memories of world-renowned speakers gathered for the Monastic Institute that summer of 1980 were in mind when the planning committee for the 21st Annual Monastic Institute met to gather ideas for theme, keynote speakers, and processes for the sesquicentennial Institute, to be held July 1–7, 2006.

Planners, keenly aware of the several forms of “new monasticism” that had sprung up within the last decades, as well as the seemingly downsizing of traditional forms of monastic communities in North America and Europe, felt the necessity to gather representatives of both groups to meet for an engaged conversation. Some 176 participants, speakers, and panelists gathered from all over the United States, from Rome, and Melbourne to engage in dialogue about new forms of intentional community, the need for continuing ecumenical efforts in order to build understanding across Christian traditions for living communal life more intently, and to explore values common to communities for authentic, truthful, vibrant Christian commitment. Each day featured a keynote speaker and a panel of responders or colloquium, followed by interaction with the participants who were eager to share observations, raise new questions, and offer critiques and/or support ideas. The talks are presented in

this volume, along with a summary of the important dialogues that took place after sessions.

The talks and dialogue sessions capture only a part of this Institute, since many of the ongoing conversations were carried on by participants going to and from prayer, walks around campus, before and after three concerts, and in the hallways and during mealtimes. Key issues were raised at sessions, which only reinforced the need for ongoing dialogue; such topics included the following: Where are the women at the altar? How does obedience differ for monastics and married people with families? How do individualism and technology pose problems for communal living and for being aware of the common good? In what ways is there a need for discernment when truth telling is called for in communities of broken people? How do leadership and members deal with members of community who have decidedly excommunicated themselves from the community? How do the diverse cultures that can exist in a given community—intergenerations, ethnicities, orientations, ecumenical—both enrich and challenge the day-to-day life in community? The final session closed with an invitation to traditional Benedictine communities: How might they extend their wisdom regarding formation, intergenerational living, and structures for communal living to the new communities? In turn, how might the new communities offer new hope, vibrancy, and venues for the Spirit to do something “new” to the traditional communities?

Deep gratitude is expressed to the members of the planning committee for the 2006 Monastic Institute: Bill Cahoy; William Skudlarek, OSB; Colleen Haggerty, OSB; Don Ottenhoff; Linda Schreiber; and Vic Klimoski. Thanks to a generous grant from the Louisville Institute several participants were able to come to this gathering and share their wisdom. Special thanks go to Linda Schreiber and Kristi Bivens for their assistance in all the details for the Institute.

Mary Forman, OSB



## *Abbreviations*

ABECA	Benedictine Association of the Caribbean and Andes
AIM	Alliance for International Monasticism
BECOSA	Benedictine Communities of Southern Africa
CIB	Communion Internationalis Benedictinarum
DIM	Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique
EMLA	Encuentro Monastico Latino Americano
Heb	Hebrews`
OSB	Order of Saint Benedict
OSCO	Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance
PIL	Pontifical Institute of Liturgy
RB	Rule of Benedict
SGS	Sisters of the Good Samaritan
Zech	Zechariah



## Section I

### *Global Setting of Monasticism*

“Community movements today . . . may parse the concept of community differently from the classic monastic model; they try to find ways to strive for genuine interdependence while not excluding some autonomy; they may work out ways of accountability within a range of participation: temporary/permanent; live-in/live-out; no vows/vowed/covenanted; married/celibate; leader/consensus model. While classic monasticism relies on a permanent identification with a particular community, which is described in the Benedictine concept of stability, there are other approaches today in which the identification becomes occasional, more a kind of reference point, or even a place of return for reconnection.”

— *Columba Stewart, OSB*



# *Early Monasticism and Community Movements Today*

## **What Is Old and New and How Do They Meet?**

*Columba Stewart, OSB<sup>1</sup>*

It is a great pleasure to be here this evening and to see what is surely the largest gathering ever of people for the Monastic Institute. My purpose is to start a conversation that will continue in various arenas, formal and informal, over the course of the Institute, by addressing the topic: “Early Monasticism and Community Movements Today: What Is Old and New and How Do They Meet?”

Now I will admit in all humility that I think I know a fair amount about early monasticism. But to paraphrase a classic of American film, “I don’t know nothing about birthing ‘new community movements.’” I am, however, a product of the same culture as those who have been instrumental in these movements; I know what it is like to live in community in the twenty-first century, and I have spent a significant part of the past years working with people, young men

1. Columba Stewart, OSB, monk of Saint John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, is the executive director of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library and University Vice-President for Programs in Religion and Culture, Saint John’s University. He is the author of “*Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to A.D. 431*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford, 1991); *The World of the Desert Fathers: Stories and Sayings from the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum* (Fairacres, 1997); *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality (Orbis, 1998); and *Cassian the Monk*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford, 1999).

and women, who have been discerning a call to monastic life, to marriage, or to other major commitments. So, the resulting observations, which I will share with you this evening, will be historical, personal, social, and best of all, anecdotal.

### **Early Monasticism**

First, I will offer what will be the heaviest and most academic part of my reflections with some comments about **early monasticism**. So, we start with the heavy stuff, and then ease off as we move more into the modern age. At the outset, early monasticism is a phenomenon even more complex than the variety of new community movements that we can find today, varying in language, culture, geography, understanding of the life and relationship to the local church, and so on. So, we need to situate monasticism in its historical context.

Despite our best efforts as Christian monastics today to search for biblical origins of who we are and what we do, we need to admit that Christians did not invent the notion of what today we call “intentional community.” In the late antique world in which Christianity took root, there were numerous forms of ideologically based association. There were philosophical fellowships of various kinds, which survived well into the Christian Era (Pythagoreans). In Palestinian Judaism at the time of Jesus there were the Essenes and the Qumran community associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus’ own Galilean fellowship with its core group of disciples fit a familiar pattern of radical commitment to a charismatic teacher, as did John the Baptist’s perhaps rival group in the Judean desert near the River Jordan. Ascetics in the Mesopotamian heartland of the Syriac Christians made commitments to celibate membership in covenantal communities as early as the third and fourth centuries and maybe even before that. Egypt, home of the earliest famous Christian “monastic” experiments, had also been the location for Philo’s mysterious “Therapeutae,” an esoteric Jewish sect in the environs of Alexandria that Philo claimed was to be found in many other regions. Indeed, you might say that Egypt was the great spiritual theme park of the ancient world,

where what we would call from our historical perspective “orthodox” or “catholic” Christians (in other words, those viewed from later perspective as mainstream and rooted in what became the canonical Scriptures) rubbed elbows constantly with a dozen flavors of Gnosticism and other late antique “New Age” movements. All of this took place against the dramatic backdrop of the vast desert and the great monuments of the ancient Egyptian cults.

### **The Search for Monastic Origins**

What then was “early monasticism” that is used as a reference point for looking at community movements today? The search for monastic origins has been a significant concern of post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment scholarship. Its myriad results have made this search analogous to the better-known effort to locate the Jesus of history. The search for monastic origins may perhaps have been more successful than the search for the historical Jesus; nonetheless, its protagonists have not by any means avoided the pitfall ascribed to Adolf von Harnack, greatest of modern historians, by the Catholic modernist George Tyrrell. Writing in 1909 of Harnack’s portrait of Jesus, Tyrrell states, “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.”<sup>2</sup> The face that Harnack saw, of course, was his own. As we look at studies of early monasticism from the Reformation period to Edward Gibbon to the most recent scholarship, we find “explanations” for monasticism ranging from flight to the desert to avoid conscription or taxes, to voluntary self-sacrifice in a world in which martyrdom had become *démodé*, or the appearance of a new and particularly nasty form of “the virus of asceticism”;<sup>3</sup> some have characterized

2. George Tyrrell, “The Christ of Liberal Protestantism,” in *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London/New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), 49.

3. Norman Douglas, “Southern Saintliness,” in *Old Calabria*, rev. ed. (London: Gentry Books/Century Printing, 1915; repr. 1983), 251. See also Norman Douglas, “*Old Calabria* on Authorama: Public Domain Books” at the following web site: <http://www.authorama.com/old-calabria-31.html>.

monasticism as a takeover by pro-Nicene episcopal thought-police of a formerly independent-minded asceticism that had empowered both men and women. Despite whatever reason is adduced and is so often the case, the truth is probably a compounding of all these various glimpses, the phenomenon itself was extraordinary: as Gibbon, the finest, if at times the most offensive, writer among the early explainers, wrote: “The Egyptians . . . were disposed to hope, and to believe, that the number of monks was equal to the remainder of the people; and posterity might repeat the saying [in the Christian era], which had formerly been applied to the sacred animals of the same country, that, in Egypt, it was less difficult to find a god than a man.”<sup>4</sup> So, historians hoped that the same would be said of monastic men and women. You read the early statistic that one diocese had ten thousand monks and as always twice as many nuns.<sup>5</sup> You find similar statistics reflecting this extraordinary explosion of what people were suddenly calling monasticism at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth centuries.

### **The Development of Early Monasticism and Later Transformations**

I have my own way of understanding this sudden irruption of monasticism into the Roman world, and one that I hope avoids Harnack’s narcissistic well or an overly simple analysis of what is, after all, a highly complex phenomenon. It goes like this. In the late third and early fourth centuries certain individuals and their followers began to emerge from a kind of primordial ascetic soup in Egypt and Asia Minor. By this point they have attained a stage of self-conscious identity or organizational development that suddenly makes them particularly noticeable, with practices that seem “more than” the

4. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Great Books of the Western World, ed. Mortimer J. Adler, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990): 1:594, chap. 37, col. 2.

5. *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: the Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans. Norman Russell, Cistercian Studies 48 (London & Oxford: Mowbray/Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 67, with reference to “Oxyrynchus, one of the cities of the Thebaid.”



Christian or even ascetic norm. They have begun to establish traditions of teaching and distinctive terminology. Sometimes, as was the case of Egypt, given the unique geography of the river running through the land and desert readily accessible, footsteps away from the fertile strip along the river, these people seemed to exhibit a preference for physically isolated locations that made them all the easier to recognize, and indeed for seekers, all the easier to find. They also began to benefit from episcopal patronage: Antony of Egypt most famously got Athanasius of Alexandria as his postmortem publicist, for better or worse, in terms of the actual historicity of some details of Antony's life. Basil the Great took over and established ascetic communities in Cappadocia and Asia Minor. The individual circumstances of each one of these great figures, or of each regional experiment (I call them experiments because most of them did not last very long for all kinds of reasons), are distinctive and resistant to uniform etiology. One might, finally, have to allow that we believers do find, after we have played every other card in our hand, that the Holy Spirit might have had something to do with all of it.

It is fair to say, and this is crediting some of the work of the great scholars of the period, that in the early Christian period and in later centuries, monasticism and other great religious "movements" flourished in times of social transition or transformation, whether in sympathetic response to whatever was happening in that transition or transformation or as a kind of manifest reaction to what was happening. For all kinds of reasons the fourth through seventh centuries were certainly stressful, opening with the end of persecution, and soon became enmeshed in exhausting doctrinal debates that became genuinely church dividing (the effects of which we live with today in many of the regions, where our work with manuscripts tries to heal divisions that date to the fourth and fifth centuries). The same period saw the fall of the Western empire, which was devastating psychologically for Western Christians and others, and ended with a tremendous catastrophe—the rise of Islam and the loss of much of the Christian East to the new faith. The ninth century, when Benedictine monasticism finally made it big through imperial patronage, was a period of reconsolidation after all of that had happened. The twelfth

century saw the rise of cities and universities, and a breakout from the classic monastic pattern, as the so-called new orders responded to social and religious needs in ways that traditional monasticism simply could not, and as monasticism itself was essentially refounded through several kinds of reform. The sixteenth-century Reformation and Counter-Reformation was certainly another time of transformation and monastic response. The nineteenth century was one of change, with its revolutionary closure of monasteries and their re-founding in different forms, some of which looked either backward to a romanticized, traditionally ordered world, or some of which absorbed the principle of social utility and engaged in new forms of educational and pastoral mission. That latter kind of monasticism brought us to this place.

Many people would argue that ours is such a transitional or transformational period, shifting from Euro-American hegemony to a much more complicated global politics. Within the Euro-American world the last fifty years have seen the collapse of former assumptions about authority, morality, and the place of the church. Ideologically driven mass movements of the twentieth century such as Communism and Fascism may now seem remote from Western countries, but it is only fair to say that the polarized political atmosphere and culture wars in the United States and the increase of religious and ethnic intolerance everywhere else do not encourage ease. Meanwhile, say scientists, the whole planet has become the frog in that famous experiment, unaware that it is slowly being boiled alive as we suffer through global warming.

In light of all this, how could classic monasticism *not* be in for quite a ride in the decades to come? And how could there *not* be some really interesting things happening outside the historical monastic movements?

### **Reasons Proposed for Why Early Christians Joined Monastic Movements**

To help us understand some of what may have been going on both inside and outside classic monasticism today in this time, I

propose that we start by examining some of the reasons why early Christians might have joined monastic movements, and then compare some of their motivations for exploring monastic or other communities expressed by people today. This will be very sketchy, but may provide something of a catalyst to our further reflection and discussion.

**Why did late antique, or early Christian, men and women join monasteries?** As always, because I have some historical training, I have to issue a disclaimer about the nature of the evidence. The evidence is written; it is not live. We do not have oral histories of these early monastic figures. The literature was rarely first person, and it was often spun by what we call in the scholarly world hagiographers and what are called today in the corporate world spinmasters. Nonetheless, the historical record that we can find in these monastic texts can serve as “typical”: both in terms of expressing some of the common motivations, perhaps more dramatically than was typically the case, and also “typical” in the sense of being formative or inspirational for others in their interest in and approach to monastic life.

### *Repentance*

When you consult the sources, the number one motivation that you find was one that sounds highly antique to us: **repentance**. If we call the word “conversion,” or even better use words like *metanoia*, it becomes more palatable to us, but our early monastic forebears were not hesitant to use the great “R” word. The working assumption, which after all is the working assumption of the anthropology of the Rule of Benedict, was that we are indeed screwed-up people who need a way to get back on track. This explains the appeal of John the Baptist in early monasticism as a great monastic type among the Old Testament and New Testament figures: after all, “Repent” was his great sound bite. As a result, monastic literature, early and medieval, and in any case premodern, is full of dramatic stories of repentance and conversion. We all know Augustine’s account in the *Confessions*, which led him to a celibate life in community. But there were other

figures who perhaps may be more intriguing, because they are less familiar or more attractive, because we have less baggage of our own when we consider them. One of these is Moses the Ethiopian,<sup>6</sup> a brigand and murderer moved to repentance by meeting the gentle monastic inhabitants of the salt marshes of Scetis, as he hid out in the Egyptian desert. He then follows their example, becoming a monk and a great teacher. Later in life he finds himself attacked by marauding Bedouin, the sort of people he once was; as they devastated his adopted monastic home, he offered them no resistance, having begun as a brigand and murderer and dying as a martyr of nonviolence. In another vein, Sister Benedicta Ward has written about the many stories of prostitutes who escaped a life of sexual slavery and found healing and wholeness in monastic life.<sup>7</sup> Among them were figures like Mary of Egypt and Pelagia, who became types of monastic repentance and whose stories translated into Latin became staples of medieval general Christian instruction. These dramatic examples must not obscure the undramatic thousands for whom life had lost its freshness, or who had become weary of their burden of sinfulness and who longed for a new beginning. In the twentieth century, one need look no further than Thomas Merton, who tapped into this same vein as they told their stories. One wonders if such a tale as Merton's would sell today.

### *Social Relocation*

Second among early Christian reasons for being interested in monasticism, there was a desire for **social relocation**; that sounds scientific and appropriately objective. The term—desire for social relocation—works because ancient peoples were locked into places and relationships in a way that we can scarcely imagine. Village and family defined the boundaries of one's existence, and everyone had a

6. "Moses," in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward, Cistercian Studies 59, 138–43 (London & Oxford: Mowbray/Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975).

7. Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, Cistercian Studies 106 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987).

role to play that was inexorably determined by social class, gender, and birth order. Some of the most famous early monks fled this burden of expectation. For example, Antony the Great, with the sudden death of his parents, found himself a person of importance in his village, owner of a substantial amount of land and guardian of his younger sister. As one hears the story of his call to “sell everything and follow me” and “do not worry about tomorrow;”<sup>8</sup> it is hard to escape the suspicion that, for Antony, taking his Daddy’s place at the grain exchange and the coffee shop was more than he could bear. Equally, Gregory’s depiction of the young Benedict scandalized by the adolescent experiments of his peers in Rome and running away from boarding school (accompanied by his devoted nanny) suggests something of the same reluctance or constitutional inability to follow a path that was predetermined for him by others. Numerous modern scholars have been particularly interested in the extraordinary courage of early ascetic and monastic women, who followed their own preference for asceticism rather than their parents’ expectation of advantageous marriage and traditional motherhood. In a world that was even more restrictive than the nun-nurse-teacher-librarian or marriage world of not so long ago, asceticism was a real breakout opportunity for women, especially for those who lacked personal wealth and the independence that wealth could buy. Many of the famous women of the Latin monastic world especially, who became patrons of monastic men like Jerome and Rufinus and others, were wealthy widows whose choice to pursue their own distinctive monastic vocation was made possible by the allowance of female property-holding under Roman law. For others, wealth could not buy their freedom, but gradually as monasticism took hold it became an option.

There were other kinds of social relocation that early monasticism offered, such as *xeniteia*, that is, voluntary exile from one’s native country, which was a harsh asceticism to be perpetually a stranger, as well as fosterage, the placement of unwanted or unaffordable children in monasteries. I noted with interest that the web

8. Athanasius, *The Life of St. Antony*, trans. Robert T. Meyer, Ancient Christian Writers 10 (New York/Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press, 1978), chaps. 2–3, 19–20.

site of the New Monasticism project presents as one of the twelve marks of the movement, “relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.”<sup>9</sup> This was after I came up with this phrase of “social relocation.”

### *Fulfillment of a Vow*

The third reason for undertaking monasticism in the early period was doing so as **fulfillment of a vow**. Pachomius related that he became a Christian and village ascetic because of a vow he made at a time of crisis. Having been conscripted by the Romans in the particularly violent way they did conscription in those days, which was to go into a village, ask to see all the young men between certain ages, put them in chains and shackles, haul them far from home, drop them on a battlefield, and then say, “Fight your way out.” Pachomius, finding himself in such a situation, also had his first encounter with Christians and, in some desperation, as people often do, tried praying to their God for deliverance to see if that would work, having tried his own.<sup>10</sup> Sure enough, it worked, and off he went: baptism, asceticism, and then a career as a monastic experimenter, with mixed success until he finally got the formula right, about which more will be said later. Evagrius Ponticus abandoned a very promising ecclesiastical career in Constantinople after having promised in a dream that he would break off a dalliance with a rich married lady and get out of town fast.<sup>11</sup> Theodoret of Cyrrhus, author of a famous series of literary vignettes of Syrian monks of the fifth cen-

9. *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, a Division of Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), xii, where this phrase is listed as the first mark of a new monasticism. See also <http://www.newmonasticism.org/12marks/index.html>.

10. “The Bohairic Life of Pachomius 7–8,” in *Pachomian Koinonia I: The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples*, trans. Armand Veilleux, Cistercian Studies 45 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 26–28. See also the parallel to this story in the same volume, “The First Greek Life of Pachomius 4–5,” 300–301.

11. See “38. Evagrius,” in *Palladius: The Lausiac History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer, Ancient Christian Writers 34 (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 110–14.

ture, was promised to the church by his mother even before his conception, and his birth was attributed to the prayers of a monk who was a friend of the family.<sup>12</sup> All this can seem strange to us, but as we talk to people who come from traditional Catholic families, many of them in this room, and as I hear people tell stories of what it was like in this part of the country not so long ago, such a world is not so very distant from our own time.

### *Fulfillment of a Spiritual Aspiration*

Finally, there was monasticism as the **fulfillment of spiritual aspiration or a desire for advancement**. The young John Cassian longed to be a “soldier of Christ”<sup>13</sup> rather than of the emperor, a kind of male analogue to the young woman who preferred betrothal to Christ to marriage to an earthly groom. Where else did talented overachievers in the late antique Christian world direct their energy? Monasticism was the coming thing. Had the young Benjamin Braddock in Mike Nichol’s brilliant film *The Graduate* (1967) lived in the year 450 rather than in the 1960s, the sage word of advice offered to him at his graduation party would not have been “Plastics” but “Monasticism.” Over time in the history of the church this became only truer, as monasticism offered the talented men and women an opportunity for advancement that a very tightly structured society could not itself offer.

### **Proposed Reasons Men and Women Join Monasteries Today**

So, with that background let me venture tentatively some observations about:

12. “Macedonius XIII.16-18,” in Theodoret of Cyrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, trans. R. M. Price, Cistercian Studies 88 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 105–7.

13. There are several references to *miles Christi* or “soldier of Christ” in Cassian’s *Institutes*; see *John Cassian: The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers 58 (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2000): *Inst.* I.1.1, 21; II.1, 37; V.19.1, 129; V.21.1, 130; VII.21, 180; X.3, 220-21; XI.3, 241; and XI.7, 243.

**Why do (post-) modern men and women join monasteries or get interested in various community movements?** I can speak here only of men and women in North America and western Europe—the culture that I know. In other parts of the world, many of these reasons of what I mentioned above are still very much in play, along with cultural and local variance of the same.

### #1: *Desire for Community*

Surely the primary reason that we all hear is the **desire for community**. Having experienced the social fragmentation of the postindustrial world, many people have a longing for social integration. In a world in which “online community” is not an oxymoron, this surely cannot be surprising. People want connection with others, and just as important, they want that connection with others to be healthy. There are a lot of unhealthy options out there for connecting with others. Intentional communities, monastic or otherwise, can offer places of genuine humanity, shared commitments, and relational sanity. In preparation for this talk I spoke with several young people who have considered monastic life. Each one mentioned as his or her first reason for considering monastic life “support” and over the long haul, as the most attractive aspect of monastic community. Recent social surveys consider that the average American had now gone from three trusted friends to two. This has prompted a lot of reflection among sociologists of “the bowling alone variety,”<sup>14</sup> who have looked at the corrosion of the traditional forms of civic association in our country. Whatever the validity of statistics like this, it is striking that there are plenty of people who would say that they have no trusted other, which would allow for that statistical result of the norm being two.

Mark Epstein, a New York–based Buddhist psychotherapist, probes the roots of this modern longing in his book *Thoughts without a Thinker*. This guy has great marketing with books with titles like

14. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).



*Thoughts without a Thinker, Going to Pieces without Falling Apart*, and his newer one, *Going on Being*; this is really terrific branding. In *Thoughts without a Thinker*, he contrasts what he has discovered about Tibetan culture with what he knows all too well from his practice about modern American culture:

The eastern self is enmeshed in a web of family, hierarchy, caste, or other group expectations from which the only escape is often spiritual practice. . . . An ancient Buddhist text begins, “This generation is entangled in a tangle.” . . . The starting point in the West rarely is an enmeshed self; more commonly it is an estranged one. The emphasis on individuality and autonomy, the breakdown of the extended and even the nuclear family, the scarcity of “good enough” parenting, and the relentless drive for achievement versus affection in our society leave a person all too often feeling cut off, isolated, alienated, empty, and longing for an intimacy that seems both out of reach and vaguely threatening.<sup>15</sup>

Epstein goes on to describe a meeting between Eastern spiritual masters and Western therapists sponsored by His Holiness the Dalai Lama: “The Dalai Lama was incredulous at the notion of ‘low self-esteem’ that he kept hearing about [from the Western participants]. He went around the room asking each Westerner there, ‘Do you have this? Do you have this?’ When they all nodded yes, he just shook his head in disbelief.”<sup>16</sup> The Tibetan experience for those raised in that traditional Eastern milieu, like the Dalai Lama and other masters in that dialogue, was the world of our monastic ancestors, a world in which one came to a monastery to discover solitude for the first time in one’s life, to wrestle with it, to find an individual identity, to shake up a reflexive self-confidence, and thus perhaps all Saint Benedict’s warnings about self-will and his emphasis on a humility that to many modern readers seems unhealthy because our starting point is often so different from his. That was a world in which excommunication from community exercises really worked as punishment, rather than

15. Mark Epstein, *Thoughts without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, a Division of HarperCollins, 1995), 176–77.

16. *Ibid.*, 177.

in our world in which alienated individualism itself is the pathology that monastic life means to address.

This premier desire expressed by modern people for community begs the question, **what kind of community?** This is one of the major topics of our Institute this year. The classic monastic model is clear: it means a vowed, celibate, common life; community of goods; accountability shaped by obedience to a Rule and a superior; and that myriad of monastic customs that constitutes the framework for monastic life in a particular place. The great “ah-ha!” moment of cenobitic evolution came when Pachomius, living out the vow he had made as he lay in prison figuring out how to get out of the Roman army, realized that he couldn’t achieve his hoped-for goal for *koinonia*, a community, without requiring that material goods be commonly owned and expectations be commonly understood.<sup>17</sup> His earlier experiment, where he thought he would live like a nice guy, and others would notice and start to imitate, and one day it would be the early Jerusalem, was a disaster.<sup>18</sup> Community movements today, including those that are expressed in this Institute, may parse the concept of community differently from the classic monastic model; they try to find ways to strive for genuine interdependence while not excluding some autonomy; they may work out ways of accountability within a range of participation: temporary/permanent; live-in/live-out; no vows/vowed/covenanted; married/celibate; leader/consensus model. While classic monasticism relies on a permanent identification with a particular community, which is described in the Benedictine concept of stability, there are other approaches today in which the identification becomes occasional, more a kind of reference point, or even a place of return for reconnection.

17. See “The Bohairic Life of Pachomius 23–26,” in *Pachomian Koinonia I: The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples*, 45–49; the parallel in this same volume appears as “The First Greek Life of Pachomius 24–28,” 312–16.

18. See especially, “The Sahidic Life of Pachomius: Fragment IV,” in *Pachomian Koinonia I*, 436–38.

*#2: Desire for a Life with Meaning and Purpose*

The second reason is the **desire for a life with meaning and purpose**. Many of us who have joined monasteries have done so from a desire, strong but often vague, for “something more” than we found in professional life or in the dating game. Many people today, celibate or married, have found themselves increasingly aware of the hollowness of much that passes for “life,” have had experiences that caused them to glimpse the contingency of human existence evoked so powerfully in the book of Ecclesiastes, a monastic favorite. They quit their successful careers to pursue something with more “meaning” even at great financial and personal cost. Meanwhile, Corporate America is scrambling to catch up, to attend to concerns about quality of life, about balance between work and personal life in a 24/7 world, lest they lose their best-performing workers to something as horrific as the nonprofit sector. The “something more” so many of us seek is beyond my ability to characterize in this talk, for it is highly personal and deeply spiritual. It leads to my third and final reason.

*#3: Desire for a Structured, Substantial, Spiritual Life*

The third reason is the **desire for a structured, substantial, spiritual life**. The biggest growth area in publishing today, as many of us know, is in spirituality and religion. The Christian market is huge. One’s local Barnes and Noble or Borders bookshop would make even the late antique Alexandrian Hellenist envious with the array of life paths that are on offer. While many of them will lead to the false gods of “self-fulfillment” or “success,” many of them testify to the tremendous longing for something transcendent and substantial. In the third century, Origen of Alexandria and, later, of Caesarea in Palestine, deliberately addressed the yuppies of his day with writings of depth, intelligence, and serious engagement with the questions and thought-world of their time. The fascination that we find today with spiritualities seems somehow “authentic,” whether they be practices from Asian religions, Sufi traditions, or the Christian East, is a stunning feature of the religious marketplace. How many American Roman Catholics or Protestants fifty years ago were reading

books about praying with icons? Who could have guessed that a bookstore in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, would sell dozens of titles on Buddhist religious practice? Who could have predicted the interest in meditation in its various Buddhist, Hindu, or Christian forms? Who would have thought that even traditional Catholic practices, like Perpetual Adoration, would be revived as a mark of parish renewal?

When I look back at my arrival at Saint John's at the very beginning of the 1980s, the oblate program seemed to be on its last legs. It in no way registered on the screen of our common life or sense of mission. At the time, other religious orders seemed to have the retreat business sewn up. What happened? Whence this guesthouse building across the way, and others like it? Surely this growing desire for connection to a spiritual path that is structured and substantial is at least part of the explanation for what has happened. *Lectio divina*, the Psalms, books on monastic spirituality that focus not on dramatic stories of conversion but on the value of a spirituality grounded in Scripture and regular participation in the Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharist, laypeople applying the Rule of Benedict to family life, the legal profession, corporate world: who would have thought?

## **Conclusion**

And so this leads me to conclude, not with Antony the Great, or Adolf von Harnack, Gibbon, or even Benedict, but with the one "who has spoken through the Prophets" (cf. Hosea 12:10; Zech 7:12), the Holy Spirit who is the only possible explanation for this gathering on a summer evening at a monastery far removed from Egypt, from Monte Cassino, from Bavaria. How else could I, a native of Houston, be delivered from my native Texanity to be brought to this land of "Minnesota-nice"? The Spirit, whom we profess has spoken through the Prophets, has given a message not about individual perfection but about the renewal of community. The message is always addressed to the people of Israel. In these coming days, let us listen, keenly, expectantly, and prayerfully, for a Spirit who seems to prefer

whispers to trumpets, who calls each one of us to the renewal of our lives in loving communion with one another.

### **Dialogue with Columba Stewart, OSB**

*Would you say that the three reasons you gave for the present interest in monasticism—desire for community, for meaning and purpose, and a structured spiritual life—also explain what draws oblates to communities?*

**Columba:** It is always interesting to hear one's own tradition refracted back, especially when oblates speak about Benedictine monasticism. One of the things that has happened to us in the last twenty-something years since the movement has found new legs is that it has challenged us to understand the tradition better and to be grateful for what we have.

**William Skudlarek:** Some time ago, and I only have very limited information on this, someone suggested to me that one of the reasons monasticism sprang up the way it did in Egypt was because of Christians being fascinated by some Buddhist missionary monks from India. There seems to be some evidence for some kind of Buddhist synod held in Alexandria, and that, in fact, Christians who imitated these Buddhist ascetics, who were referred to as the *gymnoi*, "the naked ones," were criticized. They were told that this was not an appropriate way of following the Christian life. I continue to be fascinated by the fact that this monastic phenomenon is one that predates Christianity, as you indicated in the area of Middle Eastern Greece, and five hundred years before it arose in Egypt. It has a universal character to it. I just wonder to what degree you might have some observations on whether that Christian brand of monasticism was in fact influenced from a much earlier strand, and if in some way that might be part of the reason for the renewed interest in other forms of monasticism today as expressed in Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue?

**Columba:** One of the interesting things that has happened in modern scholarship is the willingness for people like me, who do

monastic history from inside the movement, to be less defensive about parallels and sources and to recognize, for example, that much of the early desert understanding of the passions and the thoughts active in the human person are certainly derived from what Stoic philosophers and analysts had been reflecting on. What that shows is the openness of Christianity and the great tradition to engage seriously the cultures that are around it. We certainly see the same thing happening today. In terms of the direct connection between Buddhist monasticism and Christian monasticism, a lot of people have talked about the parallels, but I have not yet seen the missing-link evidence. There are indications that in the ancient world, despite what I said about your village defining your world and so on, people traveled a lot more than we would credit them, even though travel was arduous. Just think of the traffic up and down the silk road over the centuries. Early Syriac Christianity understands the mission of the biblical figure they associate with their founding, which is an amalgam of the apostle they call Judas Thomas. They mention a missionary trip he took to India, which has become a big part of the understanding of Indian Christians about the origin of their Christianity. What this tells us is that there were things going on along those trade routes that will always remain inaccessible to us. Our best stance is to learn what we can from the evidence available and not to be defensive, because, after all, our authenticity as Christian monastics does not rest on the framework of practices of monasticism; it rests on the religious faith that underlies that, which we express in these particular forms, which do begin to look like an archetype across the great traditions. The same can be said of Islam. So, many of the distinctive, devotional practices of Islam are clearly based on Christian practice, and I would say particularly monastic practice, not only in the Sufi traditions, but generally speaking: prostrations, Ramadan in Lent, and so on. That is just a fact of human culture.

**Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove:** I am here as a representative of the New Monasticism. Just this past weekend I was in the hills of east Tennessee where we had a gathering of folks who were interested in community or starting new communities to get together and talk. Five hundred people showed up out of nowhere. As we talked to-

gether, all three things you mentioned were very much there: this longing for community, longing for connection, and for a sense of purpose. But a few of us for the past year have been trying to read the Rule of Saint Benedict seriously and to see how the three vows inform what we are doing. The one I was most struck by was obedience and the sense that while the longing among this group of mostly young people is very genuine, exactly what are we obedient to? Obedience, more than anything, is offensive to our sort of American self-expression. Could you say something of where people, who are coming at this from unconventional trails, can look for obedience or a model of what that could look like?

**Columba:** If you want to hear about monastic obedience, you should really have a prioress or abbot speak to you. The prominence of obedience in the classic monastic tradition points to the fact that finding ways to pull people out of themselves and to connect them to this something larger has been a perennial challenge. It certainly is a concept that is offensive to my personal self-expression, so this is a challenge within monastic movements themselves. In terms of where you might look—marriage, children, commitment to communities—there is a lot more obedience, and certainly there is a lot more asceticism out there in American culture than we realize. Not all of it is healthy. You know we diet for beauty sometimes rather than for health or for God. But there is a lot that is healthy, and teasing out some elements of that could be really beneficial. I find my greatest lesson is in watching my married sisters and my friends who are married with small children. I am in awe of that kind of obedience, because that is not optional, not when you have the kids.

**Catholic Worker:** I have been with the Catholic Worker Movement for a long time. For the people who are gathered to the Worker, I am amazed that there seems to be an agreement that we live at the end of the empire; we live in a society that is non-sustainable; it's ready to fall apart and it should fall apart. Dorothy Day said, "All our problems stem from our acceptance of a filthy, rotten system." We look to the Benedictines and to the Desert Fathers and Mothers living in times very similar to ours, when all the institutions they depended on and trusted, their whole society, was on the verge of

collapse. And how do you live? My friends at a Catholic Worker Farm in South Dakota say that they are practicing for when peace breaks out, because when the people of the world are allowed to use the land the way they choose and use labor to feed themselves and their own families, instead of supporting us, they are going to be using it very differently. We are going to have to figure out: How will we feed ourselves? How will we house ourselves? How will we keep warm in the winter when we will not have these things to depend on? What we'll have to depend on is community. We have a society now that makes it very, very difficult to love. We need to build something very different, as things are falling apart around us; we build an alternative.

**Columba:** I was trying not to get too apocalyptic in my own evocation of the post-Euro-American hegemony, but it is difficult not to have the sense that between the political and religious currents in the world and the unsustainability of our dependence on petroleum, there is something pretty big around the corner. The arguments among the people who study this seem to be more about “when” as opposed to “if.” So, then the question of intentional communities and sustainable communities becomes a pressing one.

I was recently on my annual hiking vacation with friends in the Southwest. Talk about life and family, they are a married couple with two small children and we were out there camping and hiking. My life had to change to adapt to that. At one point we visited friends of theirs who have started what they call a “sustainable, fine restaurant” in the wilds of Utah, in a town called Boulder. If any of you know Utah, Boulder is really remote. They knew that they had been accepted by this community when they got a liquor license in very strong Mormon territory. What they’ve done is to establish their own farm, and they have set up a restaurant that is largely inspired by the Buddhist practice of the owners. They are trying to show people that you can eat well and you can eat graciously in an atmosphere that is rural, informal, and sustainable. It was really very inspiring. It is interesting that on their wall they had their story, which had appeared in Oprah’s magazine. *New York Times* has been there. I marvel at people who would jet in to experience a sustainable din-



ner and then jet off. As I listened to the people and the commitment they had made to that town, which is about as foreign to their own background as you could find in the same country, and to what they were trying to do, I was edified. That's just one of thousands of examples of what people are trying to do in a myriad of ways. Who would have thought that somebody would try to prove this with a restaurant, but it was great. Because we were friends and despite the fact of our camping grubbies, we got to eat there. It was just one of those utterly memorable evenings to be in a place that felt so well tended in every dimension. So, there are good things happening out there. Let's just hope that we pull the frog out of the water before it is too late.