

The Meaning and Purpose of this Benedictine Moment

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As I contemplate the path of Benedictine monasticism in coming years, I recall two wonderful stories from the Desert monks of the fourth century. The first is a story about Abba Agathon:

Going to town one day to sell some small articles, Abba Agathon met a cripple on the roadside, who asked him to carry him to town. He did so. When they arrived, the cripple said, "Put me down where you sell your goods." He did so. When Abba Agathon had sold an article, the cripple said, "Buy me a cake." He did so. Every time he sold something, the cripple would ask him to buy something else. He did so. When he had sold everything, the cripple said, "Would you carry me back and put me down where you found me?" He did so. Then the cripple said, "Agathon, you are filled with divine blessings in heaven and on earth." Raising his eyes, Agathon saw no man; it was the angel of the Lord.

I visualize monastics of the twenty-first century in the person of Abba Agathon, ready to be used for the good of the world, represented by the crippled beggar (who is really Christ). We will have many calls on us because of the gift we have received from God. We will not always be able to evaluate the requests thoroughly, but except in obviously inappropriate situations we will try to answer them for the good of the Church and the world. We will have to listen very deeply because those who request, even those in

authority in the Church, will not always know what they are asking. We will learn to listen then, as now, only through prayer.

The second story is about Abba Joseph, who was asked about prayer:

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame."

In the past century and a half, the Church needed us to aid its missionary work in the building years. We have already begun our work for the coming time, which will be to help people enter deeply into the mystery of God, especially through contemplative prayer. We must pray to become flame so that we may warm and illuminate our brothers and sisters, and help them to become flame.

At the present time, Benedictine monasticism is still in the wake of the renewal of Vatican II. The mandate to return to the sources has inaugurated a very fruitful time for us. Probably there has been more widespread search into the history and meaning of monasticism in the past thirty years than at any other time. We have learned much and are still learning.

This era was preceded by the final stage of the nineteenth-century European monastic revival, which had come out of the ashes of the French Revolution and secularization movements, and was born in the Romantic age. It was translated to this hemisphere and adapted to the local cultures. Most of our communities and many of us were part of that. The mixture of influences and theories animating that revival caused monastic life in this hemisphere in some cases to grow like Topsy. Especially in the United States, Benedictines were parochialized like other religious orders. That has been our recent point of departure.

Before all of that, a movement that had nothing particularly to do with monasticism has had a pervasive influence on monasticism up to the present time. This was the Enlightenment, the Age of

Reason, the exaltation of the intellect. This movement has done much good and should not be made a whipping post for all current problems. But we must say that because of the Enlightenment it is very hard for us to understand key aspects of monastic spirituality from the earlier ages, especially *lectio divina* and prayer. That is changing and will have to change for the coming age.

Western civilization is now in a period of integrating emotion and intellect, feelings and reason, right brain and left brain. Monasticism has already reaped much from this movement and in this area is beginning to contribute much to Western spirituality. Simply put, I believe that in the West the enlightenment of the intellect of the eighteenth century is finally being followed in spirituality by an enlightenment of the heart for the twenty-first century, in which monastics will have an important role to play.

Monasticism in Our World

Benedictine monasticism is still a curiosity in the world, even in the Church, and even in various degrees for other religious orders. A story Abbot Patrick Barry tells is indicative. He was out walking at Ampleforth when a group of tourists approached him and asked if this was really an Abbey. He said, yes it is. Well, they asked, where are the ruins?

Recently this attitude has been changing, at least to the extent that monasticism, though still a curiosity, is more and more an attractive curiosity because of a growing hunger for a deeper life. Seekers of transcendence are coming from various religious faiths and from no identified faith. There is increased interest in retreats, silence, prayer, the spiritual journey, books about monasteries and Benedictine spirituality. More and more people are affiliating as oblates. Monasteries have historically served an ecumenical role and this is growing again today. Monasteries are by nature non-threatening environments, where questioners and seekers of all kinds, believers and non-believers, can come without making a statement about themselves or revealing their own faith stance.

This interest is true no less of Catholics than others, but there is also confusion in the Church. Diocesan structures do not know where monasticism fits, especially now that the parochial work

force is drying up. This is true of all religious life as such. Recently the Dominicans were invited out of the Atlanta archdiocese because there was no immediate need for them in diocesan ministries. There was no recognition of the gift of their life and charism for the Church independent of covering assignments. Some, of course, do understand. The late Bishop Albert L. Fletcher of my own Diocese of Little Rock invited the Discalced Carmelite Sisters to found a cloistered monastery in 1950 for the benefit of their life of prayer to the local church, but had to weather complaints about their “non-productivity” in the ministry. The laity understands sisters and priests as parochial workers, but not brothers, even the Christian Brothers. Why don’t they go all the way and get ordained?

Similarly, contemporary Church authority has a hard time categorizing an institution from the early Church within the current structure. In men’s monasteries, the restriction of abbatial leadership to the ordained (because of more recent canonical norms) is already hampering many smaller communities and some larger ones, as since Vatican II more and more of the potential leaders are not being ordained.

Relating to Other Orders

There are many different patterns in the relationship of monasticism to other religious orders. We have generally had little structural relationship with other religious because the organization in provinces is so different from a loose collection of autonomous monasteries. The clarification of our identity mandated by Vatican II may be differentiating us in a substantial way even more, but I think something is percolating which will bring us into a new relationship in the years ahead. I want to share with you my own experience in this area since becoming abbot, which possibly sheds an interesting light on a new role the Church may be asking of us.

Immediately on becoming abbot in 1989 I began receiving mailings from the Conference of Major Superiors of Men. I had heard that though CMSM had been founded with strong Benedictine involvement (and the first president had been an abbot), participation by Benedictines was by now minimal. (It is my impression that

women Benedictines, at least in the U.S., have been more active in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious [LCWR].) I have been told that one reason for the abbots' absence was that at a particular juncture in the early 1970s it became the common wisdom to blame monastic influences for the problems in active orders. Abbots got tired of hearing this. Whether or not this was a factor, what I feel has been far more influential on the abbots' absence, then and now, is that CMSM is designed for active orders organized in the provincial system, with programs that offer little that is particularly helpful to monastic superiors. We monastics have our own workshops and meetings; besides, the dues and the costs of meetings are high, and they are extras for our already strained budgets.

One major exception among the abbots in 1989 was Abbot James Jones of Conception, who was on CMSM's national board. At his urging, I agreed to show some interest, and I went in 1992 to a national meeting in San Antonio. I was surprised by the warmth and special attention with which I was greeted.

Apparently on the strength of that participation, several months later I was invited to be a representative at an Inter-American Assembly of Religious in Santo Domingo, where again I was treated with the utmost attentiveness. I was struck that out of all the delegates representing religious life in the western hemisphere, forty from Canada, fifty from the U.S., and forty-five from Latin America, only two of us, Sister Cecilia Dwyer of Bristow and myself, represented any monastic order. (Archbishop Rembert Weakland was also there, but as a speaker). There were no Benedictines from Canada and all of Latin America, and no Cistercians, Camaldolese, or Carmelites, male or female, from the whole hemisphere. But it became fairly clear to me that we were not so much excluded as unavailable. A major meeting of religious life was convoked for our hemisphere, and monastics were almost unrepresented. This was not potentially so much a loss to monasticism as to the Church and to the future of religious life as a whole in this part of the world.

Several months later I received another call from CMSM: Would I be a member of the Justice and Peace Committee? This floored me, since though justice and peace are high on my list, I have no special visibility in that arena. I mentioned this and was

told that CMSM was trying actively to incorporate the contemplative or monastic dimension into its work, and this committee was by definition the most activist. All they wanted me there for was as a monastic presence, to participate in whatever way I could.

All this has made a big impression on me, and I take it as a sign of new possibilities for U.S. religious life in the immediate future. I am being invited not because of some personal achievement or record, but because I represent monastic life and I am available. This pattern has continued. I was asked to be on the planning committee for the 1998 joint meeting of CMSM and LCWR representing the monastic dimension and eventually to give presentations on contemplative prayer when a speaker could not be found from the more strictly contemplative orders. The new Council for the Study of Religious Life has asked me to be part of their program committee for the same reason, as a representative of the monastic dimension of religious life.

Leaders of the other orders have told me that they are aware of the common monastic roots of religious life and of the need to reawaken that dimension in their own congregations, but they need to look to monastics for help. I think we should listen carefully to discern if this is our call, not so much to help ourselves and our own in-house concerns—because the offerings of CMSM and LCWR are oriented to provincialate issues—but as a critical service of the Church in a time of reorganization and renewal of religious life. We have something that the larger world of religious life is asking us to share. I honestly do not know how best to share monasticism with other religious beyond being present and responding to the possibilities of the relationship under the Spirit's inspiration. As Jesus taught, "The gift you have received, give as a gift" (Matthew 10:8). I feel certain that as we share the gift of our life with other religious in a way we cannot clearly foresee, we will receive from them a gift we cannot yet expect.

Icon of Transfiguration

In 1996 Pope John Paul II issued *Vita Consecrata*, an apostolic exhortation meant to be the guiding document on religious life for some years. Without fanfare, the pope moved away from the

traditional biblical image for the religious life, the rich young man of the Synoptic Gospels (which he had adopted for his earlier reflection on the religious life in *Redemptionis Donum*, in 1984). Instead he used another pivotal Synoptic scene, the Transfiguration, calling attention to the “icon of the transfigured Christ.”

The rich young man story has never been satisfactory as an image for the religious life, because the primary challenge of the story is applicable to all Christians, not just religious: leave everything and follow Christ. The early Church saw it that way, to judge from Clement of Alexandria’s famous sermon, in which the rich man who will be saved is anyone who responds to the call of Christ by repentance. The icon of the Transfiguration is much better because at the same time it protects the unity of the Christian vocation in all its manifestations and also allows for the uniqueness of the religious vocation. For our interest here, it also makes an important connection with the monastic tradition.

On one hand, *Vita Consecrata* reflects Vatican II’s doctrine of the universal call to holiness:

All those reborn in Christ are called to live out with the strength which is the Spirit’s gift the chastity appropriate to their state in life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions: for all are called to holiness which consists in the perfection of love. (30)

But the document also recognizes a uniqueness to the vocation to the religious or consecrated life:

All are equally called to follow Christ, to discover in him the ultimate meaning of their lives. . . . But those who are called to the consecrated life have a special experience of the light which shines forth from the incarnate Word. (VC 15)

The Pope locates vocation in the special religious experience of those called to the consecrated life. “Religious experience” rather than “call” becomes the common denominator for all

radical Christian vocations, including but not only the religious life. The desire to follow Christ more closely springs from an experience of God evoking a response that leads by God's design to various expressions: the consecrated life, lay single life, Christian marriage, priesthood or other ministry. Not all Christians respond to these experiences, but for those who do, this is the real call to commit radically to the kingdom.

The best translation of the eunuch passage in Matthew 19, which is a source for the vocation to consecrated chastity and therefore for religious life, is that some followers of Christ become eunuchs not "*for the sake of the kingdom*" (that is, with a purpose in mind) but "*because of the kingdom*" (that is, being overwhelmed by an experience of the kingdom that drives them to live in a way they had not planned on). Their lives explode and no longer fit into customary patterns. The uniqueness of this vocation within the Christian vocation is expressed by the profession of vows, in which the personal and initially private response to the experience of the kingdom is brought into public view for the sake of Church and world:

This profession . . . makes them a kind of sign and prophetic statement for their community and for the world; consequently they can echo in a particular way the ecstatic words spoken by Peter: "Lord, it is well that we are here . . ." How good for us to be with you, to devote ourselves to you, to make you the one focus of our lives! (VC 15)

They are dedicated to Christ "professionally"—by public profession—and are no longer completely private figures in the Church, even though the essence of their profession may be lived secretly.

The Transfiguration is particularly appropriate as the icon for a radical and transforming response to God's call because it was a momentous event for the three apostles, but even more because it is treated as a key religious event in Jesus' own life. It is presented as the occasion when Jesus comprehended fully the cost and the glory of his mission and embraced it. Luke's account makes this especially graphic. The inner experience of Jesus affects his

countenance: "While he was praying, his face changed in *appearance* and his clothes became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29).

At his baptism, the voice from heaven told Jesus, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). But after Jesus has realized the true nature and the cost of his vocation and embraced it, the voice speaks to the disciples: "This is my chosen Son; listen to him" (9:35). As the result of this definitive vocation experience, Jesus can be presented as the teacher of salvation.

The icon of the Transfiguration is an image both of the response to divine vocation and of transformation in the presence of God. It connects with the experience of Moses on Sinai.

As Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the commandments in his hands, he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while he conversed with the Lord. (Exodus 34:29)

St. Paul makes this experience of Moses the pattern of all who fix their gaze on God:

All of us, gazing with unveiled faces on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed from glory to glory as from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

The icon of the Transfiguration as an image for the consecrated life, as I mentioned earlier, has a particular resonance for those of us in the monastic tradition. In Greek Orthodox monasticism, Tabor has been a symbol of the hesychastic search for God under the rubric of "prayer of the heart." Unlike some more intellectual strains which came west, the immediate aim of this prayer (especially by repetition of the name of Jesus) is to offer the heart directly to God. The struggle is more with inordinate desires than with distracting thoughts. The fruit of this prayer is the "Taboric light," the same that filled Jesus during his transfiguration.

Though it has roots in the teaching of the Desert monks, the great champion of this spirituality was Gregory Palamas, a Mount Athos monk and then archbishop of Thessalonica in the fourteenth

century. Mysticism always leads one on a rocky road. His teaching was condemned in 1342, then approved five years later; ultimately it received the sanction of his canonization in 1368. Typical of the struggles that often accompany the debate about Taboric prayer was the nickname given to Gregory's followers by his enemies: *omphalopsychoi*, "those who have their souls in their navels."

Prayer

We have all been touched, moved, and changed personally by a transfiguration experience. That profound experience on the mountaintop once swept us off our feet and impelled us to this vocation and our monastic way of life. However, we know the statistics on the religious and priests who have left this calling and turned to other ways of life. Each of us knows many stories of those who have made that decision, and we know that often it was the right decision. But we must also realize that sometimes the icon of the transfiguration was allowed to dim and die in the lives of those validly called and initially committed.

We also know religious who, though they have remained in their communities, have ceased to live out of the experience that inspired their commitment. They are distinguished by the attitudes identified already by Cassian as the great enemies of the spiritual life, the passions of anger and sadness. These are tragic figures who have forgotten that the source of their joy is within them and have doomed themselves to casting about futilely for meaning and satisfaction. Sadly they have somehow lost contact with the wellspring of their vocation.

The eminent theologian Karl Rahner produced volumes and volumes of commentary on God, redemption, the life of grace. Scattered throughout the tomes of long and often convoluted sentences are short and clear statements recognized as seminal insights that continue to be much quoted. One of those statements bears on our subject here: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all."¹ By mysticism, Rahner explains, he does not mean some esoteric phenomenon but "a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence." He goes on to comment that the source of spiritual conviction

comes not from theology but from the personal experience of God. This statement, made late in Rahner's career, is similar to the comment reported of Thomas Aquinas at the end of his life about his volumes of theology being so much straw.

If monasticism is to mean anything and be of any value in the coming age, it will be within this context of the living experience of God. I think we could paraphrase Rahner to say "Monastics will be rooted in contemplative prayer or they will not exist at all." What is different about this from the present or the recent past? The difference is not that true monastics have not failed to be people of contemplative prayer up to now, in the sense of a vibrant personal relationship with God beyond words. But wherever monasticism is enmeshed in a modern or postmodern culture of mechanization, instant communication, and unlimited information (in other words, for practically all our monasteries), the external structures and rhythm no longer lead naturally to a contemplative existence, as they could in a more enclosed, less invaded environment where the main work rhythm was manual agriculture. A deep experience of God, constantly renewed, will be necessary to offset the threats to faith from a defiantly secular and even atheistic culture. What is already true today will continue to be the norm in the future: only monastics committed to an intense personal prayer life beyond the communal structures will find the joy and transformation that this life offers.

A desert elder compared the pursuit of God to a dog with the taste of the hare in its mouth: "A monk should observe the dogs on the hunt for hares. Only the one who has seen the hare chases it, while the others that have seen the dog run after him, but only so long as they don't get tired." Only the dog that has seen the hare will keep up the long chase while the hare is out of sight. He will be stopped "neither by chasms, forests, nor thickets, neither by scratching, thorns, or wounds." A monastic may go to choir because it is a community observance. But this alone will not sustain one through the thicket of daily life. Only daily focus on the Lord in personal prayer, constant "sighting of the hare," will provide the necessary strength.

This may sound self-evident but it is not. Speaking from my own experience, when I entered the monastery I expected the

rhythm of prayer and work, scheduled community prayer and work done in obedience, to carry me to happiness and sainthood. The “prayer” in the Benedictine motto *ora et labora* was understood to be the Liturgy of the Hours. There was also “mental prayer,” which was hard to distinguish from discursive meditation. The recovery of *lectio divina* as the third “I”—liturgy, labor, *lectio*—is a recent phenomenon, and even this has often been understood more in the direction of study than of personal prayer. We have lived with the unspoken expectation that one’s personal prayer life would emerge naturally within the system. We have not seen a focus on training in contemplative prayer, under whatever form or method, as critical to monastic formation and monastic life. But it will be essential from now on.

For monasticism is and always will be a life of prayer, but not in the limited sense common in our culture, where a life of prayer is comprehensible only as a chain of prayer actions of the mind, sometimes involving the body. One is “prayerful” in intervals; and the shorter the intervals the more prayerful you are. Monasticism bears witness to a different understanding of the spiritual world—to the possibility of being immersed continually in the mystery of God, living out of the transforming experience of God that changes everything.

To “pray always” does not mean, as we all know, to be in church or on your knees all the time. It is to be living continually under the dominion of God’s reign making decisions moment to moment under that dominion more and more habitually and naturally as we grow in a life of prayer (what Newman calls “learning the language of heaven”)—or better, as our lives merge with the current of prayer that is already in us by the divine indwelling. To reach that state we do need regular times of prayer, but not prayers to substitute for prayer. The Hours of the *Opus Dei* are anchors and reminders in the daily journey. “Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” in order to establish our commitment to the priority of God’s dominion, but only within a vibrant framework of personal prayer will the Hours of the Office be enough to sustain the prayer life necessary for the coming age. For this, each monastic must faithfully and without fail come before God for a time every day in absolute inner

stillness, availability and vulnerability. Only this kind of giving up control, a blind and helpless act of trust, without words, images, or our own insights and plans, will develop in us the radical faith by which we can give Church and world our monastic gift.

Monasticism sinks its roots into the real world of God by seeking an ever deeper union with God in prayer. This vocation is a ministry of prayer by which a community makes itself available to God as a channel of grace for Christ's saving mission in this world.

I have been profoundly affected by a statement of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in a sermon he preached in 1984 in Washington, D.C. He thanked Christians around the world for the help that had come to South Africa through their prayer. But he was not making the usual connection about prayers for a particular intention: he was not thanking us for including his suffering people in our prayer intentions. In short, Archbishop Tutu was not thanking us for remembering his people in prayer, but just for *praying*, for God in unseen ways uses the availability of our hearts to heal other hearts and other situations around the world.

This is an insight from the ancient Christian tradition of prayer, which understands the deeper connections beyond request and response. Though not all prayer is petitionary, because of the mystery of the Incarnation all prayer is intercessory; the divine pattern is for human beings to be channels of grace to one another.

Monasticism focuses and concretizes this insight for the Church. Our call is to become channels of blessing for the world by making ourselves more and more available for God's action in and through us. Through the humility of deep prayer we are able to penetrate beyond the false self to our true center, where God is always waiting. We prostrate ourselves interiorly, offering ourselves to God for the world. And God distributes gifts in our name, without our ever knowing where or how. Thomas Merton said: "In the economy of God's grace you may be sharing his gifts with someone you will never know until you get to heaven."

Periods of vitality in monastic history have not always been times of clearest focus. The nineteenth-century renewal had great vitality, producing an amazing Benedictine expansion up to Vatican II, but at the same time considerable confusion about the

role and purpose of monasticism. Now we are in a time of focus, driven by the mandate to religious orders of Vatican II, and possibly sharpened by the drop in numbers. In the coming age, this renewal of focus will drive us to greater clarity about personal prayer in the monastic mission to the world and in the holiness and wholeness of monastics. We still have to interiorize the insight of monastic tradition expressed in *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

One loving, blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do.²

As a religious superior, I must know that the most important work I do for my community on any day takes place in my time of silence in the presence of God.

Lectio Divina

I mentioned earlier that because of the pervasive effects of the Enlightenment it is difficult for us to grasp the original concept of *lectio divina*, though the recovery of this tradition since Vatican II has had wonderful effects in monasticism and the larger Church. The pope's letter (July 7, 1999) looking ahead to the fifteen-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Subiaco (and therefore Benedictine monasticism) contained a ringing endorsement and appreciation of our tradition of *lectio*. If you are like me, these compliments about Benedictine *lectio* make you squirm. We are not as sure as we used to be about what we are supposed to do in *lectio*. It used to be simple, but some of the writing since Vatican II has made it complicated.

There are authors dealing very beautifully and I think correctly with *lectio* and their impact may eventually be great. But my experience is that the word *lectio* in *lectio divina* has more misled than helped us. Several times in the past few years I have had monastics rather far along on the spiritual path express anxiety over not being able to concentrate on "reading" in their

time set for *lectio*. They know that *lectio* means reading and they only know reading in the modern aggressive sense. They feel guilty when drawn to silence.

This is because they think of *lectio* as “spiritual reading,” a modern exercise that has its place as a preliminary or complement to *lectio*, but is more akin to study than to prayer. During the past year or so I reviewed two books on *lectio divina*. They had beautiful subtitles—“An Ancient Prayer That is Ever New”; “Praying the Bible”—but neither one of them got to the point. The prayer in the titles did not effectively make it to the text. They both left the impression that *lectio divina* is an intellectual exercise.

Guigo II’s medieval synthesis of the *lectio* process in the ladder of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* is well known, but our Western minds have focused on the first two steps, translating them simply into textual reading and discursive meditation, while practically ignoring *oratio* and treating *contemplatio* as a separate exercise. Until *lectio divina* is understood as a prayer method with contemplation as its goal, its power for transformation will not be released among us.

Those who cannot let go of the text are in the same situation as spiritual seekers who stall on the road of prayer because they cannot let go of words. In both cases the practitioners will fill their heads but not necessarily their hearts. Because of the deep scripture background monastics contain in their minds and hearts after years of the Divine Office and other exposures to the word of God, we do not need literally to read anything in order to practice *lectio divina*. Some days, or maybe most days as this life goes on, we go directly to *contemplatio*. Meanwhile the old familiar and simple method of poring over a familiar biblical text—a psalm, a Mass reading—savoring the words and phrases, “seeking the heart of God in the word of God” (Gregory the Great) without pressure to move or finish or know anything at the end, is still one of the best ways to do *lectio*. Recently, Cambridge professor Eamonn Duffy referred insightfully to *lectio* as “slow brooding over the tradition.” In my Arkansas way of understanding it, *lectio divina* does not mean becoming a great exegete but in becoming familiar enough and at home enough with the word of God that it will let you turn it over and scratch its belly.

Monasticism and the World

The monastery, like the Church, exists not for itself but for the world. However, the monastic and the Christian have to *be* themselves before they can be of service to the world. A discussion of prayer and *lectio divina* is logically prior to the question of what monastics do for the world. We have already stressed that through our prayer itself the world outside the monastery is affected in profound ways that we can never trace. Our work also, as expression of our life of prayer, shares this effectiveness beyond our walls.

At the end of October I attended an international Benedictine education conference at Worth Abbey in England, along with the lay headmaster of our Academy and a monk teacher. The primary focus was on secondary education, but participants reflected a spectrum of Benedictine education efforts from kindergarten through the university.

The published schedule was strong and attractive, including Latin American and Asian representatives and a presentation on Newark Abbey's inner-city school that surprised our imaginations about how the Benedictine spirit and tradition can be transmitted in an increasingly secularized world as we pass to a new millennium.

With regard to the Third World, we were first of all surprised by the numbers. Benedictine schools in Europe and the U.S. are typically caring for students in the hundreds, but representatives from the Philippines, Chile, and Mexico are enrolling thousands. The total enrollment in the Philippines is about thirty thousand.

But what they are doing with these numbers of students is the point. All are involved in creative initiatives to transmit Benedictine spirituality to their students and faculty. The schools in Chile developed and operated by laity in the Manquehue movement, for example, have oratories where the Work of God is prayed together morning, noon, and evening; *lectio* groups are formed during school years which carry over for many graduates into adult *lectio* group sessions weekly. This spiritual formation undergirds an organized program of service in the local community, and regular *convivencias*, celebrations of friendship which include mutual accountability and discernment of fidelity.

The lay speakers proved by years of experience that Benedictine education is not dead, nor is the decline in the number of professed a sign of hopelessness, but that there are new possibilities many of us have not yet tapped. The impact of the meeting went far beyond Benedictine schools. We saw new possibilities for communicating the Benedictine gift we have been given, applicable in some way to practically every Benedictine community, if not in education, then in retreat work, hospitality, and local outreach.

One of our contemporary hazards is compartmentalization, being very serious about our spiritual quest but very hesitant to bring it openly into our equally serious professionalism in education, pastoral service, and even hospitality. People expect excellence in our service, but do not these days expect us to bring our search for God into it. For some reason we have become embarrassed about doing this. We must recover the ability to talk about the center and driving force of our life. This will affect not only our giving of the gift with which we have been entrusted, but our ability to attract others to this life.

Now that we are recovering the contemplative dimension of our life we must not automatically jettison all the ministries we have accumulated. This would be another compartmentalization. We seem to be on the threshold of a renewal of authentic Benedictine education, for example, and to disown it out of hand would be irresponsible.

In the Dominican tradition, preaching is *contemplata aliis tradere*, to pass on to others what we have learned by contemplation. This is certainly true of the Benedictine tradition as well. Contemplation here means not only a way of deep prayer but a whole attitude indicated by the opening word of the Rule, "Listen." This is why the *lectio* in *lectio divina* must not be limited rigidly to a written text. For Dominic and for us, the *contemplata* in *contemplata aliis tradere* includes potentially everything: gaining a divine perspective on reality. The poet George Herbert called prayer "the Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth."

The monk's place in the world and the right to speak to the world from a monastery was highlighted in letters Thomas

Merton exchanged with two prominent American theologians in the 1960s, in the heat of the struggle for civil rights and the canonization of the secular city as the arena for service. Merton had written "Letters to a White Liberal," in which he questioned the sincerity of the white liberal's commitment to reforms that would benefit blacks, saying it would go only as far as the white's self-interest. Martin Marty blasted him in a review: "How dare this escapist monk tell those of us who labor for justice in the cities that our work will fail?" Two-and-a-half years later, after the riots of 1967, Marty wrote an open letter to Merton apologizing for his review and admitting Merton's evaluation from the monastery had been accurate, while analyses closer to the scene had not.

Around the same time, Rosemary Ruether wrote Merton that monasticism involved a misunderstanding of the gospel, and that monks would do better to come out of their refuges and work for God's kingdom in the arena where the battles were being fought. Merton retorted, "Is there anything you can do in the city more effectively than I can do in the country, to stop the war in Vietnam?" There followed a substantive dialogue in which both compromised, he admitting there was a hands-on dimension of the struggle closed to him, and she grudgingly making room for the role of the contemplative.

The threat of escapism is a real and constant concern for monasticism. Our contemplation should make us more rather than less aware of the plight of the afflicted and the oppressed, of the struggle for human and civil rights. It enables us to see the world selflessly and opens within us what has been called a "contemplative wound," an inability to be satisfied or complacent while so much suffering and injustice exists. Monasteries are now, and must continue to be, places where justice and peace efforts find a home and support. In ways that were not open to Merton, most Benedictine communities are now able to combine an active outreach in peace and justice issues with a contemplative search for God.

Our inspiration for this commitment comes from the gospel, but it receives a special emphasis from the Rule in its insistence on the sacredness of every life, seeing Christ in each person. I think there is also an untapped resource in Benedict's concept of mutual

obedience as a guide for human relations and even a more complete and rounded understanding of obedience in religious life and in the Church.

A Monastic Doctor of the Church

A recent development in the Church which may not have attracted the particular attention of monastics nevertheless has important significance for us. I refer to the naming of St. Therese of Lisieux as a Doctor of the Church. For one thing, though there have been many Doctors with monastic roots or spirituality, such as Basil, Jerome, Augustine, Peter Damian, Anselm, Bernard, and even her Carmelite colleagues Teresa and John of the Cross, Therese is the first Doctor since St. Bede in the eighth century to have spent her whole religious life in the cloister. The others typically had high-profile influence as bishops or Church reformers; their monasticism was incidental to their nomination.

Because of her public image, Therese's nomination seemed inappropriate at first. She is not associated with weighty doctrine nor a large body of literature (though she wrote more than John of the Cross) nor with the wisdom of age (having died at twenty-four). But closer examination bears out the wisdom of the choice, and the doctrine highlighted by the choice is highly monastic. St. Therese has been ill-served by early biographers who pictured her as a sweet (to the point of syrupy) and naive child preserved from the harsh realities of life. This was in fact how she began, but she broke from this mold thoroughly during her short years in the cloister. Now we know that she had to deal with great physical and mental suffering, and spent the last two years in a dark night which included temptations to atheism. Her importance for the modern search for God is indicated by her influence on Thomas Merton, who credited her significant role in his vocation, and on Dorothy Day, who wrote a biography of Therese. Neither of these two persons would be by any stretch be considered saccharine nor indifferent to the plight of the larger world.

I see the distinctive teaching of Therese deriving from, or supported by, her monastic vocation in two ways: in her "little way" of following Christ, and in her understanding of the

missionary power of love. Her “little way” was an undramatic response of faith and love at every moment, striving for holiness by accepting sufferings and doing the smallest things with complete commitment to God’s will even in the midst of her doubts, embracing everything that came as a sign of God’s love and care. This is reminiscent of emphases in the *Rule of Benedict* that are making Benedictine spirituality so attractive beyond the monastery these days. Therese spoke of a “little way,” Benedict of a “little rule.”

Before Benedict’s time people were discouraged by the impossibility of matching the heroic feats of the Desert generation, but Benedict put emphasis on doing the daily tasks well, small or large, without worrying about heroic observances. He also insisted on embracing the will of God as it comes in each moment. The great enemy on the road of holiness is murmuring, deadly because it is the denial of God’s loving presence, a type of functional atheism.

This spiritual doctrine originates, of course, in the teaching of Jesus, but is hard to hold and tends to fade periodically before theories of spiritual elitism in one form or another. It is arguable that St. Francis de Sales, a primary influence on Therese, was named a Doctor of the Church largely for reopening the way of holiness to the laity four hundred years ago. But by the time of Vatican II we were back into first- and second-class roads to glory. The Council reiterated the universal call to holiness, and both Therese’s little way and Benedict’s little rule provide tools for a modern response. It is striking that Therese eventually gave up on the spiritual books of her time and drew her nourishment from a form of *lectio divina* of the gospels (at a time when Bible reading was not encouraged).

In 1927, two years after he had canonized her, Pope Pius XI declared St. Therese patron of all missionaries, men and women, and of all the missions throughout the world, joining her to St. Francis Xavier, who had already been named patron of the missions by Pope Pius X in 1904. This was a remarkable statement by the Church: an enclosed contemplative nun who spent all her nine years of religious life in the monastery was put on an equal footing as missionary patron with the Jesuit missionary who spent most of his religious life spreading the gospel in India and Japan.

As powerful a statement as this was about the effectiveness of a hidden life of prayer on Church and world, the message has still

not come through crystal clear, even in our post-Vatican II age. Even in the current renewal of religious life there is controversy over mission and prayer, as witnessed in the findings of the Nygren-Ukeritis survey of religious in the U.S. in 1993. Perhaps this new recognition of St. Therese, patron of missionaries from within her monastery, can help move the Church to a deeper comprehension.

Many religious orders disappeared during the French Revolution and the accompanying secularization. Orders which could prove some social usefulness because of hospital or school work had a remote chance of survival; but contemplative orders, perceived as not only superstitious, but worse, socially useless, were closed universally. There were about fifteen hundred Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries in Europe in 1789; twenty years later only thirty or so remained. The same philosophy permeated the German secularization of the nineteenth century which figured in the history of many of our foundations.

Even though the Church continues to regenerate out of those ashes, the issue of the validity of a hidden contemplative life has never been adequately and finally validated. In the renewal days of the 1960s, serious challenges were raised even within the Church to the "luxury" of a hidden life of prayer when there were real needs to be met on the streets. We noticed that in the controversies surrounding Merton. The issue is still alive even in religious life. A diocesan hermit recently told of an exchange in a personal letter between religious that had been shared with him: "The Church should do away with hermits. . . . All they do is pray, anyway." But the recovery of and renewal since Vatican II of the older prayer tradition of the Church has been leading us to a deeper understanding in this area. I see the recognition at this time of St. Therese's teaching and her contemplative missionary role as a step in this direction.

The ideas of prayer and mission were certainly not contradictory for her. Even within the cloister St. Therese had a dream of being sent to the missionary scene of Vietnam, where there were two Carmelite monasteries. Her poor state of health made that impossible, and in the middle of a novena she came to understand that she could fulfill her missionary vocation another way. Her understanding of how her missionary vocation was to

be exercised from within the monastery is expressed in a passage from her writings read in the Office for her feast:

Love appeared to me to be the hinge for my vocation. Indeed I knew that the Church had a body composed of various members, but in this body the necessary and more noble member was not lacking; I knew that the Church had a heart and that such a heart appeared to be aflame with love. I knew that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished the apostles would have proclaimed the gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more.³

This is a very monastic insight. Divine love is the force powering the work of salvation in the world, and Therese's realization was to see that by letting that love be released through herself by the channel of her total availability to God through her life focused in contemplative prayer, she was reaching people far beyond the monastery and providing grace for the hands-on work of the missionaries. Hans von Balthasar said that Therese solved the debate about action and contemplation with her view of contemplation *as* action.

Most of our communities are far from being completely enclosed as Therese's was, so we serve the mission of the church in a hands-on way as well as in the secret time of prayer. But she reminds us that the active mission depends on the power of divine love received and channeled to the world through prayer. More hands or more activity do not necessarily mean more mission. The witness of Therese affirmed so strongly by the Church in the century since her death encourages us to be at the heart of the mission of the Church, whether in public ministry or totally within the monastery.

Prayer Warriors

Several Protestant churches where I live have "prayer warriors," members usually elderly and often shut-in, who have signed up to combat the work of the devil by prayer. They pray

especially for physical healings and conversions. The fundamentalist packaging of this program may be problematic, but the insight is true. In Mark's gospel the ministry of Jesus is couched in terms of a war against Satan's kingdom on all fronts, and Jesus himself says some demons can be cast out only by prayer. The *Rule of Benedict* contains several descriptions of our spiritual quest in military terms, beginning with "the strong and noble weapons of obedience" (Prologue 3).

The total population of the industrialized world is becoming older because of fewer births on one side and the extension of the lifespan by medicine on the other. This is even more true of religious communities, where the rate of new members has dropped dramatically. In a society where production is everything, life beyond retirement presents a critical challenge. People who have been accustomed to self-sufficiency now find they are unable to take care of themselves, but are reluctant to become dependent on their families or anyone else. They often see themselves as useless and in the way. This can happen in the Church and even in religious life. The culture's exaltation of function over being (what I do is more important than who I am) encourages feelings of inadequacy and uselessness in the years of physical decline.

Monasticism, now especially with the emphasis by the new Doctor of the Church, has an answer for this. The power of individual lives to channel blessings to the world through hearts united to God is what monastics are about. We further believe that this does not diminish with aging, failing health, and loss of abilities—that in fact it often increases. We see it in our monastic infirmaries; but it is not limited to monasteries.

Faithful monastics who have come to the golden years grow into a state of prayer. This does not mean that they think of God all the time, but their lives are more and more focused in God. "As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (*RB* Prol. 49). By grace and suffering, they have been emptied of egoism, hollowed out to become channels of blessing. Though they have concern for everyone and everything that is going on, they have no great plans or demands, but by their lives are pleading to God in constant

intercession. Of people like this, Thomas Merton is said to have related: “They are the tabernacles of God in the world; they are the ones who keep the universe from being destroyed; they are the little ones, they do not know themselves, but the whole earth depends on them.”

For these faithful disciples, though the time of retirement seems inactive because physical exertions diminish and may be reduced to a standstill, the inner work intensifies. Even those who lose their mental faculties in the extremities of Alzheimer’s disease are still interceding for the world. When practicing Catholics are unconscious from an accident, we administer the Sacrament of Anointing, presuming on their “habitual intention” to receive whatever the Church offers. A prayerful person who has entered the zone of mental incompetence likewise remains in a habitual attitude of prayer, unbroken by the failure of health. The heart that has chosen by free human actions over years to be emptied of self and filled with Christ remains fixed in that attitude and continues as a channel of God’s grace for the world.

That attitude is the daily holiness offered to all of us throughout our monastic life, not just at the end. It empowers our acts and it empowers our prayer. It is the best gift monasteries can give to the world, and whether or not it is present will determine the future of monastic life in the new millennium.

Notes

This essay was originally published in *Benedictines* (Erie, PA: Saint Benedict Monastery, 1998).

1. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury Press, 1990), XX, 149.

2. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. HarperCollins Spiritual Classics (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 9.

3. *Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1976).