

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER THIRTY-TWO

Living in the House of God

Monastic Essays

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES

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by

Margaret Malone, SGS

Foreword by

Michael Casey, OCSO



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Contents

Foreword by Michael Casey, OCSO vii

Editor's Note xi

- 1 Living in the House of God 1
- 2 Benedictine Life: A Sacramental Life 16
- 3 An Adventure Tale of Divine Love 29
- 4 Authority: A Service of Love 45
- 5 Benedict's Abbot and Saint Augustine 53
- 6 Taking Counsel: A Search for Wisdom 64
- 7 "Lay Aside Everything" 72
- 8 Community Table and Eucharist 83
- 9 Looking Forward to Holy Easter 94
- 10 "Seek Peace and Pursue It" 105
- 11 Obedience: A Listening Stance 116
- 12 Listening with the Heart 128
- 13 Benedictine Tradition: Timeless and Contemporary 134

14 *Communio*: The Church and the Benedictine School 147

Epilogue: A Gift for the Future 171

Sources 174

Foreword

A FEW YEARS AGO I READ AN ARTICLE IN AN airline magazine in which the author insisted that different styles of wines must be served in glasses especially designed to enhance their specific qualities. A person who drinks shiraz from a glass designed for pinot noir may be considered to lack finesse. I suppose the author knew what he was talking about. What I chose to hear him saying was that the objective quality of a wine is filtered through various components on the receiving end, such as the shape of the glass, and that these extrinsic factors change the experience of drinking it. In general this seems to be true, since we all recognize that a good wine is often enhanced by the food it accompanies, and drinking it with friends in a pleasant ambience makes it even better. The enjoyment of a wine is more than can be measured by scientific analysis. Subjective influences add value to the finished product.

In a similar way, the fact that ancient texts are received into different subjective environments means that the tradition they embody is modified according to the condition of those who receive it. There is more in such texts than their authors supposed. On the basis of their own very different circumstances, those who read the Rule of Saint Benedict appreciate different aspects of its teaching—sometimes perceiving elements that were concealed even from its author. It is in this way that tradition reinvigorates itself by proclaiming its message in different contexts. We can go further. Tradition is not only subject to adaptation in order that it might become

comprehensible to people in different cultures but also is itself enriched in the process of being inculturated.

Beyond the necessity of scholarly examination that rigorously establishes a likely original meaning of the Rule, there is also scope for a complementary reflection that seeks to bring the beliefs and values of the Rule into dialogue with contemporary experience, insights, and aspirations. Academic work tends to narrow the possibilities so that conclusions are arrived at with some degree of certainty. The more humane study of the texts builds on this scholarly foundation to relocate the Rule in different contexts, to receive the message with a different sensitivity and, perhaps, to perceive previously unheard echoes, sometimes in unlikely places.

A twenty-first-century person reads the Rule in a manner different from someone in the nineteenth century. A nonmonastic reader may be conscious of nuances that monks and nuns miss. Probably a female reader catches assonances that may escape her male counterpart. A practical person delights in sections of the Rule that pass unnoticed by the theoretician. In fact each person receives the Rule in a unique way. Each of us arrives at a personal accommodation with the text of the Rule and the tradition which it engendered. This is why it is enriching to discuss the meaning of the Rule with persons of different backgrounds, or to read commentaries that reflect the personal circumstances of the author. It is not so much a question of deciding who has the "right" interpretation of the Rule but of opening oneself to wonder at how the Rule can communicate such a variety of complementary messages without loss of its own integrity.

Margaret Malone is a Sister of the Good Samaritan of the Order of Saint Benedict, a congregation of sisters founded in Australia in the nineteenth century by Archbishop John Bede Polding, OSB. For more than half a century she has been involved in education at every level, equipping herself along the way with an impressive set of academic credentials culminating in her doctorate from the Australian National University

on the Benedictine approach to authority. She is an engaging and insightful lecturer on monastic topics who is as much appreciated for her warmth and humanity as for her ability to bring the traditional themes of monastic spirituality into conversation with contemporary culture.

Sister Margaret's involvement with Benedictine studies stems from the period immediately following the Second Vatican Council, when the Sisters of the Good Samaritan were engaged in the work of renewal and seeking to clarify their origins. The question they asked concerned the applicability of a sixth-century monastic rule to the lives of women in a congregation founded in colonial Australia and engaged in a range of active apostolates. There were only two real possibilities. One was to abandon the Benedictine component in their identity and redefine themselves in terms of apostolic religious life. The other was to go beyond the external structures of nineteenth-century Benedictinism to arrive at an understanding of the underlying beliefs and values of the Benedictine Rule and apply these to the present life of the congregation. That the congregation chose the latter option is due in no small measure to its willingness to study the Rule and provide access for its members to the fruits of contemporary scholarship. Sister Margaret was one of those who have been involved for more than three decades in demonstrating the flexibility of the Benedictine tradition and exploring its relevance to areas of contemporary concern.

The chapters in this book all originated in talks given by the author in various places. They were then, in most cases, revised and published. Inevitably the different articles bear the imprint of the audience to which they were first addressed, but they belong together as different expressions of a fundamental attitude to the Rule—one that is not only strongly ecclesial and sacramental but also firmly linked to the realities of everyday fidelity.

I had read most of these articles previously but, upon rereading them, I noted how well the various essays fit together and

the high degree of consistency they demonstrated even though they approached the Rule from different angles. Many of the linkages made in these reflections are engagingly original, reflecting the author's particular situation and context. They clearly derived from lived experience and from years of teaching. The essays are written in a simple expository style that is accessible to almost anyone who will pick up the book, yet there is a depth and honesty about them that will motivate readers not only to keep reading but also to think more profoundly about some of the issues raised. Together they embody a coherent vision of the Rule that has grown in the heart of the author through many decades of living and teaching it.

Just as there are many factors involved when good wine sings sweetly to the palate of the drinker, there are many elements in the enjoyment of a book that aims at making an ancient text part of a modern conversation. In the case of *Living in the House of God*, diligent background reading has provided a firm foundation for free-flowing reflections on a variety of topics that open up areas of the Rule that have been, for many potential readers, previously unexplored. Much work has gone into the planning of these essays, yet they are presented in a friendly way that is not likely to frighten away those who would feel out of their depths in a more technical discussion. There is much here that will give the reader pause for thought. At the end of the book not a few will feel that the beverage offered by Sister Margaret is definitely a sparkling wine.

Michael Casey, OCSO
Tarrawarra Abbey, Australia

Editor's Note

THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION OF the Bible has been used throughout, except when the passage of Scripture in question is being quoted directly from a passage in the Rule of Saint Benedict. For the Rule of Saint Benedict, two translations have been used: *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), and Terrence Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

Living in the House of God

A BUILDING, A HOUSE CAN JUST BE a shell. A house derives its meaning from those who live or work therein and from the way they interact. If we are to call our house a house of God we must make it so by the way we live. We pray in Psalm 27: “One thing I asked of the LORD, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life” (Ps 27:4). So how should we live in this house of God? We know that the way a building is shaped also helps in determining the way those within it live and relate. We are indeed formed by what we form. Qualities such as integrity, hospitality, humanity, and beauty in a place will enable its dwellers to live lives in which such qualities are evident. The way we understand who we are and how we live will be reflected in our places and vice versa. Our places become bearers of meaning and memory.

In one of his conferences, Cassian makes this very point:

Piamun: Although some people are in the habit of speaking of monasteries instead of cenobia, without drawing a distinction, nonetheless the difference is that “monastery” is the name of a dwelling and means nothing more than a place—that is, a lodging for monks—whereas “cenobium” indicates the character and discipline of the profession itself. The habitation of even one monk can be called a monastery, but something cannot be called

a cenobium unless a united community with several inhabitants lives there.¹

Without making a dichotomy between the place itself and what is done within it, I would like to explore the connections.

Elizabeth Jolly, a Western Australian writer, when writing about the monastic town of New Norcia and its sense of place, quoted a comment made to her by E. J. Stormon, SJ, who had collected the memoirs of Salvado, the founder of New Norcia Monastery. When speaking to her about a visit she was to make there, Stormon said: "Landscapes have their voices."² So, too, do buildings, homes, houses, and monasteries. They speak with their voices and our voices about our lives. One of the founders of Cîteaux, Saint Stephen Harding, was said to be "a lover of the Rule and of the place."

It is interesting that in liturgical documents much emphasis is given to the importance of space and place in relation to what is done within those spaces.³ In giving attention to church architecture, the basic questions that should be asked before a building is constructed are questions such as these: "Who are the people who use this building?" "What do we do together in it?" and then, "What environment do we need?" There is no doubt that, while what is done by the people in

¹ John Cassian, *Conference* 18.10, in *John Cassian: The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 643.

² David Hutchinson, ed., *A Town Like No Other: The Living Tradition of New Norcia* (Fremantle, Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995), 56.

³ Such documents include: "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship," in *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991); "The Place of Worship," Irish Episcopal Commission for Liturgy (Dublin, 1994); "Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship," U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC, 2000); and "Our Place of Worship," Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (Ottawa, 2000).

the building is crucial, attention must be given to the building itself, because it in turn will affect those who inhabit and use it.

The document on "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship" makes an interesting point:

When the Christian community gathers to celebrate its faith and vision, it gathers to celebrate what is most personally theirs and most nobly human and truly Church. The actions of the assembly witness the great deed God has done; they confirm an age-old covenant. With such vision and depth of the assembly, can the environment be anything less than a vehicle to meet the Lord and encounter one another? The challenge to our environment is the final challenge of Christ. We must make ready until he returns in glory.⁴

And another relevant text stresses the importance of the environment and the interaction with those who inhabit it: "The environment is appropriate when it is beautiful, when it is hospitable, when it clearly invites and needs an assembly of people to complete it."⁵ Surely both these texts could also apply to Benedict's house of God and those who dwell therein.

Throughout history, the buildings of those who lived religious lives did indeed reflect the lives of those who dwelt there, seeking God. History also tells us that when the community was in decline for whatever reason, the buildings decayed and the ruins of many monasteries give testimony to this. As long as the lives of the community flourished, however, the buildings illustrated the stability of the community. Stability did not mean a community that was static and lifeless. The places for prayer, for living together and apart, and

⁴"Environment and Art in Catholic Worship," in *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), par. 107, p. 338.

⁵"Environment and Art in Catholic Worship," in *Liturgy Documents*, par. 24, p. 323.

for work and rest were designed appropriately and spoke of a regular and stable lifestyle grounded in solid understandings. The words of Jacob after he awoke from his dream apply here: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17). In the dream God had promised that, although Jacob's offspring would be spread abroad all over the earth, God would always be with him: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28:15). Whether Jacob knew it or not, God was always with him in "this place."

"House of God" or *Domus Dei* is a term used three times by Benedict. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the idea is important because of what it conveys, not only about the building, the monastery, but also about the life of the cenobium, the community who live in the monastery. When Benedict gives a definition of "cenobites," he explains that the cenobites are those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot (1.2).⁶ Benedict envisages that the monastery should be so constructed that within it are all the necessities for living the life to which they have dedicated themselves. He feared that, if monks were "to roam outside," it would not be good for their souls: "The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden, are contained, and the various crafts are practiced" (66.6).

The three occasions when Benedict uses the phrase *Domus Dei* all reflect his concern that in this "house of God" there be an ordered life, one that provides a structure that facilitates the seeking of God by the community members and the stable environment needed.

⁶References to the Rule of St. Benedict are given in parentheses after a quotation or paraphrase by simply noting chapter and verse. In this case "(1.2)" means "Rule of St. Benedict, chapter 1, verse 2."

The first time the phrase is used is in chapter 31, "Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer." In the context of how the goods of the monastery are cared for, Benedict reminds the monks that there is a right time for things to be done: "Necessary items are to be requested and given at the proper times, so that no one may be disquieted or distressed in the house of God" (31.18-19).

In the chapter "On the Reception of Guests," which is concerned that the guest be truly received as Christ, there are practical arrangements described that should reflect this concern: suitable kitchen arrangements, help given to the guest-master when needed, the provision of adequate bedding, and then the very important prescription that the guest quarters are to be entrusted to a God-fearing brother: "The house of God should be in the care of wise men who will manage it wisely" (53.22). The repetition of the idea of *wisdom*—*Et domus Dei a sapientibus et sapienter administratur*—emphasizes the importance, not simply of an ordered household but also of the relationships that those who act wisely engender.

The third use of the term occurs in chapter 64, "On the Election of an Abbot." There is an overall concern for the abbot to be a worthy steward, not one who would go along with any evil ways of the community. What must happen is that those who block any wicked conspiracy in this direction must "set a worthy steward in charge of God's house" (64.5). In the context of Benedict's detailed teaching on the abbot, it is obvious that being a worthy steward embraces both care of the goods and care of the people who make up the community. Stewardship of the community is an overarching responsibility, so that all is ordered and well in the house of God.

It is interesting to explore the significance of the places in the monastery that are given special attention by Benedict. Some of these are the gate, the place for the novices, the room of gathering for discussion—the chapter room—the oratory, the kitchen and the places for eating, where the monks sleep, the place for guests, the room of the porter, the place where

the sick are cared for, and the place for the storage of tools and goods. All of these are significant because of the purpose they serve. I will now consider some of these uses and connections.

At the Gates

The first significant place of the monastery is the gate or the entrance or door. To this place come those who wish to join the community of their own choice or the young who are offered by parents, visiting monks and priests who wish to stay, guests who visit for a shorter or longer time, and those who come to ask for help or bring a message. The monks who belong to the community but who have to travel for any reason or who work far away from the monastery also return through the gate or entrance. Brothers who leave the monastery at “the devil’s suggestion” will leave through the entrance where they had spent time in the past, persevering until they were accepted.

Having entered the “gate” of the Christian life through baptism, some feel the desire and the call to live their baptismal life as members of a community, where they will live in a monastery serving under a rule and an abbot (1.2). This first gate of the monastery does not open easily for the newcomers. There is need for perseverance in knocking and asking for entrance—a sort of indication that what is desired demands earnest commitment. The ones seeking admittance to the community must continue knocking without any reply and keep on bearing this harsh treatment patiently for four or five days. This is indeed a test to discover whether those knocking are serious in their desire. When they are admitted, they do not gain open access to the community or the life of the monks. They are required to stay in the guest quarters, and then eventually they are able to live in the novitiate, where they are given careful attention and are “clearly told all the hardships and difficulties that will lead [them] to God” (58.1-8).

After various phases of learning about the Rule and the life he desires to live, the newcomer is received in the oratory in

the presence of the whole community. Thus the oratory is central to his admission. And within this oratory is another significant place—the altar on which he lays with his own hand the document that contains his promise of stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience. Having sung the *Suscipe* and asked the prayers of each monk, he has passed through another gate and “from that very day he is to be counted as one of the community” (58.20-23). In the case of the offering of sons who are too young to do all of this, the document and the boy’s hand are wrapped in the cloth of the altar (59.2). So powerful a symbol of the monk’s offering is this altar on which the document is laid that Benedict states that, if the monk should leave, “that document of his which the abbot took from the altar should not be given back to him but kept in the monastery” (58.29).

The gates of the monastery are also significant for those who come as guests, and here entrance is granted much more readily. They are welcomed eagerly as Christ, whatever their status or reason for coming. They are met by the abbot and the whole community with all the courtesy of love. Christ is adored in them: their hands and feet are washed, they are given every kindness, they have the divine law read to them, food and adequate bedding are provided to them. All is done for them with great care and concern (53).

This wholehearted welcome at the gates is also emphasized in the description of the porter, the keeper of the gate. There will always be someone there to give the welcome: “The porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them” (66.2). He answers the call with all gentleness and with the warmth of love (66.4), and help is given as required. Others who come and wish to stay as guests are given a ready welcome as has been described.

Within the Gates

Within the monastery itself the places are arranged and spoken of in a way that shows how important they are to the life

of the community. One of the most significant places is the oratory. Its role in relation to the newcomer's reception into the community has already been described. Benedict also devotes chapter 52 to the oratory. In this chapter the emphasis is on the role of the place in relation to what is done there—the prayer of the community. In one of those pithy statements with which he often commences his chapters, Benedict states: "The oratory ought to be what it is called, and nothing else is to be done or stored there" (52.1). It is assumed that the Work of God is celebrated there, and Benedict does not enlarge on that in this place, except to state that after the Work of God all should leave in silence and reverence so that those who wish to stay there and pray should be undisturbed (52.2-3). The oratory is also a place where the members of the community may go and pray privately at other times, and here Benedict describes some of the attitudes to prayer that will be part of that prayer: compunction, prayer with tears, and *intentio cordis*, that is, prayer with great attention and longing and reaching out for God. Nothing should get in the way of anyone's desire to pray like this, and the oratory provides a place which is silent and undisturbed for this expression of one's seeking of God.

Benedict would no doubt agree with a comment by Dr. Ken Davidson when speaking of his experience of inspiration, grace, and the "elegant solution":

There has been a long-held view in many cultures that being in sacred places enhances the experience of grace—they are seen as "thin" places where the separation between the material and divine is minimal. To me this means that we should preserve and foster such places—limit the use of churches to spiritual activities and not turn them into "multi-purpose" halls; and set aside at home places which we use only for our devotions.⁷

⁷Ken Davidson, "Inspiration and the Elegant Solution: Grace in Secular Life," *Tjurunga* 75 (November, 2008): 60.

The centrality of the oratory is also highlighted by the fact that, when the erring monk is to be punished, this involves exclusion from roles in the oratory or, in the case of serious faults, exclusion from the oratory itself. In the case of less serious faults, when he is excluded from the table, he cannot lead a psalm or refrain nor recite a reading in the oratory. Serious as this prohibition is, even worse is the absolute exclusion from the oratory. This symbolizes being cut off from all interactions with the community—working alone, eating alone, no blessings, no communications with anyone. For those who love the community this is a terrible punishment, as illustrated throughout chapters 24 and 25.

Then, as one would expect, it is in the oratory that forgiveness and reconciliation with the community finally happens. It is here that the ritual reintegration of the erring and now repentant monk happens. This involves a gradual reentry: first he lies at the feet of all as they leave the oratory, then at the feet of the abbot and at the feet of all within the oratory, finally returning to a place assigned, though not his own customary place. During this time the monk still cannot lead a psalm or read publicly until final satisfaction has been made. All of this is a powerful ritual enacted in the central place which is the oratory, and it reminds us of the ritual of the return to the Church on Holy Thursday of the sinner who had been excluded.

With echoes of eucharistic theology and its emphasis on table and word, another significant place in the life of the monk is the place where the monk eats and serves. The table in the community is also the place connected with exclusion; from it the monk is excluded for certain faults. Benedict gives a stark description of the monk who has been excluded from the table: he eats alone, the amount of food and the time of the meal are those considered appropriate by the abbot, and the food he eats cannot be blessed (25.5).

It is in chapter 35, "On the Kitchen Servers of the Week," however, that we hear even clearer teaching on the place of the table, the kitchen, and the refectory in the community's

life. It is this chapter that describes so many important elements of the community's life, for it is in the context of meals that the brothers serve one another in love, and through such service reward is increased and love fostered (35.1-2, 6). The powerful symbol of the washing of the feet of the monks both before and after their time of service connects the service in love with that of Jesus at the Last Supper.

All care is given here to the serving monks, who are given extra food and drink before their service so that they may serve their brothers without grumbling or hardship (35.13). Great care is also taken of the utensils and tools of service. This place of service is given another dimension by such efforts, prescribed in order to ensure that the service is done well and by the prayer in the oratory before all at the beginning and end of the service. There is thanksgiving at the end—"Blessed are you, Lord God, who have helped me and comforted me" (Ps 86:17)—and at the beginning there had been a prayer for help: "God come to my assistance; Lord make haste to help me" (Ps 70:2; RB 35.15-18). The latter prayer connects the service in this place with the service offered to God in the oratory at the Work of God since both begin with the same verse (17.3; 18.1).

Combined prayer and service toward the brothers remind us of the elements of hospitality expressed when the guests are received into that significant place of the monastery: the place for the guests. This is a place always open to whoever comes, and we are reminded that monasteries are never without guests (53.16). As well as the elements already mentioned when speaking of the "gate" through which the guests find such easy entry, there is in addition another dimension: namely, that in the very service he gives, the one serving also receives. After the washing he is to recite this verse: "God we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple" (Ps 48:10; RB 53.14).

Another important place in the community is the "separate room designated for the sick" (36.7). In this place the same service is to be shown to those sick as is shown to the monks

at the table and the guests who come. They are to be served as Christ; there is to be mutual consideration between the sick and those who care for them; and the abbot plays a key role with them, urging that everything be done for them that will help them return to health.

Though the particular place for gathering is not mentioned, if we take notice of what is to be done when the abbot calls the community together to listen to their counsel, we must assume that this gathering place holds great importance in the monastery. When all gather to hear the abbot explain the business on which he must consult the community, this place becomes a place which symbolizes how authority is to be exercised in the community. Indeed, the abbot must make the final decision. But if the matter is important, he must first have listened to the wisdom of the community who are to give prudent and careful advice. In this place one can believe that the Spirit is truly at work when there is a belief that each person is a bearer of wisdom and when that wisdom is offered in a suitable manner. Then everything relating to the life of the community is settled with foresight and fairness (chap. 3).

Benedict never leaves aside a discussion about the practical things that are part of the community's life. We do not know in what places the goods of the monastery (such things as tools or clothing) are kept; but, considering the care that must be given to them, it is sure to be a very well-organized place. A list of the tools is kept by the abbot; they are cared for during use and collected after use (32.2-3). They are entrusted only to those in whom the abbot has confidence, and any failure to keep the things clean or treat them with respect incurs a punishment (32.1, 4). This is not surprising since Benedict considers that all utensils and goods of the monastery are to be regarded as sacred vessels of the altar (31.10). The wardrobe for clothing is a place where used clothing is stored for the poor and where better underclothing for journeys is also stored (55.9, 12).

The place of rest is another important place, and all the monks are "to sleep in one place" (22.3) or, in the case of a

large community, in groups of ten or twenty. There is the suggestion of supervision in this arrangement, but it is expressed as “watchful care” that ensures the monks live in the way they promised. In this chapter 22, Benedict also gives direct teaching about the readiness for the Work of God, since the monks must arise without delay and express by their outward behavior that they are eager for the Work of God. With his usual compassion, Benedict also shows that he understands weakness and urges that the monks will quietly encourage each other when it is difficult to respond readily to the call to prayer (22.5-7).

The beds of the monks consist of a mat, a woolen blanket and a light covering as well as a pillow (55.15), and a warning is given that they are not to be used to store private possessions (55.16). In a much more positive vein, however, the beds are also a place where after Sext and the meal the monks may rest in complete silence (48.5). This prescription is in the chapter that speaks of the pattern and balance of the day, so it is surely a statement about the quiet and leisure of a place—leisure in the true sense—and silence.

Outside the Gates

We do not find very much in the Rule that speaks of the monks moving outside the gates, but chapters 50 and 51 speak of what is to be done when this happens. The text shows that, in fact, the monks did move outside the gates at times. Chapter 50 discusses what is to happen when monks are working outside and cannot return to the oratory at the proper time for the Work of God. They are then to celebrate it wherever they are (50.3). Likewise, if they are sent on a journey, they are not to neglect this service. On the other hand, if the journey is short and they can return within the day, they are to refrain from eating outside (51.1). It is to this world outside the gates that some monks will return if they give in to the temptation to leave the monastery. In this case the stripping off of the

monastery's clothing from the monk happens as a sign that he no longer belongs to the community (58.28). The document of profession, however, is kept and will always remain as a testimony that he once dwelt within the gates.

On the other hand, as has already been noted, there is much contact with those who dwell "outside the gates" through the guests who arrive and are welcomed (53), through those who come to the door and are greeted by the porter (66), as well as through visiting priests and monks (60 and 61). Although the Rule urges that all necessities are to be contained within the monastery and that it is better for monks not to roam outside, since this is not good for them (66.6-7), Benedict knows that the world beyond the monastery cannot be ignored.

Beyond the Gates

The Rule makes clear that Benedict knows there is another world beyond the one in which the monks are living here and now. From the Prologue to the Rule and throughout, it is clear that a journey toward something beyond this life is being undertaken. "Who yearns for life?" Benedict asks in the words of the psalm (Prol. 15; Ps 34:13). Those who respond to this call then set out on the way, clothed with faith and the performance of good works, guided by the Gospel in the search for the One who has called (Prol. 21). The Rule is in fact a description of how we are to live as we make this journey. We will always yearn for everlasting life with holy desire (4.46). We are impelled by love as we pursue everlasting life (5.10). If we fear and reverence and remember God, we will have everlasting life awaiting us (7.11). It is good zeal that leads to God and everlasting life (72.2), and the prayer at the end of this chapter is that we will be brought all together to everlasting life (72.12).

Thus, as we live our lives in this house of God, the familiar words of the psalm already quoted will be fulfilled both now and at the end of time: "One thing I asked of the LORD, that

I will seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple" (Ps 27:4).

In Jacob's dream, in which he saw the ladder set up on this earth and the top of it reaching to heaven, the Lord was standing beside him.

The LORD . . . said, I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. (Gen 28:13-15)

No wonder that Jacob knew that this was nothing other than the "house of God" and the "gate of heaven." So too is this place, this house of God where we live the Benedictine way of life.

We are, then, nourished by the hope that the house of God, where we live out our commitment in community, will be everything Benedict expressed in his Rule. In his book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, John O'Donohue speaks of how special the house of God is in all religious traditions—whether church, temple, or mosque—all places where a community gathers to hear the Word of God. His words could equally apply to how Benedict sees our own monastic dwelling places:

When one enters there one does not simply enter a building; rather one enters unknowingly the gathered memory. This house is a living archive of transcendence. . . . The house of God is a frontier region and intense threshold where the visible world meets the ultimate but subtle structures of the invisible world. Within this sacred

space, time loses its linearity, its loneliness. It opens up and suggests itself as an ancient circle of belonging in which past and future, time lived and time to be lived, form ultimate presence. From ancient times people have understood the house of God to be the sacred ground from where it is wise to begin a journey: initiation as the journey of life in Spirit, and requiem as the beginning of the invisible journey.⁸

⁸John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 160–61.