

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER TWENTY-SIX

Francis Acharya, ocsa

Cistercian Spirituality

An Ashram Perspective

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES

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by

Francis Acharya, ocsa

Edited with an Introduction by

Michael Casey, ocsa



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O MONK!

Do not harbor any illusion about the quality of your life.

Your charism will not flourish or shine simply
by keeping the rules and prescriptions printed in books,
nor will your life be deepened by irresponsibility or
the shallowness of hazardous innovations.

The true strength of the monastic charism
is to be sought in your openness to renunciation,
to personal enjoyment of quiet and silence,
in your love of prayer, both personal and in community,
to realize the value of the Cross in your life!

The genuine renewal which it should bring about
is the growth of your life in Jesus and His life in you,
with docility to His Spirit.

The growth of your life in Him,
must be sought at the source of life:
the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus.

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INTRODUCTION

The life of Abbot Francis Mahieu Acharya (1912–2002) is already well known from the excellent biography written by his niece, a year before his death.¹ At the age of twenty-three he entered the Cistercian abbey of Scourmont in his native Belgium. For twenty years he lived as a Strict Observance Cistercian before setting out for India in 1955 with the intention of founding an Indian-style monastery. In 1958, accompanied by Fr. Bede Griffiths, OSB, he moved to Kurisumala in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Here, on the Mountain of the Cross, he built his Cistercian Ashram; instituted a way of life that combined Cistercian, West-Syrian Christian and Indian traditions; and formed disciples by his profound teaching and commonsense judgment.

In more ways than one the ashram was a *sui generis* monastery, quite unlike anything else then existing in the Church. It was practically independent, coming loosely under the authority of the local Syro-Malankara bishop and the Vatican Congregation for the Oriental Churches. Fr. Francis reveled in the freedom of his situation and was able to fine-tune the monastic lifestyle without outside interference. When, however, he reached the age of eighty and various health problems made thoughts of his mortality unavoidable, he began to be concerned about the future leadership of the ashram.

At this time he started making inquiries about the possibility of aggregating his monastery to the Order in which he himself

1. Marthe Mahieu-De Praetere, *Kurisumala: Francis Mahieu Acharya: A Pioneer of Christian Monasticism in India*, Cistercian Studies 214 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2007).

had been formed. A first step was to begin negotiations with the abbot of Scourmont, his own former monastery, who visited the ashram in 1993. He was followed, in the next year, by Abbot General Bernardo Olivera. After the favorable vote of the General Chapter of 1996, the formal process of incorporation was initiated, which included the provision that a monk of the Order would spend time with the community, helping it to realign its vision of monastic life to harmonize with the spirit of the Order it was about to join.

During 1997 and 1998 I spent a fair amount of time at Kurisumala, spaced over several visits. My first task was to review with the community the foundational Cistercian texts of the twelfth century with a view to appreciating their essential values and the ways in which they were practically expressed. At that time I had the very strong impression that Kurisumala was already profoundly Cistercian in spirit and in practice and that, in many ways, the manner in which the monks lived their monastic life was much closer to the primitive observance than what could be observed in many established monasteries of the Order. Over the years this impression strengthened. It was my judgment that Fr. Francis's community was already deeply imbued with the Cistercian charism and that a long period of transition and preparation was not necessary. This conclusion was subsequently confirmed by two visiting abbots and July 9, 1998, was set as the date for the ceremony of affiliation.

The ashram was now raised to the status of an abbey and pastorally supported through the structures of the Order, but the question of succession remained urgent. Although he had earlier strongly resisted the idea of codifying ashram practice, Fr. Francis now became convinced that it was necessary to have some form of spiritual directory for the ongoing guidance of his community—an updated and inculturated version of the nineteenth-century volumes he had known in his early days at Scourmont.

And so, already in his late eighties, Fr. Francis began work. Although his library at Kurisumala was relatively small, he was not without resources—and he was helped in his task by a good memory, a systematic approach and a synthetic mind. Before he

came to India, he had received an excellent monastic formation under Dom Anselme Le Bail at Scourmont; he had studied at Rome and Paris, served as Master of Novices at Caldey, was a keen reader in many languages and a lifelong student. He had more than sixty years of varied monastic experience and he was a spiritually literate man with sound and balanced judgment. With a vigor typical of him, but still surprising in a man of his age, he sought to bring together in compact form not only the fruits of many years of study, but also to shape it according to the spirit that he desired to impart to his monks at Kurisumala.

Father Francis wrote as he spoke. At heart there was a contemplative fascination with the mysterious depths of God and great appreciation of the quasi-sacramental channels by which, over the course of a lifetime, the grace of God softens the heart and increases the pace of conversion. He was in no doubt about the efficacy of the monastic observances in providing an environment in which this transformation or deification occurs, and he was quite shrewd in identifying ways in which a monk might seek to escape its rigor. He was not a harsh man but he could be a stern master, bluntly pointing out delusions and evasions and not afraid to insist on greater effort. His writing is possessed of this same dual character: a mystical elevation alternating with a down-to-earth realism.

The book he produced at this time was a simple photocopied edition, continually revised and corrected, with many inserts and interpolations. Father Francis was exigent in his desire to get things just right and was always seeking to improve his text, using whatever materials daily Providence arranged. Having heard the result read at meals during my stays at Kurisumala, it seemed to me that his work would be helpful for a wider readership. Although it is written mindful of the specific customs and conditions of Kurisumala, it stands up well as a clear exposition of monastic tradition from a Cistercian viewpoint, enhanced as it often is with the experiential wisdom Fr. Francis gleaned during a long monastic lifetime.

In editing the text I have attempted to make Fr. Francis's own voice as audible as I could. I have removed some of the

supplementary material that he had later included. Often this impeded the smooth passage of his ideas without adding anything substantial to his presentation. I have not attempted to identify the sources from which he drew his content, but I have been aware that often he was summarizing or paraphrasing part of a book or article, without bothering with footnotes. He was more concerned with the final product than with its ingredients. Indeed, once or twice I have been flattered to have some of my own words recycled.

This book is offered to a wider world in the hope that it will serve as a means of making and deepening contact with the spirit of the Cistercian tradition not so much as it is written but as it has been lived for over six decades by a deeply spiritual man. To those who know of Kurisumala Ashram or who have read the biography of Fr. Francis, it will provide a gateway to an understanding of the interior life of this remarkable monk. In particular, his description of the stages of the experience of prayer will certainly be helpful to many who, like him, are lifelong seekers of the unseen God.

Michael Casey, ocso
Tarrawarra Abbey

PROLOGUE

It is never the intention of the founders of a monastery to establish in the Church a new way of religious life, but rather to revive in its original fervor the ancient tradition of monasticism. Similarly, the teachings of Saint Bernard and of the writings of the first Cistercian generations aimed at being only a living and personal echo to the monastic and patristic traditions.

Cistercian spirituality should therefore not be considered in the light of the modern orders or congregations whose ideal of perfection was determined by the particular aim they pursue for the service of the Church. The monk is essentially a disciple who inserts himself into a tradition. The Cistercian Fathers knew this and consciously made themselves disciples of the monks whose examples and teachings are channels of grace for their heirs. Thus it is the whole monastic tradition which is the family wealth of Cistercian monks.

Moses Bar Kepha, a monastic Father of the tenth century in the Antiochean tradition of Mesopotamia, in a homily given after the service of the clothing of monks, traces back the monastic charism to the origins of the human family, to the Cosmic Covenant:

Understand, my sons,
what is the monastic charism (*monachatus*)
and the doctrine of this way of life,
and let it be known to all who are here.
The practice of the monastic charism
is older than the ordination of the monastic habit.

Indeed with our forefathers there was no habit:
Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek,

Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Daniel and many others practised
 continence, abstinence, righteousness, justice and holiness.
 Some of them even kept virginity.

And when Christ the Savior of all appeared,
 John the Baptist and the holy apostles and evangelists
 and their followers
 were endowed with the same holy monastic charism.
 And, with it, they lived for God.

Later, in the time of Anthony the Great,
 the Lord Himself, with other graces,
 also gave the monastic habit as the monk's garment.
 And all who were clothed in it while being worthy of it
 were called monks, and their dwelling places monasteries,
 names conveying the austerity of their way of life.

Following Cassian, Saint Bernard, in his *Apologia* (# 24), relates
 the origins of the monastic life to the early Church of Jerusalem:

The Monastic Order was the first order in the Church.
 It was out of this that the Church grew . . .
 The Apostles were its moderators,
 and its members were those whom Paul calls "the saints."
 It was their practice to keep nothing as private property,
 as it is written,
 distribution was made to each as each had need.
 There was no scope for childish behavior.
 All received only as they had need,
 so that nothing was useless, much less novel or exotic.
 The text states "as each had need."
 This means with respect to clothing, something
 to cover nakedness and to keep out the cold.
 Do you think that they wore silks and satins
 or rode on mules with hundreds of gold pieces?
 Do you think that their beds had catskin coverlets,
 and multicolored quilts
 seeing that distribution was made
 only as each had need?

Contemporary interpreters of the Acts of the Apostles share the view of Saint Bernard:

Which components of the three texts of Acts have been given pride of place in monastic literature? The reference to *cor unum et anima una* must recur with the greatest frequency. What about the other elements of the text? How often are they quoted and how are they interpreted? This calls for further study.

Historically, we have here a core of solid information on the original way of life adopted by the earliest Christian community of Jerusalem. This community organized itself along monastic lines. If monasticism is an integral Christian life, must we not also say conversely that Christian life is basically monastic? The consequence would be that every Christian is a monk, at least at heart. The encounter with Indian monasticism invites us to ponder on the implication of this.¹

Moreover, if the monastic tradition possesses a deep unity, the institutions and the spiritual teachings of the Fathers have given birth to various trends, according to the emphasis put on one or another aspect of the common ideal. The Fathers of Cîteaux have adopted a definite attitude regarding these various trends. The Cistercian tradition is the fruit of their own vocation as well as of the trends of their time. They have conceived an idea of the monastic life which was both traditional and new, and was to be a norm of life for those who followed them. We will try to discern the spiritual trends which gave to the Cistercian ideal its particular features.

Thus it is in the light of the monastic tradition as a whole, but interpreted according to the ideas of the Fathers of Cîteaux, that we intend to explain and describe the monastic ideal. It is not our intention to make a detailed study of the teachings of the Fathers of the monastic life, but rather to take our inspiration from them, in order to frame a doctrine capable of giving life today to the members of our community, taking into account the "signs

1. Lucien Legrand, in *The Sign beyond All Signs*, 64. See Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16.

of the time," the change of mentality and the doctrinal progress which have taken place in the Church since the beginnings of the monastic life and since the time of the Cistercian Fathers. It is therefore as men of the twentieth century that we will put ourselves under their guidance.

We should like to show here that the monastic life does not consist simply in the fulfillment of some duties or in the practice of certain observances or in conforming to external exercises prescribed by a Rule or by Constitutions. While these provide a useful framework, our lives are the fruit of an unceasing dialogue between God who calls us and our own freedom, the freedom of the children of God. It is a free answer to an incessant call of God, addressing us exteriorly in the person of our abbot and in the directions of the Holy Rule, and interiorly by the intimate promptings of the Holy Spirit, which constitute the New Law engraved in our hearts. This law sets us free from all external compulsion and from the slavery of the law by conforming us in the very depths of our being to the divine will.

The call to interiority is in fact the main character of the New Covenant, already predicted by Jeremiah:

This is the Covenant I shall make with the house of Israel. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people. (31:31)

We then live not only by fulfilling duties imposed on us, but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as Benedict tells us in the conclusion of his chapter on the Ladder of Humility. (See also Ezek 36:26; Heb 10:16.) Obedience to the law and fulfillment of the observances (Mosaic Covenant) remain, keeping us in one body, the body of Christ; but their fulfillment becomes a matter of the heart. This is why we pray so often: "Create a new heart in me, O God; put a new and a steadfast spirit within me" (see Ps 51:10).

The message of this twofold call, exterior and interior, is the same: to go, like Abraham, from our country and our kindred, that is, to break with all attachments here below so that we may

always put first God and the values of His Kingdom revealed in the Gospel.

These values are the following: repentance with humility and meekness of heart, forgiveness and compassion, peace and the secret of joy of the Holy Spirit; in one word, God's own life poured into our hearts, as Jesus disclosed in the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Last Supper discourses.

May this directory, by recalling the deep meaning of the monastic life, help the members of our community to live this perpetual departure to the promised land of our heart, where we meet our Lord, the promised land which is reached only in the measure in which we never cease to make progress toward it.

PART ONE

MONASTIC TRADITION AND CISTERCIAN LIFE

Chapter 1

THE ROOT VOCATION OF CHRISTIAN DEDICATED LIFE

1. The Fullness of Christian Life

At the outset the monk can be described as “a Christian leading a religious life according to Christ’s call to perfection in the Gospel and according to the early tradition of the Church.”

The monk is a religious, that is, a Christian well aware of the demands put on him by Christ’s discipleship. In his desire to conform to Him, he has entered a state of life in which everything is arranged so as to promote the growth and the flowering of the life of grace, of the Holy Spirit in us. The aim of the religious life is not different from that of a simple Christian life; the religious is not seeking a perfection higher than that offered to the simple Christian. Every Christian has the duty to seek the perfection of charity. What is proper to the religious is that he has chosen a stable way of life in which everything is directed to the pursuit of this aim only.

The religious is not marked off from the simple faithful as one “consecrated,” distinguished from one “nonconsecrated.” Every baptized person is consecrated, a member of a holy nation and set apart from the ungodly world, the world of evil, in order to belong entirely to God. But the religious, by his profession, is established in a state of life, officially sanctioned by the Church, in order to allow this baptismal consecration to find its full expression and to be worked out in a privileged manner.

The monastic life is also a religious life, but one framed according to the ancient traditions of the Church. This does not mean that it is an antiquated relic of a bygone age, but that its structure

was established between the fourth and the twelfth centuries. It is a religious life conceived by the Church, the Fathers of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and it is from this that it draws its permanent value. Just as the doctrinal writings of the Fathers remain for the Church ever-living springs, so the ascetical teachings of the masters of the spiritual life of the first centuries have created a form of religious life which must remain alive in the Church at all times.

What gives to the life and thought of the Church of the Fathers its proper character, its fullness, its all-embracing synthesis, is the absence of specialization. To the monastic life belongs this character of fullness. It is simply a life in which everything is arranged for the pursuit of perfect discipleship, the full flowering of the life of Christ in us, without any kind of specialization. All the means of which it makes use, according to tradition, are directed to this sole aim: renunciation of marriage and of earthly possessions. Solitude and service, prayer and silence, obedience, fasting, vigils, austerity of life, manual labor, liturgical and private prayer, lead the soul toward unceasing prayer, nearness to Jesus, unbroken communion with Him.

The monk is thus distinguished from the religious belonging to a modern institute by the absence of a "secondary aim." Indeed modern religious institutions are usually organized so as to lead their members at the same time to the perfection of charity and to assume for the Church a particular task: education, health care, preaching, works of charity, and the like. Sometimes, even, the founders have dedicated their institute to a particular devotion, such as the cult of reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, or of the Precious Blood, and the relief of souls in purgatory. Because of this, modern institutes, while keeping the principal means established by the Church's tradition to assist in the pursuit of the common and principal aim—the perfection of charity—have reduced the part given to some of these means; for instance, the withdrawal from the world which favors a spiritual atmosphere, the Liturgy of the Hours and private prayer. They gave their life and adapted it to the needs of the "secondary aim."

2. Monastic Life and Contemplative Life

According to the monastic tradition, the phrases “active life” and “contemplative life” do not refer to distinct states of life, distinguished by different “secondary aims” as would be the active apostolate and works of charity on one side, and on the other side the liturgical celebrations and spiritual exercises, corresponding to different vocations. They mean rather two stages, two complementary aspects of the spiritual life, two facets of the same coin. The “active life” is described as the practice of asceticism and virtues, especially fraternal charity; the “contemplative life” is the life of deep union with God, the moving experience of His intimate presence to which a generous ascetical effort usually leads.

In this way, the monastic life is inseparably active and contemplative. It is active, not in the sense that it is organized for a particular ministry in the Church but as consisting, essentially, in the practice of evangelical virtues and brotherly service, as required by the ordinary circumstances of life. It is contemplative, not in the sense that the monk would have as “particular aim” the celebration of the sacred liturgy or the practice of some spiritual exercises, but as directed exclusively to promote a life of deep union with God in which prayer permeates the whole life and is practically identical with the perfection of theological charity.

This being established, there is room, within the monastery, for more active vocations, inclined to the humble service of the brethren in the common life, and for more contemplative vocations attracted by the sacred liturgy or by simple prayer of the heart. This is beautifully illustrated by Saint Bernard in a description which he calls “the cloistral paradise”:

The monastery is truly a paradise, a region fortified with the rampart of discipline. It is a glorious thing to have men living together in the same house, following the same way of life. How good and pleasant it is when brothers live in unity. You will see one of them weeping for his sins, another rejoicing in the praise of God, another tending the needs of all, and another giving instruction to the rest. Here is one who is at

prayer, another is reading. Here is one who is compassionate, and another who inflicts penalties for sins. This is one aflame with love, and that one is valiant in humility. This one remains humble when everything goes well and the other one does not lose his nerve in difficulties. This one works very hard in active tasks, while the other finds quiet in contemplation. (Div. 42:4)

Fourteen styles of monastic living—some of them incompatible, even opposite, observes Fr. Michael Casey. Most communities would recognize their own members in Bernard's list. What is unity? It is that which binds together what is different and unique. Its opposites are envy, competitiveness, petty-mindedness, intolerance, self-justification, self-assertion, and the refusal to be absorbed in community life, which Bernard calls *singularitas*, that is, individualism.

It is left to the spiritual discernment of the superiors to distribute the offices and duties according to this legitimate diversity. It will be advisable, however, to see that brotherly service does not degenerate into activism nor endanger the essentially contemplative orientation of the monastic life. And in case some tasks requiring active service have to be entrusted to souls attracted by a deeper contemplative life, these will have to bear this trial without losing their peace of mind and rather transform all activity into prayer by the deep orientation of their heart to God alone.

3. The Various Forms of Monastic Life

A secluded life is the distinctive mark of the monk in contrast to the first ascetics who lived in the midst of the Christian community during the first three centuries. It was toward the end of the third century, when the ascetics began to withdraw into the desert or to the mountains, that monasticism first asserted itself as a new way of life in the Church. However, as the life of seclusion was led individually, the new institutions soon developed in two ways: the way of the hermit (the recluse or the pilgrim monk) and the way of the cenobites (those who lived in a community).

As such, the cenobitic life is directed rather to the perfection of the "active life" and the eremitical life to be a full flowering of the "contemplative life." It is for this reason that a whole school of monastic spirituality considered the first to be a simple preparation for the second, to which every monk having a real contemplative ideal should aspire.

Origen pleads for, and practiced, contemplation in the world:

You who follow Christ and imitate Him, You who live in God's word and practise his commandments: you are always in the sanctuary and never leave it. It is not in a place that the sanctuary is to be sought, but in your actions, in your life, in your behavior. If your life is pleasing to God and fulfills his precepts, it matters little whether you are at home or at the market place. It even matters not that you are in the theatre: if you are at the service of God, you are in the sanctuary. Do not doubt it. The ultimate end can be summed up in this way: with a pure heart, become like God in order to draw more and more near to him and to live in him.

Further, because of the dangers threatening the solitary life, many masters of the spiritual life would keep the great majority of monks in the cenobium during their whole lifetime. But at the same time they would enforce seclusion from the world, silence and authentic contemplative life. In addition to that, obedience and the loving submission to his superiors and to his brothers, shown in the details of everyday life, was a path of renunciation which conformed the cenobitic monk intimately to the Christ of the Gospel, meek and humble of heart. Thus community living was the equivalent of the hermit's rigorous solitude. This last view, which spread very early in the West through Cassian, was adopted by the first Cistercians.

Saint Benedict's Rule reflects this view in the first chapter:

The first kind of monks is that of the cenobites, those who live in monasteries (community) and serve under a Rule and an Abbot. The second kind is that of the anchorites or hermits, those who . . . after their formation in a monastery, having

learned among many brethren how to fight against the devil, go out well-armed from the ranks of the community to the solitary combat of the desert. . . . to fight single-handed against the vices of the flesh and their own evil thoughts. (RB 1:2-5)

It would not be fair to argue from the social character of Christianity and give cenobitism an exclusive preference, as Saint Basil did. Truly, the cenobium is a distinguished manifestation of the unity of the Mystical Body. But it is a manifestation only, on the level of things that can be seen. The deep reality of the union of all members of Christ in charity transcends all particular realizations, ever imperfect here below and until the Parousia comes; it is given in its all-embracing fullness only in the innermost heart. Therefore, a hermit who possesses a higher degree of charity, who has reached the stage of unceasing prayer, is more deeply united with all people than a cenobite possessing charity in a lesser degree.

The cenobite must therefore be convinced that his relative solitude, which is ensured mainly by silence with respect to his brothers themselves, should help him to enter more deeply into the mystery of the communion of the saints than fraternal exchanges sought indiscriminately. An authentic cenobitic life is expected to favor a personal search for God, a drawing near to the Lord, as we profess on the day of our solemn clothing as a monk, a life with Jesus and in Him. "Abide in Me as I abide in you," said Jesus to His disciples. "I wish to draw near to God. Be good to me, Lord, my trust, that I may recount all Your wonders," proclaims the candidate at the beginning of the sacramental initiation of his clothing as a monk.

4. Models of the Monastic Life

Rather than make use of abstract notions to describe their ideal of life, monks of old used similes or comparisons, as Jesus revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom of God in parables. These soon became traditional as they contained a whole theology of the monastic life.

4.1. *The Angelic Life*

Christian antiquity described monasticism as the “Angelic Life” because it is organized so as to promote in every possible way detachment from the present world and dedication to the world to come, to the city of the angels and of the saints. The monk’s life of divine praise, chastity, poverty, simplicity and single-mindedness is, at the same time, his sign of the preference he gives to the “eschatological” realities, eternal life and the fruit of the new life poured out into his heart by the Holy Spirit. Liturgical prayer as well as silent contemplation are a participation in the liturgy of the heavenly city:

I think that because of the perfect renunciation of the world which it demands and the singularly lofty spiritual life which it favors and by which it is raised above all other ways of life, [the monastic way] makes those who profess it and love it different from men and similar to angels. It reconstitutes the image of God in man, it configures us to Christ as baptism does. (Saint Bernard, *On Precept and Dispensation*, 54)

The life you profess is a lofty one. It surpasses the heavens, it is on a par with the angels, it is like them in its purity. For you have made a vow not only of holiness, but of the perfection and the completion of holiness. You do not stop at the common precepts, you do not ask only what God commands, but what he wants, investigating the will of God—all that is good, all that is acceptable to him, all that is perfect. Others have the function of serving God; yours is to adhere to him. Others are expected to believe in God, to know him, to love him, to revere him; you are expected to savor him, to understand him, to make his acquaintance, to enjoy him. (William of Saint Thierry, *The Golden Epistle*, 15–16)

Our *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit* refers repeatedly to our association with the angels, as described in Revelation 8:1-4.¹

When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who

1. See also *The Clothing of Monks in the Antiochean Tradition*, 124.

stand before God. They were given seven trumpets. Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayer of all the saints on the golden altar in front of the throne. And from the angel's hand the smoke of incense went up before God with the prayers of His people. (Rev 8:1-4)

4.2. The Prophetic Life

The monastery is a prophetic place: an anticipation of the world to come, a permanent declaration of a universe remade in God, a universe whose poles are charity and the praise of God, fixed points to which all others are referred. Established in a state of life which anticipates the eschatological destiny of humankind, the monk, thanks to the power of the spirit living in him, witnesses to a prophetic way of life. The Fathers were inclined to see in the prophets of the Old Testament, and especially in Elijah, Elisha and John the Baptist, models and prefigurations of their way of life:

What shall we say of prophecy? . . . Until John came, there were the Law and the Prophets. Thus says Truth Himself. Yet he who, after Saint John, said, "We know in part and we prophesy in part," was not an adversary but a disciple of truth. Prophecy has ceased, because now we have knowledge, and yet it has not ceased altogether, since we prophesy in part. "When that which is perfect has come, that which is imperfect will be done away with." The prophets prior to John foretold the two comings of the Lord, and nevertheless the two parts of our salvation were not yet entirely known: they remained hidden in the prophecy. Now your way of prophesying, the kind of prophecy to which you have dedicated your lives, is of a high order, as I see it. According to the Apostle's teaching, it consists in regarding not the visible things but the invisible. That is what it really means to prophesy: to walk according to the Spirit, to live by faith, to seek only the goods of heaven instead of those of earth, to forget the past and apply ourselves exclusively to that which is before us. Yes, that is to prophesy in great part. For how can our life be in heaven, if not by the spirit of prophecy? It is thus that the prophets of other times, bridging time by a flight of

thought, launched into the future, separated themselves from their contemporaries and thrilled with joy at the idea of seeing the day of the Lord. They saw it, and this vision inebriated them with joy. The manner of prophesying, . . . demands a superior way of life; for in it one becomes attached to spiritual and eternal realities. (Saint Bernard, *De Diversis*, 37:6-7)

Your state is not some innovation. It is the fruit of the ancient religion, of the perfect piety which is founded in Christ. It is the ancient heritage of the Church of God, foreshown at the time of the prophets and, when the Sun of the new grace was rising, restored and reborn in Saint John the Baptist. (William, *The Golden Epistle*, 11)

4.3. The Apostolic Life (The Life of the Early Church of Jerusalem)

Under the guidance of the Spirit of Pentecost and under the guidance of the apostles who had led a similar common life with Jesus during the years of his messianic ministry, the Christians of the early Church of Jerusalem endeavored to put fully into practice the Lord's teachings on renunciation of earthly goods for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and on giving away one's possessions to the poor. The common life described in the Acts of the Apostles was taken as a sign of the coming of the eschatological times and as the first fruits of the gathering of all the children of God in the heavenly city. To adduce adequate grounds for their way of life, the monks of old liked to turn to this "apostolic life," which they sought to perpetuate in the Church. Even the hermits who distributed their possessions to follow Christ appealed to it. (See Acts 2:42-46; 4:32-35.)

Saint Bernard saw in the life of the early Church of Jerusalem the origin of the monastic order:

The monastic order was the first order of the Church. It was out of this that the Church grew . . . The apostles were her wonderworkers, and her members were those whom Paul calls "the saints." It was their practice to keep nothing as private property, as it is written: Distribution was made to each as each one had need. There was no place for childish behavior. All received only as they had need, so that nothing was useless,

and much less novel or unusual. The text says: "As each had need." This means with respect to clothing something to cover nakedness and to keep out the cold. (*Apologia*, 24)

Together with this policy of holding everything in common while sharing according to the needs of each one, there was a deep concern with poverty. In their early documents the Cistercians described themselves as "poor with Christ the poor" and even found fault with any display of splendor in church buildings or in the common way of life:

O vanity of vanities, a vanity as insane as it is vain! The Church is resplendent in her walls, but in her poor she languishes. She has covered her stones with gold, but has left her children naked. (*Apologia*, 28)

4.4. The Monk and the Martyr

For the Christians of the first three centuries, martyrdom was the highest perfection that could be reached by a disciple of Christ who wished to follow his Master to the end. The martyr, or witness, is one who gives the greatest witnessing to Christ by offering his life for the Lord's sake, a man of the Spirit; he enjoys the experience of the power of the risen Christ who triumphs in him over Satan and the world by giving him a love for God stronger than all enticements of the world here below.

When the persecutions came to an end, the monks made an appearance as the successors of the martyrs. They were united with Christ's passion, seeing their monastic life as a war against Satan and a work of love. Martyrdom was considered a second baptism, or a baptism of blood in case the martyr had not yet been baptized, because in it is fully realized the configuration to the death and resurrection of Christ, sacramentally inaugurated at baptism. So, too, the monastic life as a whole was considered a second baptism or the highest fulfillment of baptism as the monk freely unfolded in his life the sacramental mysteries. Later this view was applied to the celebration of the monastic profession.

As a model of the monk in his spiritual combat, the martyr is a model also on account of his contemplation, as contemplation is but the experience of the love of Christ poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. (See the martyrdom of Saint Stephen, especially in Acts 7:54-60.)

Saint John Cassian sums up beautifully the teaching on martyrdom as part of the monastic charism:

The patience and strictness with which monks remain so devotedly in their profession, once they have taken it up, never fulfilling their own desires, crucifies them daily to this world and makes living martyrs of them. (*Conferences*, 18:7)

5. The Monk in the Church

From what has been said up to now, it appears that in the monastic order the Church reconnects with her origins, not by an archeological return to the past, but by a movement toward that which belongs to her deeper life. She becomes again the Church of the apostles, of the martyrs, of the Fathers. At the same time she reveals more clearly than anywhere else her eschatological character.

In the Church the monastic life is not a ministry or a particular function. Unlike priestly life and married life, it is not based on a particular sacrament. If we consider what belongs to it as proper, it is not to be ranked among the sacramental signs but among the realities of the life of grace signified by the sacraments. The monastic life or, better, the monastery, is the place where everything is organized so that the means of sanctification entrusted by Christ to the Church as a sacred deposit may bear all their fruits in the life of the Spirit.

Therefore monkhood can very truly be said to be at the heart of the Church, summing up, so to say, the whole mystery. The monastic institute stands for the way of life which the Church, as teacher of perfection, offers to him who wishes to live exclusively, and of his own free will, for the full growth of the seeds of grace sown in his heart at baptism and later by the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the Divine

Mysteries. As such, monkhood stands as the most interior aspect of the Church's tradition and it offers a model to all believing Christians.

On the other hand, in the measure in which these means of sanctification bear fruit in him, thanks to his prayer and to the holiness of his life, the monk possesses—as does every friend of God—a distinctive power of intercession which can be regarded as a spiritual priesthood. At the same time the holy monk and the monastery where he lives, by the radiance of spiritual beauty, enjoy a power of attraction on believers who are meeting with trials, but also on those who seek a spiritual renewal by entering more deeply into the mystery of the Kingdom of God and its hidden presence here below, on earth:

Rid yourselves of all malice and deceit, insincerity and jealousy and recrimination of all kinds. Like newborn infants that you are, you must crave for pure milk—spiritual milk I mean—so that you may grow into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Draw near to Him, our Living Stone. Though rejected by mortal ones, He is the Chosen One of God, precious in his sight. Come and let yourselves be built into a spiritual house. Become a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:1-4)