"With realism and no little wit, Michael Casey dispels any romantic notion of the monastery as he portrays monastic community as a school of love where members are called to grow in humility, gentleness, and patience, especially with those who are different. If one stays the course for many decades, however, one might just be 'overcome by admiration for the holy lives lived by others' and find that the monastery has indeed been an initiation into the very life of heaven. Springing from sixty-some years of monastic life, Michael Casey's profound insights on *lectio divina*, prayer, honoring others, and cultivating self-knowledge invite all readers to a deeper encounter with the other—both human and divine."

—Dr. Glenn E. Myers, Professor of Church History and Theological Studies, Crown College

"In *Coenobium*, Michael Casey successfully demonstrates that the individual search for God and community life are not two disparate elements of coenobitism but are in fact mutually dependent upon one another. The monastic community exists to help its members seek union with God, and the search for God bears fruit in vibrant community. In *Coenobium* Casey speaks directly to those who live monastic life, addressing its realities with wisdom, compassion, humor, and challenge. *Coenobium* contains key insights for monastic communities trying to find a way forward in these uncertain times."

—Colleen Maura McGrane, OSB, Editor of *The American Benedictine Review*

"This is a beautiful and moving book that opens the inner chambers of monastic and contemplative life, speaking directly to the human heart. In its careful, sensitive depiction of the holy ordinariness of Cistercian community life, which is the ambience for experiencing God and for deepening one's relation to God and neighbor, readers are offered a compelling vision of communal spiritual practice with real significance for our own time."

—Sr. Kathy DeVico, Abbess, Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey, Whitethorn, California

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER SIXTY-FOUR

Coenobium

Reflections on Monastic Community

Michael Casey, OCSO

Cistercian Publications
www.cistercianpublications.org

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

A Cistercian Publications title published by Liturgical Press

Cistercian Publications
Editorial Offices
161 Grosvenor Street
Athens, Ohio 45701
www.cistercianpublications.org

Imprimi potest: Abbot Steele Hartmann OCSO. 12 October 2020.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Casey, Michael, 1942– author.
Title: Coenobium : reflections on monastic community / Michael Casey.
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Cistercian Publications/ Liturgical Press, [2021] | Series: Monastic wisdom series ; number sixty-four | Summary: "Michael Casey combines his observations about the joys and challenges of living in community with an appreciation of the deeper meanings of cenobitic life, taking into account the changes in both theory and practice that have occurred in his lifetime"— Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021022095 (print) | LCCN 2021022096 (ebook) | ISBN 9780879070670 (paperback) | ISBN 9780879070687 (epub) | ISBN 9780879070687 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Monastic and religious life.
Classification: LCC BX2435 .C31435 2021 (print) | LCC BX2435 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/94—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021022095
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021022096

Contents

Abbreviations

ABR	*American Benedictine Review*
CC	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis
CF	Cistercian Fathers series. Cistercian Publications
CIC	Codex Iuris Canonici
CICLSAL	Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life
CRIS	Congregatio religiosorum et institutorum saecularium
CSQ	*Cistercian Studies Quarterly*
GILH	General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours
PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne
SBOp	Sancti Bernardi Opera. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses.
SCh	Sources Chrétiennes. Paris: Cerf

Works by Saint Bernard

Dil	*On Loving God*
Div	Sermons on Diverse Topics
Ep	Epistle
Gra	*Grace and Free Choice*
Hum	*The Steps of Humility and Pride*
Nat	Sermon on the Nativity of the Lord
PP	Sermon on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

QH	Sermon on the Psalm "Qui habitat"
Res	Sermon on the Resurrection
SC	Sermons on the Song of Songs
Sent	*Sentences*

"The owl of Minerva spreads its wings
only with the falling of dusk."

G. W. F. Hegel, Preface to *The Philosophy of Right*

Introduction

Coenobium or *cenobium* is a Latin word derived from the Greek *koinos bios*, meaning "the common life." It is a term used to describe a monastery of cenobites—monks or nuns who live in a permanent community under a rule and an abbot or abbess. Cenobitic life is more than cohabitation; it inevitably involves interaction. Unlike the Eastern tradition of idiorhythmic monasticism, where everyone follows their own particular grace and inspiration, cenobitic life aspires to harmony and unanimity. These are beautiful concepts, but the attempt to translate them into everyday realities is a lifelong challenge. Partly this is because the community itself is in a state of constant flux, with new arrivals and eventual departures, with different generations emerging into prominence and then fading, and, progressively, with persons of different cultures trying to find a meeting point between their own customs and those of the long-established community.

Today there are many books on monastic spirituality. Sometimes the impression is given that they are addressed to individual readers, offering techniques by which their spiritual life may be upgraded. It may seem as though living in community is marginal to the main thrust of spiritual endeavor and that the best things in the spiritual life are the outcome of one's own fidelity. Bearing one another's burdens with the utmost patience becomes no more than individual virtue—not allowing the idiocies or demands of others to distract us from our spiritual pursuit.

Perhaps there is a value in approaching matters from the viewpoint of community life, since all the valuable recommendations

that we find in these books can be summed up in a dynamic attachment to an evolving tradition and to a community as it passes through all the changes that are typical of real living in a changing world. Participating fully in community life will teach us all the virtues—maybe that is why so many monastic authors refer to community life as a school. There is a theological basis to this. The author of the Epistle to the Ephesians stretched his vocabulary to describe our true situation as Christians as co-heirs in a co-body and co-sharers in Christ's promises: *sunkleronóma*, *sússoma*, *summétocha* (Eph 3:6). Our corporate identity is not something accidental added to our personal vocation. We become most fully what God intends us to be by becoming most fully and deeply united with those around us. It is really a corollary of the Second Commandment.

After more than sixty years in a monastic community, I have decided that it may be useful to set down some of my thoughts on how the ideals of communal monastic living are expressed in practice. Inevitably what follows will reflect my experience in my own community, but the result is more expansive than that. I have had the opportunity of visiting many communities of monks and nuns throughout the world, and speaking with many different people about their experience of life in a monastery. Some of the examples I give are drawn from this wider acquaintance, though they have been leached of all identifying characteristics. Others, following the example of Saint Bernard, are no more than exaggerated caricatures, creatures of my imagination, offered to illustrate a point—though these often have a basis in reality (*ens rationis cum fundamento in re*). Any who think they recognize themselves in what I have written should take heart. They are not alone. There are others who share what they thought was unique to them.

Writing a book like this is a challenge from the point of view of exclusive language. Some see as a solution the use of the adjective *monastic* as a noun to cover both nuns and monks. I have avoided this option as reductionist. It is my observation that although nuns and monks are heirs of the same tradition and live

under the same rule, the dynamics of daily life are different, and, as far as I am concerned, *vive la différence*. I use inclusive terminology when I believe that what I say applies equally to nuns and monks. There are two reasons that I sometimes restrict myself to masculine references. One is when I am treating of the Rule of Saint Benedict and other monastic sources that have a masculine community as their immediate context. The second is when, in my experience, what I say applies only to monks; it may also apply to nuns, but I do not feel myself in a position to assert this. If the cap fits, wear it.

There are those who would prefer a more lyrical and theological exposition of the joys and meaningfulness of monastic community, perhaps in the manner of Baldwin of Forde. I have chosen not to follow this path but to plot a more down-to-earth course, recognizing the many challenges involved in community living. The reason for this is simple. One of the first hurdles the monastic candidate encounters is confronting the manifest imperfections of the different members of the community that was previously supposed to be a school of perfection.[1] I want to affirm the value and the beauty of ordinary and imperfect communities, and to make the point that they don't have to be glamorous to be worthwhile.

In fact, nobody in their right mind would ever speak of a monastic community in terms of perfection. The more traditional designation is that it is a school of love. And it is clear from the Rule of Saint Benedict that the principal means of expressing that

1. Isabelle Jonveaux, "Internet in the Monastery—Construction or Deconstruction of the Community?" *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 14 (2019): 62: "Furthermore, in an investigation I conducted into the image young Catholic people have of monastic life, community life was the most frequently mentioned positive dimension of monastic life (34.4%). Interestingly, it was also the third most frequent response (18%) to a question addressing the perceived negative dimensions of monasticism (Jonveaux, 2018b, pp. 144–146). This suggests that community life in a time of individualism is sought out by young monastics when they enter monastic life, but at the same time represents a challenge for them."

love is through forbearance; we are called to tolerate bodily and moral weaknesses with the utmost patience (RB 72.6). That faults and failures exist even in Saint Benedict's monastery is indicated by the fact that he devotes twelve chapters to dealing specifically with wrongdoing. The Statutes of the Cistercian General Chapters, over the nine centuries of its existence, indicate that there are few vicious tendencies that have not sometimes found expression in particular cases.[2] These may be exceptions to the rule, but they indicate that when the ancients spoke of monastic life as spiritual warfare, they knew what they were taking about. In warfare, nobody ever has the upper hand in every single battle.

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto: "I am human and I consider nothing human to be foreign to me." This maxim of the Roman poet Terrence can be applied to a monastic community. The celebrated *humanitas* of the Benedictine tradition does not limit itself to the desirable qualities of the human condition. The impress of sin is not absent. Quirkiness is not banished. Monks are not pious clones. The beauty of a monastic community is shown most powerfully in the tenderness it extends to those who are weak and struggling—as the example of Saint Aelred of Rievaulx illustrates.

Yes, the first close-up and in-depth encounter with a monastic community may reveal attitudes and activities that seem inconsistent with the ideals of monastic tradition, but often these do not, in the last analysis, amount to much. Yes, there are occasional and even systemic scandals, and some of these might become notorious. These must be dealt with effectively. But in the commonality of monastic communities that I have encountered, there is a vast reservoir of goodness and kindness, the result of people going about their ordinary and obscure occupations graciously and without much trumpeting.

2. See Michael Casey, "The Three Pillars: Filiation, Visitation, General Chapter," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 70 (2020): 373–403.

I am so convinced of the overarching value of monastic community that I have little hesitation in sometimes lifting the carpet to discover what is underneath. Nearly all monasteries—if they are healthy—generate one or two or more characters who may be termed "eccentric." These people are the treasures of monastic life, living signals that lifelong discipline does not crush liveliness of spirit but seems rather to encourage a certain originality—always, of course, tinged with good humor. They may well be a source of exasperation to those fussy people who want to convert monastic life into a well-run business, but to the ordinary rank and file members they add a note of cheerful resistance to an otherwise orderly life.

It has been said that one of the struggles most of us face is to convince ourselves that we are normal. One of my hopes in looking directly at some of the unmentioned aspects of monastic community alongside its sincere aspiration to goodness is to help readers come to the conclusion that the community in which they live suffers from that most unfashionable of human characteristics: normality. May they continue to do so.

1
Community as Church

Those of us who live in a monastic community quickly learn to develop a tolerance for all sorts of odd behavior. We understand that in a community, as in marriage, there is room for a lot of give and take, that we cannot hope that things will be decided always as we wish, and that what is self-evident to us is often unaccountably obscure to others. When we think about community it is usually the trivialities of daily interaction that take center stage.

As for our own behavior, mostly we follow routines, some personal, some communitarian. We don't think much about fundamental principles but try to develop ways of acting that enable us to live with a minimum of friction and without the necessity of constantly having to review options and to make definite choices. Today is pretty much like yesterday, and tomorrow will probably be no different.

Good habits are a great benefit, because they mean that we can live a moderately virtuous life without having to think too much about either the theory or the practice. There is, however, a downside to this. It is easy for settled routines to become so stale that participation in them becomes listless and perfunctory. *Totum constat de consuetudine, de dulcedine nihil*. "It is all a matter of routine; of sweetness there is nothing."[1] From time to time it may be worth-

1. Bernard of Clairvaux, SC 9.2; SBOp 1:43.

while to rekindle our interest in one or two aspects of our monastic observance where some improvement seems possible, so that our life may be just a little bit sweeter than it is at the moment.

To do this efficiently requires that we step back from the details of daily living and consider some of the more foundational truths about our monastic vocation. So, on the understanding that nothing is as practical as good theory, I would like to begin my reflections on monastic community at the level of theology, approaching the community as expressive of the mystery of Christ's church, mindful that, in the Middle Ages, a monastery was often referred to simply as an *ecclesia*. A monastic community was regarded as a particular local embodiment of the universal church.

The monastic tradition does not define a community by the works that it does.[2] This includes the liturgy, the Work of God, "to which nothing is to be preferred." Monks are not canons. The importance of the Liturgy of the Hours derives from its providing an opportunity for the realization of the primary purpose of the monastic life. Historically this has been defined as "seeking God," understood more specifically, since the time of the Desert Fathers, as growing toward an ever more conscious state of continuous prayer. Here, however, it is important to clarify that such prayer is more a matter of actualizing our relationship with God initiated at our baptism than of a specific activity, such as is promoted in meditation workshops. Prayer is not so much a task to be accomplished as a state into which we are drawn—over the course of a lifetime. Prayer primarily involves becoming more mindful of this supernatural reality. It is more than engaging in some facilitative tasks, important though these may be. Growth in mindfulness is both qualitative and quantitative—it involves an ever deeper and

2. "The real mission of Benedictine monasticism is to preserve the priority of community life, not out of self-interest but because love—that is, lived fellowship—alone is credible" (Luigi Gioia, *Saint Benedict's Wisdom: Monastic Spirituality and the Life of the Church* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020], 7). The Benedictine monastery is meant to be a sign and a prophecy of what the church is.

more intense comprehension of spiritual reality, and its gradual expansion into more minutes and more hours of more days.

Such considerations lead us in the direction of concluding that the essential function of the monastic community is to lead and support those who enter in their journey to a closer union with the God who has called them to this way of life. The dynamism of the community is first directed inwards—to animate, energize, and guide its members in their spiritual pursuit and, by its effectiveness in so doing, to equip them to participate in communal activities, in and for the community and for those whom the community serves.[3] The Cistercian monks of Tibhirine were engaged in a mission of evangelization not by preaching the Gospel from the rooftops but simply by striving to live an integral community life, bearing one another's burdens with the utmost patience, and placing no boundaries on the respect and honor shown to others.

It is the interior call of God that is the foundation and heart of monastic community—the vocation given to each member is the source from which all cohesiveness must flow. The initiative of establishing a monastic community—or of allowing it to flourish—remains with God. This is the point made at the very beginning of the Vatican document on the essential elements of religious life. Consecration is the basis of religious life. By insisting on this, the church places the first emphasis on the initiative of God and on the transforming relation to God that religious life involves. Consecration is a divine action. God calls a person who is thenceforth set apart by a dedication to a particular form of life.[4]

This is the point made repeatedly by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his 1927 dissertation, later published as *Sanctorum Communio*. Anyone can readily perceive the sociological reality of the church,

3. "It is contemplation and not the common life that seemed to the ancients to be the ultimate goal [of monasticism]. Their deepest preoccupation was not the union of men among themselves but the union of each with God" (translated from Adalbert de Vogüé, "Le monastère, Église du Christ," *Commentationes in Regulam S. Benedicti,* Studia Anselmiana 42 [Rome: Herder, 1957], 46).

4. CRIS, *The Essential Elements of Religious Life* (1983), §5.

but its underlying theological reality is not visible to our ordinary gaze; it is perceptible only to faith:

> The confusion of community romanticism with the communion of saints is extremely dangerous. The communion of saints must always be recognized as something established by God . . . . It is thus willed by God "before" all human will for community. . . . It is only through faith that the church can be grasped, and only faith can interpret the experience of communion that necessarily arises as evidence of the presence of the church. Man "experiences" only the religious community, but knows in faith that this religious community is "the church."[5]

On this understanding, there is a spiritual quality to religious community that transcends its visible functions—including those performed in the name of the church and for religious purposes. "The monastery is an expression of the mystery of the Church."[6] It shares some of the Church's visibility, but it is also a participant in its mystery.

The spiritual nature of the monastic community is indicated by the traditional ritual of solemn profession.[7] This contains two elements. The first is the taking or making of vows by which the candidates dedicate themselves to God by a specific act of commitment to the monastic way of life, promising a lifelong acceptance of its observance. This is complemented by a second element: the rite of consecration or blessing, by which the celebrant, in the name of the church, consecrates the newly professed. The former element

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, trans. R. Gregor Smith (London: Collins, 1963), 195–97.

6. Constitutions and Statutes OCSO, 3.4.

7. See Michael Casey, "Sacramentality and Monastic Consecration," *Word & Spirit: A Monastic Review* 18 (1998): 27–48. Reprinted in Michael Casey, *An Unexciting Life: Reflections on Benedictine Spirituality* (Petersham, MA: St Bede's Publications, 2005), 263–85.

by which persons offer themselves is termed "active consecration," the latter is regarded as "passive consecration." As the church is constituted by persons who have been baptized, the monastic community is constituted by persons who have received, in addition to their baptism, monastic consecration. Monks and nuns are set apart and endowed with a sacred character. It is a convocation. All alike have been called by God—otherwise their association with the community will always be fraught by difficulties. This is the point of which Saint Bernard reminds his community:

> This community is made up not of the wicked but of saints, religious men, those who are full of grace and worthy of blessing. You come together to hear the word of God, you gather to sing praise, to pray, to offer adoration. This is a consecrated assembly, pleasing to God and familiar with the angels. Therefore, brothers, stand fast in reverence, stand with care and devotion of mind, especially in the place of prayer and in this school of Christ where the Spirit is heard (*auditorium spirituali*).[8]

The essential holiness of the community means that the monastery becomes a "cloistral paradise"—it is the ante-chamber of heaven and, in an imaginative aside, Bernard notes that it is cohabited by angels:

> Walk cautiously, since there are angels everywhere: according to the commandment given them, they are in all your ways. In whatever room you enter, in whatever corner you sit, have a reverence for your angel.[9]

To explore the nature of a particular religious community, we need to be open to listening to the ongoing vocation stories of its members—these embody the mandate given to the community.

8. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon for St John the Baptist*, 1; SBOp 5:176.
9. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on Psalm 90,* 12.6; SBOp 4:460.

Such stories are more than narratives about the past. There is a certain plasticity about vocation that allows it, while retaining the memory of an initial experience, continually to reframe itself in terms of the present. As a result, conscientious contributions to community discussions are not merely intellectual judgments, but attempts to formulate a response to an issue in terms of one's personal sense of call, often described as "God's will." In discerning between options, I try to gauge which of them corresponds most closely to what I sense is the ongoing guidance of this inner voice. Instead of defining a monastic community by the activities by which, in years past, it formulated its identity, there needs to be an attentive listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches today, through the experience of those who have been graced to commit themselves to this way of life.

Vocation is not just a trigger that motivates a person to enter a community. It is a lifelong indicator of the way ahead. Without this inward compass, people will be floundering all their lives. Ancient monastic tradition manifests an awareness of the danger of giving candidates a too-rapid entry into the community—obstacles were placed in their paths so that they would be forced to scrutinize their motives and thereby attain a greater purity of intention. By eliminating worldly and unworthy ambitions, it was hoped that a greater reliance might be placed on the work of grace operative in the experience of vocation. A similar conclusion might be drawn about admitting candidates to solemn profession or to ordination—advancing too quickly may inhibit genuine discernment and may be one of the causes that many leave a year or two afterwards. Often candidates are so anxious to take the next step that they are reluctant to take time for a deeper discernment. Such a delay is time well spent.

This is, no doubt, why Saint Benedict greets a priest aspiring to join the community with the words Jesus addressed to Judas: "Friend, for what purpose have you come?" (RB 60.3). Candidates are expected to possess a degree of spiritual literacy that will enable them to discern by what spirit they are being led. The com-

munity also needs continually to ask itself a similar question, seeking answers not in juridical documents but in the hearts and consciences of its members.

Saint Benedict makes the point that God *often* reveals things to the younger and newly arrived members of a community that are unrecognized by the established group of seniors (RB 3.3). The same attention needs also to be paid to visiting monks who are not part of the local community (RB 61.4). Outsiders often see more clearly what inspires a group than those immured in habitual practices. As do those who, for one reason or another, find themselves on the margins of the community. Those caught up in the administration of the community often choose not to see the ambiguities and inconsistencies evidenced in its day-to-day behavior. This reluctance to intervene is a serious abrogation of pastoral responsibility, and it is probably more frequently found in men's communities.[10]

The principle is that the community exists to service the vocations of those who are its members. This obviously applies to newcomers, but it is also true of those who have spent many years in the community. It is, perhaps, less recognized that there is a corresponding responsibility laid on those to whom the governance of a community is entrusted. They need to monitor the deep aspirations of all, and seek to respond appropriately. The

10. "The Abbesses tend to be very personal in their relationship to their nuns. . . . They want to know everything that goes on in their houses and to be consulted about all arrangements. . . . The Abbots on the whole seem to be less personal and more distant from their monks. . . . The Abbots don't expect to know everything that is going on in the house and sometimes they are woefully ignorant of how the monks are spending their time" (Ambrose Southey, *Minutes of the General Chapter O.C.S.O: Feminine Branch* [El Escorial, 1985], Appendix I: "Conferences of the Abbot General," [6]–[7]). Reportedly, Abbot Maximillian Heim of the large abbey of Heiligenkreuz in Austria consults his monastery's webpage every day to find out what is happening in the house. See Isabelle Jonveaux, "Internet in the Monastery—Construction or Deconstruction of the Community?" *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 14 (2019): 65.

community exists for the sake of its members and not the other way around. No matter how laudable or necessary its social goals, the spiritual good of its members always has priority. Pope Francis writes, "Growth in holiness is a journey in community."[11] The converse should also be true: growth in community is also growth in holiness.

Seeing the monastic community primarily in terms of its being an image of the universal church leads to its identifying—aspirationally, at least—with the primitive community portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. We find this linkage at many points in monastic tradition. Basilius Steidle asserts, "The first Church of Jerusalem was the model that Pachomius (+345), Basil (+379), Augustine (+430), and Benedict (+547) never lost sight of while writing their rules."[12] Although he gives only a qualified assent to this suggestion, Adalbert de Vogüé adds that the thesis of the monastery as church "offers to the theologian the best definition of the monastic community, a holy society that is exclusively turned towards God, a society of persons given to one another in love."[13]

Here it is necessary to offer a clarification. A monastery is not a church in the same sense that a diocese under a bishop may be considered a local church. This is, perhaps, more obvious regarding priestless communities. For its sacramental life every monastery remains dependent upon the broader ecclesial institution. The monastic community remains always a lay grouping, even though some of its members may receive priesthood from the bishop, and abbots may trot around wearing miters and wielding croziers. More loosely, the community may be seen as an embodiment of the church in so far as it is an intentional gathering of the faithful,

11. *Gaudete et exultate* §141.

12. Basilius Steidle, *The Rule of Saint Benedict with an Introduction, a New Translation of the Rule and a Commentary, All Reviewed in the Light of an Earlier Monasticism*, trans. Urban J. Schnitzhofer (Canon City, CO: Holy Cross Abbey, 1967), 9.

13. Vogüé, "Le monastère," 27.

living in accordance with the gospels and tending to the eternal life that they proclaim. The internal dynamic of such a community is marked by unity in faith and love and practice. It is a communion of disciples. Saint John Cassian saw monasticism not as being a distinct part of the church, or a miniature church in itself, but as a particular embodiment of the church, especially in its aspect of seeking the perfection of charity in holiness of life.[14]

There is a certain utility in insisting on the ecclesial character of the monastic community, since it reduces the possibility that, in some way, the community is understood as the master of its own destiny—free to decide in what direction it should travel and by what means its goal may be realized. The monastic community derives its origin from the call of God; this means that its spiritual purposes have priority over any temporal good works in which it may find practical expression of its discipleship. This was a point made by Cardinal Braz de Aviz at the Abbots' Congress in 2012: sometimes "we must have the courage to diminish our works to save our charism."

Saint Augustine uses the texts from Acts to support an appeal to his companions living a quasi-monastic life in the bishop's house to renounce private ownership.[15] He insists that it is by the renunciation of goods that the group will be able to become like the community in Acts, being of one heart and one mind. The same connection had been made at the beginning of his Rule, written about 397:

> Before all else, live together in harmony (*unanimes*), being of one mind and one heart on the way to God. For is it not for this reason that you have come to live together? Among you there can be no question of personal property. . . . For this is what you read in the Acts of the Apostles: Everything

14. See Adalbert de Vogüé, "Monachisme et Église dans la pensée de Cassien," in *Théologie de la vie monastique* (Paris: Aubier, 1961), 213–40.

15. *Sermons* 355–56, dated 425–426; PL 39:1568–81.

> they owned was held in common, and each received whatever he had need of.[16]

Saint Bernard makes the same linkage between the renunciation of private ownership and unity of heart:

> The monastic order was the first order in the Church; it was out of this that the Church developed. In all the earth there was nothing more like the angelic orders, nothing closer to the heavenly Jerusalem, our mother, because of the beauty of its chastity and the fervor of its love. The apostles were its moderators, and its members were those whom Paul often calls "the saints." It was their practice to keep nothing as private property, for, as it is written, "distribution was made to each according to 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 says, "as each had need": this means with regard to clothing something to cover nakedness and keep out the cold. . . . I don't imagine they would have cared much about the value and color of their clothes. I don't think they would have bothered much about them at all. They were far too busy with their efforts to live in harmony, attached to one another and advancing in virtue. So it is said that "the company of believers was of one heart and one soul."[17]

Inequitable distribution of monastic resources is a fundamental impediment to unity of heart. It is not only that some receive more goods than others. Often the possession of more personal items or ones of higher quality indicates that the owner belongs to the

16. *The Rule of Augustine,* 1.2–3, trans. Raymond Canning (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), 11–12.

17. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia*, 24, trans. Michael Casey, CF 1 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 61; SBOp 3:101.

elite in the community, one of a group of insiders clustered around a superior who is a cut above the common herd.

As a holy community, the monastery is pledged to pursue unity of heart and mind. It is not just a sociological unit or an intentional grouping. Quite the opposite: its members will often be drawn from different countries and cultures, from different social classes and educational levels, and from different backgrounds. "There is to be no favoritism, since whether we are slaves or free, we are all one in Christ, and under the one Lord we all take upon ourselves the same service" (RB 2.20).

Saint Aelred of Rievaulx saw the harmonious cohabitation of vastly different brothers as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the lion and the lamb living together in peace:

> Consider how God has gathered you together in this place, from vastly different regions and from different lifestyles. One of you, when he was in the world, was like a lion, who despised others and thought himself better than them because of his pride and riches. Another was like a wolf, who lived from robbery, whose only interest was how to steal the property of others. A leopard is an animal marked by variety: such were some of you [who lived] by your wits, through deception and fraud. Furthermore, there were many in this community who were foul because of their sexual sins. Such as these were like goats—because goats are foul animals. There were some of you who lived innocent lives when you were in the world; they may well be compared to lambs. There were others who were like sheep because you lived a simple life. Look now, brothers, and see with how much concord and peace God has gathered all these into one common life. Here the wolf lives with the lamb; he eats and drinks with the lamb and does him no harm, but loves him greatly.[18]

18. Aelred of Rievaulx, Sermon 1.33–34; CCCM 2a:10–11.

Baldwin of Forde went one better. He understood the common life as a participation in the shared life of the Blessed Trinity. In his sermon on the common life (*De vita communi*), he understands monastic community as drawing its origins from the apostles and, beyond them, from the angels, and beyond them from the very being of God:

> It is by no slight or mean or ordinary authority that the institution of the common life is supported and sustained. The primitive church was built on the common life, and the infancy of the new-born church began with the common life. It is from the apostles themselves that the common life has received its form and expression, its title of honor, the privilege of its high position, the testimony of its authority, the protection which defends it, and the foundation of its hope. . . .[19]
>
> The common life was instituted by celestial models: it was brought down from heaven and adopted by us from the heavenly way of life of the holy angels. . . .[20]
>
> The common life, then, is a sort of radiance from the eternal light, a sort of emanation from the eternal life, a sort of effluence from the everlasting fountain from which flow living waters, springing up into eternal life. God is life. The holy and indivisible Trinity is one life. The Father is not one life, the Son another, and the Holy Spirit a third, but these three are one life. Just as they have one common essence and one common nature, so they have one common life.[21]

19. Baldwin of Forde, *Sermo de vita communi* 1; trans. David N. Bell, *Spiritual Tractates II,* CF 41 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 156; CCCM 99:229.

20. Baldwin, *Sermo de vita communi* 3; CF 41:157; CCCM 99:229.

21. Baldwin, *Sermo de vita communi* 4–5; CF 41:157–58; CCCM 99:229–30.

Baldwin does not remain in the clouds permanently—he sees the high character of the common life as carrying with it corresponding obligations. Those who embrace this manner of living are bound vigorously to pursue unity, to reflect in some earthly manner the unity of the Trinity. This is to be accomplished, above all, by the rejection of the practice of private ownership:

> This is the law of the common life: unity of spirit in the charity of God, the bond of peace in the mutual and unfailing charity of all the brethren, the sharing of all good that should be shared, and the total rejection of any idea of personal ownership in the way of life of holy religion (*sanctae religionis propositum*).[22]

Seeing the monastic community as an ecclesial reality provides a mandate for three aspects of the life of the community:

a. An insistence on the importance of the sacred liturgy: "nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God."

b. The enshrining of the Scriptures as the basis of the community's shared beliefs and values, and the commitment to living a Gospel lifestyle.

c. Giving priority to the spiritual flourishing of the members of the community as the basis of any external activity in which they are involved.

Let us examine each of these areas in a little more detail.

a. The monastery as church will be characterized by good liturgy. "Sharing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together fosters fraternity and makes us a holy and missionary community."[23] In particular, an ecclesial community celebrates the Eucharist. This

22. Baldwin, *Sermo de vita communi* 57; CF 41:177; CCCM 99:243.

23. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*, §142.

is more than a matter of attending Mass. It is important that the members of the community are able to own what they celebrate as expressive of their life and aspirations. No doubt Saint Benedict's chapter on priests (RB 62) can be read in this context.[24]

We all know from experience that good liturgy requires more than smoothness of ceremonial. It demands a substantial investment of time and resources if it is to be kept fresh and relevant to the changing situation of the community. In the case of some of those entering the community, basic catechesis may be necessary, as well as a training in ritual. But good liturgy involves more than professional performance; it requires a certain receptivity among the participants. It presupposes the possibility of living a recollected and reflective life, buttressed by a degree of silence and the opportunity for *lectio divina*. For a community that is overworked or otherwise deprived of leisure, the liturgy will become an im-

24. A problem arises with women's communities who have to rely on a roster of visiting priests for their celebration. There are four possible solutions to this. a) The most obvious one is to have some members of their community ordained. The Vatican regards it as dangerous even to think about such an option. b) The second is to move toward unisex communities in which priesthood would be seen as a ministry within the community, not necessarily associated with governance. I have raised the possibility of ungendered communities in "Towards the Cistercian Millennium," *Tjurunga* 54 (1998): 57–67, and in "Thoughts on Monasticism's Possible Futures," in Patrick Hart, ed., *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century: Where Do We Go From Here?* MW 8 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 23–42. Such an arrangement is not unknown in history. c) The third option is for a live-in chaplain to become almost a member of the community for all practical purposes, except for juridical status. d) Finally, to make the most of present possibilities by the careful choice of celebrants and the diligent cultivation of their interface with the community. See Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses, *Of Time Made Holy: A Statement on the Liturgy of the Hours in the Lives of American Benedictine Sisters* (Madison, WI, 1978), §40: "The integration of the Eucharistic celebration within the liturgical life and experiences of the community is an essential element of Benedictine Christological spirituality. The selection of ordained celebrants and community liturgists who will make joint efforts to achieve this ideal is extremely important."

position—one more task to be done or a burden to be endured—and energy expenditure will be kept at a minimum. Sometimes one comes across a community where the liturgy has been dead for decades, its forms frozen and meaningless, its books tattered, and its chanting ragged. Absences and late-coming are rampant, because nobody really wants to be at the liturgy; there are many alternative occupations that are more useful and more gratifying. Such a community has lost one of its identifying characteristics, and it is no surprise that morale is low and recruitment feeble.

Monastic liturgy is typically marked by *gravitas*. Its keynotes are simplicity and sobriety.[25] It purposely lacks both the fervid enthusiasm of youth liturgies and the pretentious pomp of pontifical performances. This is because it is expressive of a fundamentally contemplative life and is designed to support and sustain those attitudes that contribute to an avowedly prayerful existence. As a community matures, and as the average age of its members increases, there will also be a noticeable preference for quieter celebrations in which variety and much-speaking are less important. Like the monks and nuns themselves, the liturgy is unobtrusively becoming more apophatic.

b. The monastery as church will take the Gospel as its guide (RB Prol. 21), understanding that the Scriptures are the most effective norm for human life (RB 73.3). This involves a double exposure to the Scriptures. The Word of God must be proclaimed to the community as the necessary soul that complements and animates the body of observances. Indeed, Saint Benedict mandates that the abbot should not teach, establish as policy, or command anything outside what the Lord has enjoined (RB 2.4: *nihil **extra** praeceptum Domini*). It is in response to the daily challenge of Scripture that possibility arises of infusing otherwise banal actions with authentic spiritual content. The Word of God heard

25. See Michael Casey, "Monasticism and Liturgy," *Tjurunga* 91 (2018): 5–19.

in community needs to be buttressed by personal *lectio divina*—long considered as the vibrant heart of Benedictine *conversatio*. For the Gospel to be translated into action there needs also to be an environment that is conducive to reflection. The words of the sacred text do not immediately translate into practical directives; they need to be pondered, ruminated, assimilated.

c. The monastery as church will have at the forefront of its concerns the spiritual flourishing of each of its members.[26] The work and prayer of monks and nuns is effective only to the extent that these activities flow from an undivided heart so that there is no impedance standing between what they are and what they do. The purity of heart that the ancient monks sought with so much zeal permits the action of God to flow through the person, unhindered by self-will, arrogance, or ambition. Monasteries should be places where people grow spiritually. This demands personalized pastoral care: the abbot is reminded that his governance should be at the service of the different characters found in the community (RB 2.31: *multorum servire moribus*) and not some species of tyranny (RB 27.6).[27] The visible mission of the community—whatever that may be—derives from the fact that its members have been called by God; it is only by cultivating an ongoing sensitivity to that call that persons and their activities flourish.

In giving emphasis to the spiritual and ecclesial character of monastic community we hope to provide a prism through which

26. "Because religious community is a *Schola amoris* which helps one grow in love for God and for one's brothers and sisters, it is also a place for human growth" (CICLSAL, *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor [Fraternal Life in Community]*: [1994], §35).

27. On this see Dysmas de Lassus, *Risques et dérives de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Cerf, 2020).

we may discuss the more practical aspects of living together in community. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the day-to-day concerns of community life and activity so that the fundamental purpose of pursuing our vocation fades from active view. In any discussion, we need to keep in mind the primary source of our identity as the integrating principle of all we do. This is stated quite clearly in a recent document from the Vatican:

> At the basis of every journey, we find it important to underline the need for consecrated men and women to have a new aspiration for holiness, which is unthinkable without a jolt of renewed passion for the Gospel at the service of the Kingdom. We are moved to this journey by the Spirit of the Risen One who continues to speak to the Church through his inspirations.[28]

Perhaps we need to assess situations and challenges according to a different and distinctive scale of values.

It is the sacred character of the monastic community that is its most distinctive feature. Its role as a visible sign of the church is to witness to the presence of the risen Christ to an indifferent world and to be a sign of hope to a generation that sometimes seems to be fading into despair. By the attractiveness of their fully realized humanity monks and nuns can be lights on a hilltop, trailblazers for all who wish to follow Christ, who is our road to eternal life.

But a word of warning. A monastic community is not Utopia. Every community that I have ever known embraces not only holy and well-integrated people; there is room for a few laggards as well. Every spiritual journey includes stages of regression during which a person's worst features emerge, whether these be psychological, moral, or spiritual. Like the universal Church, we are

28. CICLSAL, *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II* (2017), §10.

a community of those blighted by sin. This is why Saint Benedict calls upon us to expect to put up with both bodily and moral weaknesses in those around us (RB 72.5). This patience is our principal means of sharing in the paschal mystery (RB Prol. 50). Whatever image our public relations people try to market, the monastic community is always marked with the sign of the cross, willingly embraced as the only path that leads to eternal life.