

# *Benedictine Peace: A Meditation on Time*

CHARLES DUMONT

## Primacy of Eternity

The kind of life chosen by Christian monks—in the world, without being of the world—has long contributed to the moral health of mankind and to the holiness of the Church. This contribution, in part, is due to the gospel way of freedom in which monks see and take time: not as alienating but as the beginning of eternal life. “Your acting should be different from the world’s way” so that in all things God may be glorified (*Rule of Benedict* 57; hereafter abbreviated as *RB*). Yearn for everlasting life with holy desire (*RB* 134) and “look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing” (*RB* 49). Such indications set the earthly direction of the monk. They free him from other desires so that he can “run heart overflowing in the way” (*RB*, Prologue 49) in which “he prefers absolutely nothing to the love of Christ” (*RB* 4), which brings us to everlasting life (*RB* 72, 12). The time of earthly life, then, is like a runway to the take-off.

## Eternity in Time

Through the centuries, monks and monasteries have recalled society and the Church to a time beyond time, to the hope of eternal life. It is indeed in time and in one’s labor and patience that one advances, badly at first, but then increasingly in faith and time, never losing sight of seeking God, who remains above and before any other concern the preoccupation of the monk.<sup>1</sup> Nothing should become a pretext among passing and earthly

things to forget that it is necessary to “seek first of all the kingdom of God” (*RB* 2, 34, 35).

The primacy of the spiritual is found everywhere in the monastic project, but nevertheless it is always and irrevocably linked to the necessities of temporal life. Wise management is required in order that these necessities should lead to liberty of spirit. *Miscens temporibus tempora* (*RB* 2, 24) is a rather enigmatic expression (perhaps derived from a Roman maxim, and found in many languages *a propos* of time): literally: “Fit the time to the times.” It indicates that the abbot must adapt to persons and to circumstances. Thus the significance of time will be respected, while simultaneously subordinating it to the reality of eternity. “Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die” (*RB* 4, 47) means, in fact, “put your hope in God” (*RB* 4, 41). When time is related to eternity in this way, the activities of mind and body that fill it are considered as means. And as Kierkegaard has said, means are not distinct from their ends when “eternity penetrates and transcends time.” For what is eternal penetrates time and redeems it. To the baptized Christian, all time is composed of favorable moments, since “there is still time to act [so that] by the light of this life, one can do what is useful for Eternal Life” (*RB*, Prologue 43-44). Monks have always wanted to live in a manner freely decided in community that enables them to hasten toward Eternal Life. Within time, the monk has patience as a means of entering the Paschal Mystery, which alone will bring him to his desired end.

### The Monastery and Time

All Christian men and woman commit themselves with interior freedom to following Christ. With mature deliberation, the monk makes a profession that he will express this act of love continually and throughout his whole life. It is important to emphasize that by the monk’s vows—whose meaning is temporal more than spiritual—God’s fidelity is also engaged. The novice prays: “Receive me according to your Word and I shall live; do not disappoint my expectation” (*RB*, Prologue 21). In this prayer, in the presence of all in the Church, the monk openly professes his dependence on divine grace. Eventually, by the action of the

Holy Spirit, the Lord will manifest in his worker, who is purified from vices and sins, the love God has for all humanity in route toward the Kingdom (*RB* 7). Monasteries through the ages, by their bell towers and bells, have continued to awaken us to the mysterious presence of the grace of God in every human conscience that loves life and desires to know happiness. The bells sound a rhythm of time marked by moments of prayer and give meaning to the monk's day.<sup>2</sup>

### Community

Through his profession, the monk asks the Lord not to disappoint his expectation. In a spirit of freedom, both interior and exterior, the monk consecrates all of his time to the praise of God and to the expectation of God's coming. The way in which St. Benedict pictures the economy of the monastic life points to the freedom that the monk has in relation to time. Benedict sees time and the monk himself as divine gifts to be dedicated before everything else to give glory to God (*RB* 57). The maxim "time is money" has no more place in the *Rule* than it has in the gospel.

The same freeing disinterestedness governs the way in which monks live community. The conflict of generations is rendered nugatory by the eternal youth of the life of grace. Friendships can be formed, because time in the cloister is not the devouring Kronos of what it produces. Charles de Montalembert, in the great work *The Monks of the West*, best defends this quality of freedom of the medieval monk.<sup>3</sup> As an outstanding representative of Catholic liberalism, he saw in the monastic epoch the essence of the freedom desired for both Church and state. If freedom is the most needed value in our world and in the Church today, it is also the most threatened; so it is good to see how through the centuries monks have protected it, sometimes heroically. In a long introduction, de Montalembert expresses his opinions concerning liberalism, rationalism, and nationalism. He gives us these deeply felt and meaningful lines:

Their life was carried out and completed in the bosom of a hard-working tranquility and sweet uniformity. But it

was prolonged without being saddened. The longevity of the monks has always been remarkable. They knew the art of consoling and sanctifying old age. This, in contrast to modern society where a wholly devouring material activity seems to have become the first condition of happiness and old age is always so sad. In the cloister we see old age not only cherished, honored and listened to by younger men, but so to speak, replaced by that youthfulness of heart which endures through all the snows of age as the prelude of eternal youth.<sup>4</sup>

### The Balanced Life of the Monk

The inner peace of each brother of the community, that no one be “troubled or distressed in the house of God,” depends on the fact that everything is done in its due time. The same words occur in the *Rule* speaking of the abbot calling for the Divine Office (*RB* 47) and referring to the cellarer giving to the brothers what they need (*RB* 31).

The balanced life of the monk is obviously, first of all, a question of time.<sup>5</sup> The horarium of the day, the liturgical organization of the year, if in close accord with the natural time of night and day and with the seasons, is not a time closed in on itself but one open to the eternal. The ancient city imposed a servitude through its set and exclusive social structure—peasant, artisan, soldier, or “contemplative”—that continued to exist in the Orders of the Middle Ages. But the monastic institution, mainly Benedictine, progressively gave the example of a culture freed from social and political constraints. Among the three monastic works, it is *lectio divina*, the meditative reading of scripture, which occupies an ever-larger place in enlightening and nourishing prayer and work. It unifies life and orients it toward God, while permitting eternity to penetrate time.

In the monastery, the primary intention of the division of temporal activities is the salvation of the soul threatened by lassitude. If the monk does not “have time,” that is not the contemporary banal formula that we are always hearing or using. It is because of his poverty, which begins with “his” time, the

element essentially linked to his bodiliness, which no longer belongs to him alone (*RB* 33). The favorable time (*Kairos*) can never be found in the emptiness of agitation or nihilism or in the death-dealing philosophy of the complete idler.

Until the fifteenth century, the mental and spiritual horizon of Christianity was without question an existence given direction by the last ends, where ardent desire for eternal life gave meaning to daily life and to death (*RB* 4, 44-48). The presence of monasteries has preserved and bequeathed this spiritual patrimony, and inscribed it indelibly in history. However it may happen, the Church and her faithful are free to rediscover this vitality. What a historian has written remains true today:

It is necessary in our time to reconstitute these little Christian societies, mystical bodies in miniature which, in God's time, will become models for the whole of society. These will be Christian families, which for a time, hold within and build up a sense of the meaning of life, judgment on surrounding realities, a scale of values, and respect for conscience. These values are not always appreciated in our time, but through them a better future, preserved and enriched, can be found.<sup>6</sup>

The superior has the responsibility for the wise governance of this church, this miniature mystical body, which draws its life exclusively from the life of Christ. St. Benedict thinks of the superior as a doctor. The superior will always recall the primacy of the spiritual in everyday life. For example, he will shake up the talented artisan who might take his work too seriously (economically or socially). To challenge him, the superior will sell his masterpiece at half price. Is it not God who gives value and meaning to the artisan himself?

The alternating of occupations is obviously salutary to their being well done as the monk is freed from the stress of a specialized result. More important, such alternating relativizes these activities with regard to the eternal. They must always remain means, and must never take on the pretension of being ends in themselves. Rilke expresses this well:

We have never possessed, not for a day,  
 the clear space in front of us, in which flowers  
 constantly open. We have the world with us, always,  
 never that unnamed place which is no place:  
 the pure, undefined air we breathe and intimately  
 know and never yearn for.<sup>7</sup>

Isn't this true poverty? Poor persons, recognizing their desire for the infinite, are often the most available. "Happy the poor of heart—the Kingdom of God is theirs." If Christianity is distinguished from other religions by its concern to keep the temporal within the eternal, it is also true that reality appears only through the eruption of the eternal into time.

The poet T.S. Eliot perceived the point at which the two coincide:

Men's curiosity searches past and future  
 And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend  
 The point of intersection of the timeless  
 With time, is an occupation for the saint—  
 No occupation either, but something given  
 And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.  
 For most of us, there is only the unattended  
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,  
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.<sup>8</sup>

The monk is at the same time holy and only merely one of us. With every other Christian, he experiences the continuing occupation and the "unattended moment" as described by Eliot. The believer's existence is at once in time and also in eternity. Angelus Silesius is a spontaneous believer when he declares

“Eternity is so native and profound in us, that willy-nilly we are eternal.”

Already, St. Bernard in the twelfth century had said: “Those who enjoy the spiritual peace of their cloisters, by their way of living have already begun to imitate the state of being reserved for them in eternity.”<sup>9</sup> Even today visitors to our monasteries often testify to experiencing a kind of timeless peace.

### Three Witnesses to the Contribution of Monasticism to the Church and World

In seeking to situate the contribution of monks in the church and world, it is interesting to read what two commentators of the nineteenth century noticed regarding the absence of monastic life in their time. Sören Kierkegaard, who admired the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages, saw monasticism as having the responsibility to recall to the Church that it belongs to two worlds:

The cloister was, after all, a landmark for determining where one was, that is, if one had advanced toward perfection or had foundered in unadulterated worldliness. The cloisters were allowed to be closed down, and now today we realize that we have been groping foolishly for a good long time in full darkness, trying to find out where we are. The stronghold of the profane has been doing wonderful business. . . .

The more I think about it, the more I come back to this idea; that the religious of the old style—the style of the Middle Ages—that is, the religious of more severe bearing, is an essential element as an intermediary category. Catholicism saw, and correctly, that it was a good thing for this intermediary category to belong as little as possible to the world, and in consequence we find celibacy, poverty, asceticism, etc. . . .

When an individual is rigorously religious and manifests his religious life, people [nowadays] think he is mad. But why? Because the intermediary category is lacking. . . .

There is no doubt that our era, and Protestantism in general, has need of cloisters once more, or at least needs that some should exist. The cloister is a dialectical movement which is essential to Christianity. We need the cloister just as we need a buoy, so we may see where we are."<sup>10</sup>

The second witness is John Cardinal Newman. More fortunate than Kierkegaard, he read the Fathers attentively and discovered there the "monastic system," as he called it. It is in his *Historical Sketches* that we find the story of Anthony. Among long passages which he had translated from the *Life* by Athanasius, Newman inserted comments including these thought-provoking ones:

It would not be consistent with our present argument to rescue [Anthony] from the imputation of enthusiasm; he must be here considered as an enthusiast, else I cannot make use of him, the very drift of my account of him being to show how enthusiasm is sobered and refined by being submitted to the discipline of the Church, instead of being allowed to run wild externally to it. . . .

If I must choose between fashionable doctrines of one age and of another, certainly I shall prefer that which requires self-denial, and creates hardihood and contempt of the world, to some of the religions now in esteem, which rob faith of all its substance, its grace, its nobleness and its strength, and excuse self-indulgence by the arguments of spiritual pride, self-confidence and security.<sup>11</sup>

These two spiritual masters of the nineteenth century thus stated in well-defined terms the place of monks in the Church, and the need of the Church for them. Their agreement is complete when it comes to giving the characteristics of the monk: simplicity and unity, constituting a quality which Kierkegaard, following tradition, calls "purity of heart."<sup>12</sup>

In his essay, "The Mission of Saint Benedict," Newman comes back constantly to this quality of unity—unity of purpose, of state, and of occupation:



Simplicity is the temper of children—(or the poet)—and it is the temper of monks. . . . From the solitaries of Egypt down to the Trappists of this day . . . unity and simplicity characterize the monk.<sup>13</sup>

And when monks such as Gregory VII or Saint Bernard were called to political life at moments of great urgency, Newman tells us, it was still because the work to which they were summoned was such that only monks were apt for it, by reason of their single-mindedness and pertinacity of purpose.<sup>14</sup>

As a final witness, this time of the twentieth century, consider Thomas Merton. Because of his literary success and the many connections he had as a result of his spiritual influence, Merton thought a great deal about the role of monks in the Church. He suffered all his life from the conflicts of conscience that his situation brought with it.<sup>15</sup> It was not easy for him to reconcile the solicitations that came to him from all sides and his own deep-rooted resolution to remain a solitary. He explained his position concisely in his article "Openness and Cloister,"<sup>16</sup> repeating that monasteries should be centers of spiritual life and schools of prayer. But he was just as adamant about maintaining that the greatest service, the sole service of monks in the Church, is their own life of prayer.

In an article entitled "The Contemplative Life and the Atheist," he writes a commentary on the "Message of Contemplatives to the Synod of Bishops," of which he was one of the principal authors:

Our silence and solitude are not mere luxuries and privileges which we have acquired at the Church's expense. They are necessary gifts of God to the Church in and through us. They are that part of the precious inheritance of Christian truth and experience which God has confided to us to hold in trust, in order that the spirit of prayer and contemplation may continue to exist in the whole Church and in the world of our time.

The laity and clergy who are absorbed in many active concerns are unable to give themselves to meditation and

to a deeper study of divine and human things. We feel it is our first duty to preserve for them the reality of a life of deep prayer, silence, and experience of the things of God so that they may not themselves despair, but may be encouraged to continue in their own way to seek intimacy with God in loving faith.<sup>17</sup>

Merton suggested many ways of sharing this treasure: by retreats, works of spirituality, and contacts, either personal or with groups, be they intellectuals, artists, philosophers, or atheists. There might also be meetings of an ecumenical nature, or with contemplatives of non-Christian religious traditions. As Merton noted on another occasion, "Solitude has its own special work: a deepening of awareness that the world needs. A struggle against alienation. True solitude is deeply aware of the world's needs. It does not hold the world at arm's length."<sup>18</sup>

The abrupt and somewhat disdainful contempt for the world that is found in his first works gave way at the end of his life to universal compassion and understanding. He loved to think of himself as a new type of Good Samaritan, himself wounded and fallen into a ditch:

My monastery is a place where I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion. To exist everywhere, I have to be No-one.<sup>19</sup>

#### Notes

1. The *Rule* instructs the monks in the following way: "Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we grow in this way of life and faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandment our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (*RB* Prologue 45).

2. The sociologist Max Weber has shown that factory sirens, replacing bells, have given another meaning to time, one without any connection to eternity.

3. Count de Montalembert, *Monks of the West* (Boston: Patrick Donahue, Boston, 1872), 41.
4. de Montalembert, *Monks of the West*, lxxvii.
5. See Charles Dumont, "St. Aelred: The Balanced Life of the Monk," *Monastic Studies* 1 (1963): 25-38.
6. Etienne Delaruelle, "St. Benedict," in *Christianity and the Barbarian West* (Paris, 1945), 482.
7. Rainer Marie Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, trans. Leslie Norris and Alan Keele (Columbia, SC.: Camden House, 1993.)
8. T.S. Eliot, "Dry Salvages," from *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1943).
9. St. Bernard, *Sermons De Diverses*, 84, 2.
10. Sören Kierkegaard, *Journals* (New York: Harper, 1959), X, 298; XI, 532; VII, 152; VIII, 403.
11. John Henry Newman, *Historical Sketches* (London: Baril, Montagu, Pickering, 1876), 103, 125.
12. "Character consists in being one thing. Reason has everywhere done away with character. The infinite has been tidily suppressed. When there is question of the finite, one can hold several offices and be several things at the same time. But on the level of the infinite, man can be but one thing. In other words, to be one single thing is to exist, on the level of the infinite" (Kierkegaard, *Journals*, X, 571).
13. Newman, *Historical Sketches*, III, 2, p. 376
14. Newman, *Historical Sketches*, 381.
15. Charles Dumont, "A Contemplative at the Heart of the World" *Lumen Vitae* 23 (1969): 633-46.
16. Thomas Merton, "Openness and Cloister," *Cistercian Studies* 2 (1967): 312-23.
17. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 168-69.
18. Thomas Merton, *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 19.
19. Introduction to the Japanese edition of Thomas Merton, *Seven-Storey Mountain*, trans. Kudo Tadashi (New York: Doubleday, 1966).