

The Art of Christian and Monastic Life

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In St. Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus was talking about the coming of the Son of Man and the time of his coming, he talked about the signs that will indicate that the time is near. Then he said the following: "Take the fig tree as a parable: as soon as its twigs grow supple and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. So with you when you see these things: know that he is near, right at the gates" (Matthew 24:32-33).

My paper focuses on the sign value of human, Christian, and monastic life. I was born into a Christian and Catholic family. As a Benedictine monk who entered monastic community forty-seven years ago, I have spent a lot of that time trying to make sense of it as an expression of the meaning of Christian life. I have pondered it as a Christian, monk, student, priest, teacher, missionary, pastor, prison chaplain, convent chaplain, director of novices, and an abbot, among other things. If Jesus could tell people to look for the signs of the coming of the Son of Man, then I can say I have spent my life looking for those signs that give meaning to my life as a Christian and as monk.

I have to admit that my best insights have come as the result of others who have had an impact on my life. It always amazes me how God speaks profoundly in the simplest of signs. It is this experience that teaches us to pay attention to the more intentional signs God has given us. In fact, God has gone to great lengths to get us to know God. The signs are all around us.

Let's move directly to the heart of God's sign-giving: humanity made in the image and likeness of God in us has nothing to do with physical appearance, gender, color, size, or language. It also does not mean that we are just like God. That

would be impossible. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, God is of an entirely different order of being. God is without limit, and in our order of being, to be means to have boundaries. So we are made in the image and likeness of God in a different way, and when we live in accord with the truth of our being, we are then living revelations of who God is.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian who had the integrity to be martyred rather than submit to the abominations of Nazi theory and practice, gave a series of lectures in the early 1930s that were subsequently published in a small book called *Creation and Fall*. In a nutshell, he said that God created not out of necessity but freely, and that nothing has the power to so much as tempt God to betray creation. Bonhoeffer put it in terms of freedom: God is free for creation, and free from what would make God stop being for creation. Bonhoeffer equated God's freedom with God's love. The image and likeness of God in humanity is that love, that freedom for the other, the freedom from whatever might destroy love for one another. In short, for Bonhoeffer the image and likeness of God that becomes the clearest sign and revelation of the reality of God is humanity in unity. Adam and Eve in the Genesis stories represent the totality of humanity in unity with all their diversity, not just the individualistic notion that each person is the image and likeness of God apart from activating that gift.

Now we all know about the fall. So let's go directly to the solution. One of the best summaries of God's plan for us in Christ is found in the Letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the unseen God,
 the first-born of all creation,
 for in him were created all things
 in heaven and on earth:
 everything visible and everything invisible,
 thrones, ruling forces, sovereignties, powers —
 all things were created through him and for him.

He exists before all things
 and in him all things hold together,

and he is the Head of the Body,
that is, the Church.

He is the Beginning,
the first-born from the dead,
so that he should be supreme in every way;
because God wanted all fullness, to be found in him
and through him to reconcile all things to him,
everything in heaven and everything on earth,
by making peace through his death on the cross.
(Colossians 1:15-20)

What was torn apart by sin, what lessened the effectiveness of the sign of humanity as the image and likeness of God, is now reconciled in Christ, who is head of the reconciled body of humanity. In him who is "the image of the unseen God" we in our reconciled unity might become that people who reveal God with us by our love for one another as members of the Body of Christ, the church. In other words, we are God's "art," God's living art.

No art perfectly expresses the mind and the heart of the creator of that art, and that is why artists keep on producing more art. The Christian community, this Body of Christ, is constantly demonstrating that it is not just like God. So we make God known in halting ways, but ways that nevertheless give hope to all of humanity. We love one another as Christ has loved us, and ask forgiveness and forgive when we have failed. We get married in Christ so that the unity in diversity in marriage will announce and be the sign of Christ's love for the Church. We gather into intentional communities of faith, some of which are monastic, so that by the witness of inclusive love the world might know God's inclusive love. This too is the art, the living art of God.

As Christians, whether monk, married, or single, we have a common goal built on our relationship to Christ Jesus. Everything in our life is centered on Christ. The history and mystery of our salvation is Christ. The whole of creation is through and for Christ. The love of God for us even precedes creation, and creation itself is the first manifestation and even contains the love

of God for all people. Creation is the demonstration of God's love and God's will to include all people everywhere and in every age in the salvation that God wants all to share in.

When we look about the world we see the murderous disunity that on close examination we can discover in our immediate environment and even within our own selves. Some people seeing that in themselves hate themselves. Others allow this disunity to overflow in their relationships to those nearest them. Others expand this division to whole nations and then to the world.

We are invited to "know the mystery of his [God's] purpose, according to his good pleasure which he determined beforehand in Christ" (Ephesians 1:9). We are to look at God's plan established prior to creation so that we might understand the purpose of creation and in our hearts accept one another and all people because God excludes no one. We are not a select elite among the few who will be saved. That would be contrary to the message God gives to us. The separation from one another that sin produces is overcome in God's plan that God "would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth" (Ephesians 1:10).

What I am describing here is called "Paschal [Easter] spirituality." What that means is that because we are centered on Christ, because we have been baptized into his death and resurrection, we have a new life. The monastic community is meant to be a sign to the whole Church, to all of creation, of the reconciliation Christ has accomplished and makes known through what I dare to call the "sacrament of monastic life." If married life is a sacrament, the sign, the living revelation of the faithful union between Christ and the Church, then monastic life is to reveal the diversity that can come together in unity in Christ.

The Benedictine monk vows stability, that is, fidelity to the community; *conversatio*, or living the covenant of this monastic manner of life; obedience, or hearing God's call, Word, message through the scriptures, the Church, the community, the superiors, through each other. And the monk does this by living the reality of the Paschal Mystery today.

It takes a real effort to apply the theory of Paschal spirituality to all areas of life. Yet it is the only spirituality that can help us

to make sense of life. It involves confronting the most basic realities of life so that we learn to see them as parts of our journey with Christ to the accomplishment of God's purpose in us. There is nothing of reality that can stand outside of the Paschal Mystery that describes God's love for us and our response to God.

There is in this the acceptance of ourselves, as difficult as that can sometimes be: acceptance of ourselves from the weakness of childhood, through the strength of maturity, to the weakness of life's end when we give up all power. We also acknowledge the reality of our necessary interrelatedness and the fact that we do live in this world with others, and that the goal of all is to be fostered and protected by all so that all, through Christ's reconciliation, might come together to the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation.

The only way this can be accomplished is through mutual love, which reveals God's covenant with all of humanity, excluding none. By this covenant God reveals faithfulness, and by living in that covenant we are telling all people: I am here for you. I will not abandon you. I will die rather than betray you. You can count on me. There we have the behavioral evidence that we are living the Paschal Mystery by the total gift of ourselves to God. We cannot ever separate our dedication to God from our relationship to the very real humanity our lives touch every day.

The way we treat one another infallibly reveals our relationship to God. We cannot compartmentalize our spiritual life as though it has no relationship to the way we live with others for the good of all in this world. If it takes real effort to apply Paschal spirituality to all areas of life, it is because we find reconciliation and outreach so trying. Living the covenant that Paschal spirituality implies involves every moment of life.

The monastic community is a presence in this world of people who strive to have some understanding of this Paschal spirituality in order to live it in such a manner that in a deceitful and underhand world we might shine out "like bright stars in the world, proffering to it the Word of life" (Philippians 2:15-16). Long hours in prayer and daily *lectio* may well be essential for the monk to live the Paschal Mystery, but the evidence that we are doing so will always be our faithfulness to the covenant we have

freely entered into, by which we say: I am here for you. It is the actual living together, the encounter with fellow human beings, the mutual support, the encouragement, the forgiveness for wrongs done, the hospitality within and outside the community, the “supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior” (*RB* 72:5) that become for the monk the font of revelational experience of the living God in our midst. Monastic life is first a living experience of God in community.

The Role of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina, or holy reading, is both a practice and a way of life. As a practice it typified monastic life. Scripture is normative for the monk as it is for all Christians, and St. Benedict directs us in these words:

For anyone hastening on to the perfection of monastic life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection. What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, besides the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil. For observant and obedient monks, all these are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues. (*RB* 73:2-6)

The monk is to be immersed in the Word of God, for it is the Word of God who gives us life.

We can look at St. Benedict’s own experience as given to us in the Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great. The story of Benedict begins with his disillusionment with the environment he found himself in while pursuing studies in Rome. It seems clear that he came from a decent family background, had a religious sense about him, and had no desire to compromise his dedication to God by living in the manner of other students:

When he found many of the students there abandoning themselves to vice, he decided to withdraw from the world he had been preparing to enter; for he was afraid that if he acquired any of its learning he would be drawn down with them to his eternal ruin. In his desire to please God alone, he turned his back on further studies, gave up home and inheritance and resolved to embrace the religious life. He took this step, fully aware of his ignorance; yet he was truly wise, uneducated though he may have been.¹

When eventually Benedict would go to Monte Cassino and write his *Rule*, he would do so with an eye to establishing an environment that would not be an escape from the world but an alternative and mutually supportive way of living in the world while seeking God. In chapter one of the *Rule*, when he speaks of the different kinds of monks, he tells us that he wishes “to draw up a plan for the strong kind, the cenobites” (*RB* 1:13). These are monks “who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot” (*RB* 1:2). The monastery is the environment in which the tools for good works can be employed, for “the workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community” (*RB* 4:78).

We can hardly look at the *Rule* and not come away convinced that the vast majority of what Benedict has to say is dealing with the building of an environment that supports seeking God and enables the monks to encourage one another in this pursuit of holiness. The many chapters devoted to outlining the *opus dei* and the practice of *lectio divina* are a major focus for this environment. His structuring of community meetings for the sake of communal discernment, of meal times with reading, of work that supports the community, of silence that allows for listening, of deans and priors for the sake of good discipline, of respect for the goods of the monastery, of excommunication for faults that do harm to the environment of seeking God—all of these point to an emphasis on creating the atmosphere in which blocks to seeking God are minimized and encouragement for growth in holiness is maximized.

Benedict would set a schedule of daily prayer when the monks coming together would praise God. He did so, not because only these were the prayer times for the monks, but rather to sanctify all times, because we are to pray always. He established an oratory where this work of God and Eucharist would be celebrated, a place where nothing else was to be done. He did this to recognize a sacred space that announces to the monks that all space is sacred, and he even calls the monastery the house of God. He indicates the sacredness of all objects as well by declaring that the tools of the monastery are to be treated as the sacred vessels of the altar. What a wonderfully holistic view Benedict had of the monastery, this school of the Lord's service.

When we get right down to it, Benedict had a pretty good notion of what goes into the makeup of a human being. Maybe it has taken us longer to learn a simple rule: garbage in, garbage out. If we are what we eat, we should have no trouble understanding that we become what we do, what we read, what we listen to and watch. We know that to become anything good we have to study, to absorb, to want to learn, to discipline ourselves. *Lectio* as a practice is necessary if we would live a life of *lectio*, if we would be formed by the Word of God, if we would become assimilated to the Christ who become one with us that we might become one with God.

So we read and are read to; we listen to the Word of God with the ears of our heart so that we might return to him from whom we had drifted by the sloth of disobedience. Obedience means hearing, and disobedience means not hearing, not listening to the voice of God calling us and saying,

“Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?” If you hear this and your answer is “I do,” God then directs these words to you: “If you desire true and eternal life, keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your guest and aim. Once you have done this, my eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen for your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: ‘Here I am’ ” (*RB*, Prologue 15-18).

Now, the problem with listening is that we become responsible for what we hear. And when we immerse ourselves in the scriptures, two things will happen to us. First, we will become aware of the message of the scriptures. By this I do not mean that we become expert exegetes who can grapple with the historical, cultural, and philological problems the experts tackle. Rather, we become experientially aware of God speaking, inviting us to recognize the Word through whom all came to be, and that nothing that is came to be in any other way than through God's Word. We begin to see more and more the unity of creation, and especially our unity in humanity that should become ever more clearly the image of God on earth.

This, in turn, confronts us in our relationship not only to God but to the people around us and around the world. If we experience ourselves as coming forth from the love of God, we have to see our neighbor in the same light: "How can you love the God you do not see if you do not love the neighbor whom you do see?" The love of God and the love of neighbor grow side by side. As the vision of our neighbor-as-Christ grows so does our vision of God grow. And this is when the second problem presents itself.

It is one thing to be Word-centered with a capital W, another to be word-centered with a small w. (Friends, this has absolutely nothing to do with politics and our current president!) We tend to overuse words as though they could "contain" reality in and of themselves. We encapsulate God in words as though we could control God, tame God, carry God around in our back pocket or handbag. And finally, painfully, we discover that God eludes us and refuses to be imprisoned in our concepts. We can't even do this to one another, no matter how much we think our psychologizing and Myers-Briggs tests and Enneagrams and Minnesota Multiple Personality Inventories tell us about others. We still remain a mystery, and all the more does God.

Saint John of the Cross said, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: "The soul will have to empty itself of these images and leave this sense in darkness if it is to reach divine union. For these images, just as the corporeal objects of the exterior senses, cannot be an adequate, proximate means to God" (12.4). Words and images are

insufficient to carry the reality of God; they can only point in a direction and open us to what we cannot imagine. “What no eye has seen and no ear heard, what the mind of man cannot visualize; all that God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

In speaking of Byzantine theology, John Meyendorff says:

Theology . . . may and should be based on Scripture, on the doctrinal decisions of the Church’s magisterium, or on the witness of the saints. But to be a true theology, it must be able to reach beyond the letter of Scripture, beyond the formulae used in definitions, beyond the language employed by the saints to communicate their experience. For only then will it be able to discern the unity of Revelation, a unity which is not simply an intellectual coherence and consistency, but a living reality experienced in the continuity of the one Church throughout the ages: the Holy Spirit is the only guarantor and guardian of this continuity; no external criterion which would be required for man’s created perception or intellection would be sufficient.²

Interestingly enough, although Taoism asserts that the underlying reality of all is “so vast that it cannot be described in words,” the Chicago Institute of Art hosted an exhibition entitled “Taoism and the Arts of China.” And though St. John of the Cross could say that the “soul will have to empty itself of these images and leave this sense in darkness if it is to reach divine union,” we will nevertheless use an abundance of words to explain this and will even sketch an unusually beautiful and perceptive crucifixion of Jesus that he presented to someone else.

Similar to marriage, so too monastic life is a gift to the whole Church, a witness that is visible of certain Christian values that speak to the world something of who God is and what it means to live as faithful witnesses of God revealing God in ways visible to the human experience. Edward Schillebeeckx entitled one of his books *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*.³ We might say that married life is a sacrament of encounter with Christ, not only for one another but for the whole Church who sees the

meaning of faithful love as revealed in Christ. We can also say that monastic life is another sacrament, at least by analogy, of the encounter with Christ that represents the broader reconciliation of humanity in Christ.

Liturgy

Some may find it offensive to stretch the meaning of sacrament beyond the defined seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church. However, I would submit that if we cannot do that stretch we impoverish the meaning of sacrament, and in the process lose the meaning of liturgy. Let me explain.

At the age of four, a little boy goes to a vacant lot next door, picks a bouquet of odd weeds, and brings them home to his mother as a sign of his love for her. She takes the weeds, places them in a vase with water, and sets them on the dining room table. As other members of the family return home from school or work, she warns them at the door: "You call those weeds and I'll annihilate you." A four year old boy gave his mother a sacrament, a sign of his love, and she accepted it. Here has been played out a family liturgy.

The Baltimore Catechism called a sacrament an "outward sign." Now a sign that is not outward is no sign at all. By nature we are sign givers, we are sacramental, and we understand the meaning and effectiveness of signs. In his Rule, St. Benedict understood the meaning of such signs and clearly went beyond words only. At liturgy in common he recognized the value of bowing and prostrations; when receiving guests, of washing their feet, praying with them, and only then giving them the sign of peace. He understood the reverence needed between the monks: seniors are to love their juniors and juniors are to reverence their seniors. All of these are accompanied by signs and liturgies that are visible and recognizable. The whole monastic life, then, is a liturgy, a sign or even a sacrament that is visible and recognizable.

Within the monastic living situation there are expressions of the official liturgy of the Church. Clearly, baptism is a given and is so revealed in Benedict's central attention on the Paschal Mystery. Easter is the starting point and goal of the monastic year.

The yearly schedule leads to Easter and is derived from Easter. The Eucharist holds a place of honor in the monastery and so also the priesthood, which Benedict honors. Reconciliation, whether considered as a Sacrament or not, is still an important aspect of monastic life, as seen in Benedict's directive for the abbot to recite aloud the "Our Father" in the presence of the praying liturgical community, emphasizing the importance of the words "forgive us as we forgive."

It is clear from the Rule and from life's experience that we need signs, that we need to express what is inside of us, that we need ritual to teach us how to express respect and love and honor. Weddings, funerals, graduations, presidential inaugurations: all have their rituals and liturgies that enable us to in some way make an adequate expression of the meaning of events. They do not say it all, but they give us a way of indicating what is deeply inside of us. It is this recognized need that is inside of us that then becomes the source of liturgical expression, art and poetry and many forms of artistic presentations that have been inherent in monastic life from the beginning.

Art in Monastic Life

The first time I went to Japan I tried to learn at least some of the simple forms of *konji*, or signs, that make up the written language. I kept wishing that, even though they had three sets of what we would term alphabets, they would come up with a strictly phonetic alphabet that would help people like me understand more clearly what the language said. As I came to appreciate more what the language was saying and what the signs were indicating, I began to change my mind about that phonetic alphabet. There is such a richness in the *konji*, the pictographic signs, that a great deal would be lost if the *konji* were to be abandoned.

For instance, those who live according to the *Rule of St. Benedict* take a vow of *conversatio*, which frequently is simply translated as a vow of conversion of life. The word itself, however, is the Latin translation of the Greek *politei*, which has to do with citizenship or belonging. That is not at all as clear to our intelligence as the word for monk would be in Japanese, for

instance. On one of my trips to Japan I asked a Soto Buddhist priest friend what the Japanese word would be that would translate the word *conversatio*, or manner of life. I explained to him my understanding of its meaning in English. He came up with the word for monk, which in Japanese is *shudoosha*. The parts of this word came out this way: *shu* means learning, training, struggling or being trained; *doo* means a way of living which is ongoing and continuous; *sha* means a person, man or woman. So a *shudoosha* is a person who is learning or struggling or being trained to live life, or to lead a way of life according to the teachings of a specific teacher. And all of this is expressed in simple *konji* form. This sounds very much like *The Rule of St. Benedict*, where we are told we enter into the school of the Lord's service where we give up our "own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience . . . do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord."

Whatever the manner of life the follower of Christ chooses or is called to, that life is to make known what it means to put on Christ, to become the revelation of Christ so that through our manner of life people will come to know the God of Jesus. The gospels impress us with the way Jesus lived, a manner of life that was at least as important as the words he spoke. His life was his message, just as married life reveals the mystery of Christ and Church, and monastic life reveals the inclusive love of God for all people. Whatever our manner of living the Christian life, we are meant to be light to the world. This is what we might call the art of monastic life.

The signs we call words contain what we did not plant in them. We inherited a language just as we have inherited all sorts of signs that speak of the reality of life. I have learned a great deal from poetry in this regard. A poet can express a deep reality in simple words, but words that point the way to mystery somewhat enlightened, to a reality beyond the words spoken or written. Poets will speak in metaphor, symbols, similes, and so on. Put them all together and the end product is greater than the sum of its parts. But it still does not exhaust the subject.

For many years I have been an admirer of the Japanese artist Sadao Watanabe. At my abbey we have a collection of his prints.

In my visits to our monastery in Japan I always wanted to meet this man whose biblical scenes and depictions of the saints I have found so attractive. Finally, in the fall of 1995, I had the opportunity to go to his home and have tea with him and his wife.

While we were there, we talked about a work he had done in 1990 depicting St. Benedict. It was while we were talking about this work that he showed us the as-yet-unfinished work he was doing of St. Scholastica, the twin sister of St. Benedict. He explained some of the symbols he had used in this and in the one of St. Benedict, and showed some of the contrasts between the two as well. I was impressed.

It was then that I asked him how he went about producing such a work. It was interesting to know that he made his own paper, created his own colors, and so on. But my main interest was what did he do to prepare himself to produce the work of art. His answer was wonderful.

The monastic superior of our priory in Tokyo at the time was Father Kieran Nolan. Mr. Watanabe was asked by him to do the St. Scholastica depiction just as he had done the one on St. Benedict five years earlier. Mr. Watanabe said that Father Kieran had given him a copy of the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory the Great, which tells the story of Benedict and Scholastica. He told me, "I read it over and over and over again. Then I meditated on it over and over again. Then I did it." I smiled very broadly at his words and told him "That is what we call *lectio divina*." I believe that was the way he did all of his art, most of which was inspired by the sacred scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

We spent about an hour and a half with Mr. and Mrs. Watanabe that day, and when it came time to leave we went through the common Japanese ritual of bidding farewell. We bowed to each other, one trying to bow lower than the other. Finally, I placed his joined hands between my own, and he knew exactly what I was doing. I honored those hands that had done such magnificent work, hands belonging to a man who had so interiorized the gospel that he communicated to great numbers his own reverence for God's work. Three months later Mr. Watanabe died. I will forever be grateful for the grace of having met him and his wife.

In February of this year, a man by the name of Count Balthazar Klossowski de Rola, otherwise known as the artist Balthus, died at the age of 93. On February 20, 2001, Zenit News Service from Rome published a report on their Internet site on an interview he gave to the French Catholic weekly newspaper, *La Vie*, his last public interview. In that interview he said, "To paint and to pray are the same thing. I have never thought of painting in any way other than as religious activity."

Zenit continued:

The painter took pains to explain how he lived his artistic inspiration: "A ritual that needs prayer and then silence. When I am in study, it often happens that I cannot paint. I must first sit in front of the canvas, look at it, and caress it with my hand. It is another way of painting, of proceeding. . . . To paint means to reach, to proceed, and to conquer—to go through secrets, translate what is still obscure, and not try to give interpretations. What is important is that the painter himself often does not know the reason. . . . Suffice it for him to have the will to communicate to the world through his darknesses."

One of the greatest modern monastic scholars and writers was Father Jean Leclercq, now deceased, a monk of Clervaux in Luxembourg. In 1980, for the sesquimillennial celebration of the birth of St. Benedict, he made a presentation that was subsequently published in a book entitled *Monasticism and the Arts*. He makes reference to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapter 57, "The Artisans of the Monastery," where St. Benedict says:

If there are artisans in the monastery, they are to practice their craft with all humility, but only with the abbot's permission. If one of them becomes puffed up by his skillfulness in his craft, and feels that he is conferring something on the monastery, he is to be removed from practicing his craft and not allowed to resume it unless, after manifesting his humility, he is so ordered by the abbot.

Father Leclercq says of this:

There is no sharp distinction between those called “artists” and those we would call “artisans.” Both produce works governed not by the spontaneous forces of nature but by the spirit. . . . Under the label “art” are included therefore such activities as writing, spinning, weaving, painting, architecture, and the composition and performance of works of music: in a word, all that goes toward transforming any reality of the material order into a work born of the spirit.⁴

He further explains something of what he sees as the essence of art, and I quote at length:

The spontaneous comes from nature, but art is born of humans given freedom by God the creator of all to arrange nature’s resources in new patterns. In artistic creation there is always embodied the element of choice, of novelty, of the unexpected, and consequently of the wonderful and surprising. Like everything else in humans, subject as they are to sin, this creative capacity can be used for good or evil, to free them from passion or to hold them captive to it. . . . God endows the artist with a wonderful capacity to make his or her own life a work of art, as the artist’s nature is refined through asceticism and by developing the gifts bestowed by God. And it is precisely “culture” that enables the artist so to improve upon nature; for the word *culture*, often found in association with the work and names of holy monks and sometimes even with God’s name and Christ’s, designates all forms of work and *industria*—from agriculture to the knowledge of divine realities and the cult of divine things.⁵

I am not an artist nor a historian of art, monastic or otherwise. Once in my life, when I was stationed in New York, I tried my hand at water colors and one day got so absorbed in

what I was doing that I worked on a piece for two hours straight and finally noticed that my radio was not on and I did not have WQXR serenading me as I usually did at free times. That experience alone taught me something of the kind of single-mindedness that prayer and even all of life can become.

Or I remember the time I was truly inspired by a Broadway performance of *Hello Dolly*. The lead was played by Ginger Rogers and when she sang the song, "Hello Dolly," she danced around the apron surrounding the orchestra. At the completion, the whole audience was on its feet cheering, and she did it again—an encore. I do not think I had ever witnessed an encore in the middle of any Broadway performance before or since. When I got home that night all I could think was that as a monk/priest, my involvement in monastic life and liturgy should be as wholehearted as I had witnessed that evening. She was Dolly; I have to be Christ.

So what might the monk become who by faithfulness and dedication perseveres in this school of the Lord's service? And does it make any difference to the monastery itself, to the Church at large, and to all of humanity? I am reminded of a beautiful passage in *Godric*, my favorite book by Frederick Buechner. He says, concerning pilgrims who come to visit the hermit:

To touch me and to feel my touch they come. To take at my hands whatever of Christ or comfort such hands have. Of their own, my hands have nothing more than any man's and less now at this tottering, lamewit age of mine when most of what I ever had is more than mostly spent. But it's as if my hands are gloves, and in them other hands than mine, and those the ones that folk appear with roods of straw to seek. It's holiness they hunger for, and if by some mad grace it's mine to give, if I've a holy hand inside my hand to touch them with, I'll touch them day and night. Sweet Christ, what other use are idle hermits for?⁶

I entered my monastic community forty-seven years ago and have seen those who entered before me leave feet first after many years of faithfulness to their call. Not all were easy to get along with all the time, but I cannot thank God enough for the

examples of struggle and victory that I have seen. I recall Brother Hubert Schneider, accomplished cabinet maker who taught us (at the time) young monks as much about humility as carpentry—and perhaps with as much success. Or Brother Stephen Thell, who created beautiful altar pieces out of wrought iron and taught us the meaning of service to others. Or Fathers Conrad Diekmann and Dunstan Tucker, whose love for Shakespeare and Dante respectively was exceeded only by their genuine and pure love for their confreres.

One of my confreres of late has become a poet and I suspect that one of his poems emerges from his long experience as a monk. Father Kilian McDonnell wrote this poem, entitled “Perfection, Perfection.”

I have had it with perfection.
 I have packed my bags,
 I am out of here.
 Gone.

As certain as rain
 will make you wet,
 perfection will do you in.

It droppeth not as dew
 upon the summer grass
 to give liberty and green joy.

Perfection straineth out
 the quality of mercy,
 withers rapture at its birth.

Before the battle is half begun,
 cold probity thinks
 it can't be won, concedes the war.

I've handed in my notice,
 given back my keys,
 signed my severance check, I quit.

Hints I could have taken:
Even the perfect chiseled form of
Michelangelo's radiant David,
squints.

The Venus de Milo
has no arms,
the Liberty Bell is
cracked.

(June 18, 2000, St. John's Abbey)

It is Father Kilian's poem that has brought me to think of the way artists have frequently portrayed Christ and other subjects of sacred art. Scenes of the crucifixion will show the very athletic and perfect body of Jesus hanging on the cross. Or we see Mary being visited by the Angel Gabriel at the annunciation, Mary regally attired and in a splendid palatial setting. Or there is the Assumption of Mary by El Greco, royally dressed as she rises above apostles to be greeted by choirs of angels. Often we have been presented with the perfect as a reminder of the perfection of the divine and the imperfection of the beholder. Some viewers have gotten the impression of a goal beyond our reach. Other artists have presented the suffering Jesus, the sorrowful mother, the martyred saint in such sad ways as to again make us feel our inadequacy.

Zenit News Service, on April 12, 2001, published an article entitled, "How Women Theologians See God," from the book, *How We See God*, a collection of writings published by Desclee de Brouwer publishers. Directed by Isabel Gomez-Acebo, "married and the mother of six, and a founding member of the Association of Spanish Women Theologians," this Association is quoted as saying:

The principal problem that women have in speaking about God is that all the language and categories coined have been done by men, from the vantage point of the values they regard as sublime: omnipotence, transcendence, luminosity, which clashes head-on with the sensitivity of

the weak, where we women are traditionally placed, who see an immanent God sharing the life of suffering.

Further on Ms. Gomez-Acebo said, “We are in the phase in which language categories have not been created that express the God in which many of us women believe. To speak of the weakness and immanence of God, continues to elicit rejection in many circles, despite the fact that our Redeemer died a failure on a cross.”

There have been those whose depictions of the sacred capture something of the hope that Paschal spirituality is meant to implant in us. There are the scenes of journey that mean there is a destination to be reached through perseverance. There are the sculptors whose works reveal humanity in very unfinished and rough poses that proclaim: we are not there yet but we are moving. Examples include Doris Caesar’s John the Baptist in the baptistery of St. John’s Abbey, and Alberto Giacometti and his depictions of people in very rough attire, stark and down-to-the-essentials-looking human beings, but moving forward in hope.

Maybe this is the type of expression in art that is needed today in a world and in a church that knows a lot of imperfection and downright sin. We are not perfectly the Body of Christ yet, we do fail, the evidence is all around us, and we do not have to dishonestly hide our sin. But we will not remain down. We are people of hope.

Monasticism’s Contribution

So now the question is: What contribution has monasticism made to the Church and to society in all these years in regard to liturgy and sacraments, *lectio divina*, and art? When we look at the so-called active orders in the Church we find missionary work, preaching, teaching, heroic poverty, availability to serve at a moment’s notice in far flung places, and so on. Many of these things monks have done for centuries as well. But here in a monastery is something more essential to our lives, and that is stability in a community where we faithfully serve until death enables us to become the sacrament of the Paschal covenant for all to see who will see.

St. Benedict wanted his monasteries to be known. He recognized that monasteries are never without guests, so he made sure that all who present themselves be received as Christ. It is this hospitality that is a major principle in the life of the monastery. He knew that guests will not be received as Christ unless Christ is preferred by the monk to absolutely everything else. He is to recognize Christ in the abbot also, and in the infirm who are to be taken care of as Christ.

St. Benedict also wanted his monks to live a monastic manner of life, living under a rule and an abbot and being faithful to the monastery until death. The faithfulness of the follower of Christ, whether in the monastery or outside of it, is a revelation of Christ's faithfulness to us. The monk's faithfulness to God and to his fellow monks becomes the image of the law of Christ, "since whoever does not love the brother he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

The witness of prayer in community is provided by the very context of monastic life and shows the monk, one another, and the whole world that our God is worth the dedication of a life to the praise of God. This is a witness needed in a world concerned with material gain at the expense of mindfulness of God. This commitment to good liturgy and the sacramental life is a gift to the whole Church, that we might know the difference between mere ritualism and sacred ritual that announces God in the events of salvation history and in the present celebration of the sacred mysteries handed on to us.

Monastic men and women are witnesses to the effectiveness of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of the Word of God and those writings that comment on the Word of God. The effect of this *lectio* way of life is the union created between members that provides a visible sign of what it means to be the Body of Christ. And it is this *lectio* way of life that produces the liturgy, the art, and the architecture that one could term sacred because it creates in concrete form the fruit of the contemplative spirit fostered by absorption in the Word of God, the same contemplative spirit in which the total mission of the Church is rooted. And just as the budding fig tree heralding spring is a parable of the signs of the coming of the Lord, so those who genuinely live the Christian life reveal the presence of the Lord, that he is right at the gates.

Monks are no better and no worse than anyone else. Their way of life is an alternative way of saying Christ to the world, just as marriage is a way of saying Christ to the world. Following what St. Paul describes in 1 Corinthians about the gifts of the Spirit, we can say that there are communal charisms as well as individual charisms. Monastic life is one of the wonderful ways God has given us to be witnesses to his life, death, and resurrection, signs of the Paschal Mystery that gives meaning to the Christian life.

Notes

1. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book II, in *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict*, trans. Odo J. Zimmermann and Benedict R. Avery (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1959), 1f.
2. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 13.
3. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).
4. Jean Leclercq, *Monasticism and the Arts* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 69f.
5. Leclercq, *Monasticism and the Arts*, 71.
6. Frederick Buechner, *Godric* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 43.