

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER NINETEEN

Thomas Merton

The *Rule* of Saint Benedict

Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 4

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by
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Edited with an Introduction by
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Preface by
Joan Chittister, OSB



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PREFACE

“Change is inevitable . . . change is constant,” Disraeli wrote. Well, yes and yes and no. Change is inevitable because time, life, and growth do not stand still. Change is constant because it is of the essence of living things to grow from one stage into another. But change does not necessarily require that we obliterate what has gone before. “Change” and “destroy” are not synonyms. What is valuable can be maintained—even though only differently.

The fact is that the courage to change may be exactly what enables us to remain the same. When we discover that what once spoke to an entire culture—like carrying popes through the piazza of Vatican City on a *sedia gestatoria*, a sedan chair, or failing to recognize “mixed marriages”—now ceases to speak to a people, to energize them spiritually, to make sense to the present, it’s time to change the practices in order to save the faith.

Change is what makes a thing different—but, at the same time, it is also, often, what is needed to make it authentic, realistic, consonant with the changing times. There are, in fact, instances in every dimension of this ever-dynamic world that do change and change again, but which never go out of style, never really lose the essence of themselves. Those things are the “classic” elements of life, the prototypes of the categories they embody, the paradigms of the best in art and architecture, in painting and statuary, in literature and drama, in culture and religious sensibilities, in government and civilization.

These are the models to which the world looks again and again to gauge the quality of what, in their names, has come after

them. They set the standard. They define the principles, the elements, that make what follows them clearly one thing and not another: great rather than simply good, “a superior example” of the category rather than just one more of its kind. The classics in every arena last from age to age, always true, always universal in their appeal and their meaning, always attuned to the best in the human soul.

The *Rule of Benedict*, a spiritual document written over 1500 years ago, is one of them. It is still the basic spiritual guide for more than 1,400 autonomous Benedictine/Cistercian monasteries of 30,500 monks and nuns, and of 25,000 lay oblates around the world. Every continent on the globe has been touched by the Benedictine tradition and by this same Rule of Life for centuries. North America, for instance, has 155 monasteries of monks, nuns, or sisters; Canada, 8; Central America, 15; South America, 104; Africa, 109; Europe, 656; Asia 153, Oceania, 8—as well as 350 Cistercian monasteries worldwide. That is what is called “out-reach.” That is what is called “impact.” Most of all, that is what is called “classic.”

The *Rule of Benedict* is still the basis of life in each of these separate monasteries, though no one would maintain that life as it is lived in a Benedictine monastery now is exactly the way it was lived in Monte Cassino in 520 C.E. Nevertheless, in every instance, this one document stands as the chief arbiter of the lifestyle, definer of the values fundamental to each whatever the culture in which they live, and the common spiritual vision of all of them.

Someone should ask, why? How is it that so ancient a document can go on era after era shaping different generations and vastly different cultures. How does any one spirituality go on living in the mind and soul of generations so distant from its own? This book is a clear answer to that question. In this text we have the rare opportunity to see a conversation between the ancient text itself, written in the sixth century, and Thomas Merton, one of its most prolific exemplars of the life in the United States of our time.

Merton, a Cistercian monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky from 1941 to 1968, gave a series of conferences on the *Rule* of Benedict to the novices of that abbey. This book brings those lectures into print for the first time so that the rest of the world can study not only the text of the *Rule* itself but Merton's exegesis on its meaning and implications for our time. They are a landmark example of the way the *Rule* continues to stay the same—and change at the same time.

Merton teaches the *Rule*, not the document. His intention is not to maintain its letter but to capture its spirit. And by that very process he does honor to the essential character of the *Rule* itself. He demonstrates how it is that a document written for Roman men in the sixth century can still have meaning for both women and men of our own day. He preserves the three essential dimensions of the *Rule*: it is moderate; it is flexible; it is a spiritual document, not a legal one. It is, in other words, dedicated to the maintenance of a set of values, not to the preservation of a set of arcane behaviors.

The *Rule* of Benedict, unlike many religious documents that followed it, is not an exercise in spiritual athleticism. It requires no arduous fasts. It promotes no unusual behavior for the sake of religious eccentricity. It sets out to teach seekers how to live the ordinary life extraordinarily well. It does not pretend to turn humans into angels; it sets out to help average human beings become fully human by helping them to become fully spiritual as well. It teaches the spirituality of the presence of God and that changes everything in life.

The *Rule* of Benedict is a flexible way of life. Perhaps the most telling line in the *Rule*, after having laid out an order of prayer for twelve straight chapters, is the last one. "If anyone knows a better way," Benedict writes, "let them arrange things differently."

Merton is quick in his commentary to impress on the novices of a modern monastery the fact that some of the examples Benedict uses in the *Rule* were simply common practices of the time, not sacred acts to be continued into the twenty-first century as they were in the sixth. Any rule that can last for fifteen centuries

is surely one that has been able to live well in all centuries—and to be true to itself, Merton implies, must continue to do the same.

Finally, the *Rule* is a spiritual document, not a legal one. It implies no overarching institutional connections, no body of constitutions, no clerical regalia or hierarchies. It is a document written by a lay man for a lay community—which may be why it works for women monastics, as well. There is nothing in this *Rule* designed to categorize people or to diminish anyone. Rank is not built on either social status or clerical standing. It is a *Rule* for modern-day mystics of all times meant to fly the soul of the seeker on the backs of the scriptures to the heart of God.

Most of all, Merton stresses to the novices the number of commentaries already written to preserve the character and autonomy of the myriad communities throughout time who have decided to take the *Rule* of Benedict as their spiritual guide. He points out that not even the various streams of the Benedictine family—Black Benedictines, White Cistercians, Camaldolese, men and women—all live the *Rule* the same way. Why? Because the *Rule* is about the values it preserves, not about the ways communities seek to preserve them as time and life go by in all their flavors and places and colors and centuries. It is, indeed, then, a classic document whose purpose is universal, whose aim is unending, whose human insight is great, and whose values of community, obedience, humility, conversion of life, hospitality, and stewardship are perennials.

No doubt about it: “Change is inevitable . . . change is constant,” and change is very Benedictine—which is obviously why we manage to stay the same.

This is a fine book, a real contribution to Benedictine literature, a monument to fine scholarship, both Merton’s and editor Patrick O’Connell’s. It may well stand as a study in moderation, flexibility, and spirituality itself. It is a gift to us all.

Joan Chittister, OSB
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INTRODUCTION

As Thomas Merton wrote in *The Waters of Siloe*, his 1949 history of the Cistercian Order, the “new monastery” of Cîteaux was founded in 1098 to enable monks to live out the *Rule* of St. Benedict with a degree of fidelity that was no longer possible in the Benedictine monasteries of the time, including the Abbey of Molesme from which the founders of Cîteaux had come: “The ideal of the founders was a return to the perfect integral observance of the Rule of St. Benedict: which meant a return to the cenobitic life in all its simplicity.”¹ During the decade in which

1. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), xxii. See also Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Contemplatives: A Guide to Trappist Life* (Trappist, KY: Gethsemani Abbey, 1948), 16–17: “Anyone who has read the *Exordium Parvum*, which was the manifesto left by the founders of the Order to their posterity, will be able to tell us at once that the ideal which led our first Fathers into solitude in the woods of Cîteaux was simply to keep the Rule of St Benedict to the letter.” He goes on to say that “it is not enough merely to say” that literal application of the *Rule* was the purpose of the order; rather, as St. Bernard taught, “the true end of the Cistercian vocation came to be considered as nothing less than the mystical marriage of the soul to the Word of God in a union of perfect love” (18), through the practice of the common life, and concludes, “To anyone who has read the Rule of St Benedict it is evident that this is simply the application of that Rule to the exigencies of the contemplative life in all its purity” (19). A decade later, in *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957), Merton returns to the question of Cistercian observance of the *Rule* with somewhat greater textual precision: “In seeking to restore the primitive Benedictine life, St Stephen Harding was therefore not merely striving to pacify his conscience by bringing his life into perfect conformity with the written code by which he had vowed to live. He was going much deeper into the reality of things: and here we might as well remark that nowhere in the *Exordium Parvum* does St Stephen use the phrase the ‘letter of the Rule.’ On the contrary, what he speaks of is *rectitudo*

he served as novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemani (1955–1965), it was thus essential for Merton to introduce the young men embarking on monastic life to the guiding document of that life. In fact, as Merton notes early on in this set of conferences (5, 6), he explored different aspects of the *Rule* in three distinct novitiate courses. The most basic introductory conferences, entitled “Our Monastic Observances,”² were largely taken up with explaining the *opus Dei*, the pattern of the liturgy of the hours, described in great detail in the *Rule*,³ that occupied a substantial part of the monk’s daily life. “An Introduction to the Life of the Vows”⁴ presented an extensive discussion of the three vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of manners, derived from the *Rule*,⁵ that the novices would take when they made monastic profession at the conclusion of their two years of preparation. The third set of conferences, the content of the present volume, provided an overview of the *Rule* itself and of the life of its author as traditionally presented in the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory the

regulae and the *puritas regulae*, the ‘integrity of the rule,’ the ‘purity of the rule.’ These words embrace not only the letter but also the spirit, and indicate that St Stephen realized the rule was not merely an external standard to which one’s actions had to conform, but a *life* which, if it was lived would transform the monk from within. And so, as a matter of fact, instead of violently forcing the monks of Cîteaux into a servile acceptance of the letter of the Rule, precisely as it was written, nothing more and nothing less, St Stephen actually brought about an adaptation of the Rule to twelfth century conditions which was the work of religious genius” (102–103).

2. Thomas Merton, “Our Monastic Observances,” a set of conference notes for a course given by Merton as master of novices and found in volume 15 of “Collected Essays,” the 24-volume bound set of published and unpublished materials assembled at the Abbey of Gethsemani and available both there and at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

3. Chapters 8–20 of the *Rule* are concerned with the recitation of the divine office.

4. Thomas Merton, “An Introduction to the Life of the Vows,” in “Collected Essays,” vol. 14.

5. Chapter 58 of the *Rule* specifies the promises made at profession (not yet called vows), though the topics of obedience, stability and *conversatio morum* are discussed repeatedly throughout the *Rule*.

Great. These conferences on the *Rule*, then, form a kind of bridge between the more directly praxis-oriented instructions of the “Observances” and “Vows” courses and the historically and textually focused conferences on the development of monastic tradition such as *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*⁶ and particularly *Cassian and the Fathers*,⁷ to which the *Rule* conferences form a kind of sequel, both in terms of chronological sequence and the actual order of presentation at Gethsemani.

In comparison with those two sets of conferences, *The Rule of St. Benedict* is of course more narrowly focused, and also possesses a greater degree of internal organization and coherence. Unlike the *Cassian* conferences, which add an extensive “Prologue” in its revised version,⁸ the text of the *Rule* conferences remains relatively the same in successive presentations, and unlike the *Pre-Benedictine* conferences it does not veer off in a decidedly different direction from that which Merton had originally intended.⁹ If it is much less wide ranging and less path-breaking than either of these courses, it has the virtues of providing a lucid, unrushed overview of the guide, both person and work, that his charges would be following for the rest of their lives if they chose to remain at Gethsemani. As with all the novitiate conferences, Merton’s major intent is not to provide an objective academic treatment of his subject, though here as elsewhere his text shows evidence of his own assiduous reading and digesting of primary and secondary sources, but to engage in monastic formation, to encourage the students to appreciate the wisdom of the texts and

6. Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 2, Monastic Wisdom [MW], vol. 9, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006).

7. Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, MW 1 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005).

8. For the revisions to this set of conferences, see *Cassian and the Fathers*, xxii–xxiii, xxvii, liv–lxii.

9. For the change in focus of these conferences, see *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, xvii–xx, xxxv–xxxvii.

to apply the material to their own lives. In order to do this he tries to contextualize the material in its own historical and cultural setting and also to “translate” it into a contemporary idiom, with pertinent connections made to the lives and times of his audience, himself, and the world, monastic and non-monastic, in which they were now living.

* * * * *

The Rule of St. Benedict conferences are divided into three unequal parts. The short introductory section on “Study of the Rule” (7–16) is preceded by a brief prefatory overview of the contents of the text (5–7), probably written last, that emphasizes the importance of considering the *Rule* from a perspective that is neither narrowly legalistic nor overly intellectualized, but marked rather by commitment to the goal of Benedictine monastic life, which is not simply to obey the *Rule* but to love and serve God. Approaching the *Rule* in the proper context is essential for appreciating its perennial power and value.

The important thing is for monks to love the *Rule*, not as a document printed on paper but as a life that should take possession of their inmost hearts. St. Benedict did not call us to the monastery to serve him, but to serve God. We are not here to carry out the prescriptions of men, but to love God. The purpose of the *Rule* is to furnish a framework within which to build the structure of a simple and pure spiritual life, pleasing to God by its perfection of faith, humility and love. The *Rule* is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, and it is always to be seen in relation to its end. This end is union with God in love, and every line of the *Rule* indicates that its various prescriptions are given us to show us how to get rid of self-love and replace it by love of God. (6)

This same point is made in the Introduction proper, where Merton first emphasizes that the entire tradition of Christian spiritual teaching, both the developments of the Christian and specifically the monastic life preceding Benedict and subsequent forms of

spirituality, such as those of the great Carmelites, can and should be studied and practiced,¹⁰ but always viewed through a Benedictine lens (8). He stresses the need for monks to love the *Rule*, to love the person of Benedict himself, and to love the tradition that Benedict brought into focus and transmitted to future generations, ultimately including the first Cistercians and their successors. “To love St. Benedict means to *love our monastic tradition* that goes back to him and beyond him to St. Basil and St. Anthony—and to Jesus. Hence, our study of the *Rule* will be relatively sterile and useless if we only study the *Rule* itself, without any background, without any roots, in monastic tradition. . . . [W]e go to him as *to the authoritative and inspired guide* who will open to us all the rest of monastic tradition and show us how to understand it and apply it to our own monastic lives” (9–10). Merton warns his charges against any sort of narrow, “partisan” reading of the *Rule* that would pit Cistercian “purity” and “authenticity” against supposedly “lax” practices among the Black Benedictines, a tendency not unknown in previous eras:

we would not be faithful to our own monastic tradition if we confined ourselves narrowly within purely “Cistercian” or “Trappist” limits in our study of the *Rule*. On the contrary, to be true Cistercians we must, like our fathers, seek with all spiritual thirst the *pure springs of the monastic tradition*. And here again, everything that is living and authentic, especially in all forms of monastic reform and return to primitive sources, is not alien to us. We must be acquainted with all that is genuine and vital in the monastic tradition. (10)

This brief section concludes by acquainting the novices with the respect and veneration in which St. Benedict has been held throughout the centuries, by the Cistercian Fathers such as

10. See Merton’s 1961 conferences for newly ordained monks, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, MW 13 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), which provides an overview of the Christian contemplative tradition from its origin through Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

St. Bernard, who considered “*St. Benedict* himself as a quasi-‘sacrament’ of God’s will and God’s love for monks” (10), by the liturgy and by Church councils, and most recently by the pope, Pius XII, who had commemorated the fourteenth centenary of Benedict’s death in 547 with an encyclical that Merton summarizes as an authoritative presentation of Benedict’s historical and contemporary significance.

Part II, on “The Life and Character of St. Benedict” (16–38), takes a close look at highlights of Gregory the Great’s *Life of Benedict* as found in the second book of his *Dialogues*.¹¹ Merton considers the *Vita* reliable in the main, though written for the purpose of edification and spiritual nourishment rather than according to modern canons of scientific biography (16–17). He shows his appreciation of the picturesque or even amusing details in the *Vita*, such as the fact that at the outset of his ascetic journey Benedict is still accompanied by his old nurse (21), the appearance of the friendly crow who carries away the poisoned bread sent by Florentius (29), and the warning Benedict gives to the slave Exhilaratus that the bottle of wine he had concealed for himself should be checked before drinking (for the serpent now hidden in it) (31). He retells the vivid stories of Benedict’s reclaiming of the ruined pagan shrine on Monte Cassino (30), hurling the flask of oil denied to a poor supplicant over a cliff (33), confronting the Goth tyrant Zalla (34), being “bested” by his sister

11. Merton would of course have been unaware of the recent questioning of the Gregorian authorship of the *Dialogues* and consequently of the historicity of the *Vita*, as proposed by Francis Clark (and opposed most notably by Adalbert de Vogüé); for a summary of the controversy (which finds Clark’s thesis persuasive), see Terrence G. Kardong, OSB, “Who Wrote the *Dialogues of Saint Gregory*? A Report on a Controversy,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 39.1 (2004), 31–39. In a June 6, 1961 journal entry, Merton does however mention a “good talk on Monastic Traditions and tradition, both necessary,” given to the community by Dom Jean Leclercq during a visit to Gethsemani, that included “Recent theories about St. Benedict and the Rule,” and adds, “What seems to have stirred people most is the hypothesis that St. B. never existed. By this Dom L.’s visit will be most remembered” (Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960–1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996], 124).

Scholastica when he wished to part early during their final meeting (33), and receiving his culminating vision of the “whole world gathered together as though in one ray of the sun” (37–38). Merton provides his own meditative reflections on the highlights of the *Vita* and their pertinence to contemporary monastic life. He observes that Gregory’s presentation shows Benedict passing through “all the stages of monastic life known in his time—ascete, hermit, Pachomian cenobite. Having tried all these, he has reached his own conclusions and it is at Monte Cassino that he puts his own formula into effect” (18). Commenting on the key phrase from Gregory’s prologue, “*soli Deo placere desiderans*,” he notes, “it is not said that Benedict desired to possess, or to enjoy God alone, but to *please* God alone. {The} emphasis {is} on the fact that God is not for him a commodity to be ‘had’ but a Person to be loved and honored with one’s whole heart. (It is only in that way that He can be possessed!)” (20). In discussing Benedict’s taking the monastic habit, he points out both the undeveloped state of monasticism in Italy at the time, where the act of clothing itself, unaccompanied by vows, was regarded as monastic consecration, and the lesson for his own particular audience: “Let us remember however that the mere wearing of a religious habit, although the novice does not yet take vows, implies a desire to consecrate one’s life to God, and the intention to live a holy life entirely pleasing to God” (23). In the next episode, when Benedict combats fleshly temptation by throwing himself naked into a briar patch, Merton is careful to warn his charges: “All must be generous and uncompromising in renunciation of self, but all are not called to take an equally dramatic or drastic exterior way of fighting temptation. . . . This is a good example of a case in which we should imitate the *spirit* with which a saint overcomes himself, and reproduce his generosity, while not at the same time taking the exact same exterior means that he used” (24). He proposes the ideal of *custodia cordis*, guarding the heart, as one to be imitated by sons of Benedict, but warns against too narrow and rigid an interpretation of this virtue, a comment that is certainly reflective of Merton’s own ever more catholic breadth

of interests: "A person can have Benedictine *custodia cordis* and yet retain a variety of interests and occupations. It is not so much a matter of what you do and what you know, as how you do it and how you know it. Here too the motive is all-important. Cultivate self-custody not by strained and rigid introspection which leads to an unhealthy state, but by seeking God in all things and embracing His will with simplicity wherever it is made known to us" (27). Benedict's contests with the devil, which occupy a considerable part of the *Vita*, are considered as exemplifying the vocation of the monk as "the chosen instrument, the soldier of Christ who, by his prayers and self-denial, continues the work of the Incarnation which is a reconquest, by God, of His creation." This "work of spiritualizing and divinizing the world" is shared by all Christians, Merton says, but he goes on to note that "the principal part is played by the great saints, those with special charismatic gifts, special purity of heart" (29–30). Gregory's portrait of Benedict is seen as one that balances austerity and moderation, severity when needed with mercy and compassion, "a great tenderness and understanding of human frailty" (34). The key monastic themes of obedience, poverty, good works, penance, and fidelity to the common life are all found in the *Vita* as essential elements of Benedict's teaching (32–33). It is above all Benedict as a model of prayer that Merton proposes to his novices: "If we truly have the spirit of St. Benedict we will seek the face of God always in prayer, and will prefer nothing not only to the work of God but also, as did Benedict, to those hours of silent and solitary union with God in interior prayer" (35). The life of Benedict, and consequently the Benedictine life, is according to Merton "simply living the Gospel without fanfare." Benedict "*lived* the Gospel without talking about it. The mainspring of everything in St. Benedict is the *love of Christ*—in Himself, in the poor, in the monastic community, in the individual brethren. . . . This is the key to the monastic life and spirit" (37).

Part III, which constitutes more than three-quarters of the entire text (39–216), focuses on the *Rule* proper. Following brief comments on dating and sources (particularly scripture), Merton

looks at some of the textual problems associated with the *Rule*, the largely successful scholarly efforts to untangle the confusion, and a few examples of instances in which the seemingly dry, even pedantic efforts to restore correct readings to the text can be shown to have a significant impact on the actual way in which the *Rule* is lived out, concluding that “the findings of scholarship regarding the ancient text of the *Rule* . . . have a great importance for our true understanding of the mind of St. Benedict,” and that the “mentality which would prefer the rigidity and oversimplification of the *textus receptus* is also very likely to be the mentality which hates and distrusts scholarship. We must try not to cultivate such a mentality—it leads to ossification and stupor in the spiritual life” (46). Here as throughout the notes the focus invariably is directed eventually to the impact of the particular topic on the concrete practice of monastic living.

Merton then provides a rapid historical overview of the reception of the text by mentioning the major commentators through the centuries and their particular perspectives (borrowed largely from the *Benedictine Monachism* of Dom Cuthbert Butler, whom he praises as “one of our best students of St. Benedict and . . . a great modern representative of the black Benedictine tradition” [50], thus exemplifying the “ecumenical” openness toward non-Cistercian authors he had earlier recommended). He will make relatively sparse use of this commentary tradition in what is to follow, but on occasion he does provide a few citations, particularly from Dom Edmond Martène, the scholarly seventeenth-century Benedictine whose massive commentary, which summarizes and quotes from most of his predecessors, is printed with the *Rule* itself in the edition found in the *Patrologia Latina*; most, though not all, of Merton’s references to commentators other than Martène himself are actually borrowed from this source as well.

The main body of the text is subtitled “A SPIRITUAL COMMENTARY ON THE *RULE* OF ST. BENEDICT,” and Merton immediately explains that his “main purpose is to look at the *Rule* in so far as it *forms us* as spiritual sons of St. Benedict” (50). The two major

aims of his commentary are therefore to find the major spiritual ideas of the *Rule* and to discover how the principles based on these ideas are to be lived out in the day-to-day experience of the monastery. The *Rule* is to be regarded as “not merely a body of external regulations to direct the outward actions we perform all day long; it is more than just a legal code, intended to establish good order in the monastery. It is a *discipline* which forms the monk in his entirety, reaches into every department of his life and brings it under the direct action of divine love, of the Holy Spirit” (51). The commentary has three principal areas of concentration: first the Prologue, in which Merton finds “the theological foundation of the whole spiritual doctrine of St. Benedict” (51), to which is appended a discussion of the various types of monks as presented in the opening chapter of the *Rule*; second, examination of key chapters on the abbot and the monastic community, which includes consideration of monastic work, spiritual reading, and poverty; finally, occupying more than a quarter of the entire text, a thorough explication of chapter 7, on the degrees of humility, which Merton like most commentators considers the spiritual heart of the entire *Rule*.

Merton’s discussion of the Prologue (51–71) provides both a synthetic overview of the key theological and spiritual themes that undergird the entire *Rule*, and a detailed textual analysis of certain key passages. His starting point is the recognition that the *Rule* is properly to be understood as “a way of salvation”—or rather as *the* way of salvation, for there is only a single way—as “adapted and applied” to a specific group, cenobitic monks (51). Thus the theological principles he finds governing the Prologue are the basic truths of the Christian proclamation, the good news of salvation in Christ. The starting point is God as loving and patient Father urgently calling His children to respond to His invitation “to seek union with Him, to dwell with Him in ‘his tabernacle’” (53). The second dimension is of course human sinfulness and the need for ascetic discipline to overcome what Benedict calls “the sloth of disobedience”—*inobedientiae desidia*: Merton finds in this phrase “the connotations of boredom, futility, aimlessness, inertia,

pointlessness of an existence given over to the cult of our own whims and impulses" (54–55). Such an attitude leads to a kind of paralyzing fear and hopelessness from which one can be freed only by the Word of God, Benedict's third key theological theme. The call to conversion, and the power for transformation, come through the Scriptures, which the *Rule* echoes and channels to its monastic audience. Here Merton unfolds phrase by phrase the teaching of Benedict on the "voice of God" which "awakens in us *desire and zeal*—and confidence," which "calls us with equal *tenderness and urgency*" (60). Ultimately of course the Word teaches "that without Christ we can do nothing, but that if we have trust in Him He can and does work in us miracles of grace—and we extend this thought to embrace the entire human race" (63). Here is Benedict's fourth great theme, the working of divine grace, the "light of love that works in our souls, transforming them into the likeness of our divine Exemplar, Jesus Christ" (65). This grace "must bear fruit in good works, without which we cannot be sons of God and cannot reach the end of our journey," and to bring forth fruit "we must abide in Jesus, the true vine" (66). This theology of grace, Merton sums up, "is sufficient to give us the full theology of the Prologue. It contains implicitly all St. Benedict's teaching on humility and obedience, the principal good works by which we correspond with grace and allow it to bear fruit in our lives" (69). But "for grace to work effectively in our souls, we must establish ourselves *in a favorable milieu*, where everything is ordered to promote correspondence with grace"—this, for those called to it, is the monastery, the school of the Lord's service, "a place where there is *leisure for thought, study and prayer*" marked by "a certain strictness and ascetic labor" (69), and above all by the obedience that will reverse the sloth (*desidea*) of disobedience, the life of unreality. Such a life, Merton concludes, is profoundly paschal: "we taste the joy of being *united with Jesus Christ* on the Cross, and realize that therefore we are destined, by His mercy, for a share in the joy of his Kingdom," and also oriented toward union with God, "a truly contemplative life, alone with God in silence and love" (71).

Having considered principles, Merton, with Benedict, then turns to practice in the first chapter's examination of the types of monks, cenobites and anchorites, sarabaites and gyrovagues (71–79). While affirming and developing Benedict's basic insights here, Merton provides some helpful context that puts Benedict's critique in perspective. Noting the "spontaneous development" of early oriental monasticism when "many original and unusual forms of monastic life sprung up of themselves," as well as the outward similarities of the later mendicant orders to the pattern of life "of the *wandering monk* which St. Benedict seems to reprove in its very nature," Merton warns that "These qualifications should teach us to read St. Benedict's chapter with care and with understanding, and not with a rigid and absolutistic mentality" (72). He then applies this caveat to the question of whether Benedict allows for anchorites within the context of the *Rule*, a question of course that was of fundamental personal importance for Merton throughout his monastic life, including the period during which he was giving these conferences. He maintains that Benedict allows for a life of monastic solitude "no longer live[d] according to the fixed rule of the cenobium" after "*long training . . . in the cenobium, under a rule and an abbot. In other words, {there is} no sanctity without discipline, and discipline in practice is not learned without obedience and regularity*" (73). What unites cenobite and anchorite and distinguishes them from undisciplined types of monks is their participation in the common battle against evil, as members of a common body, the Church, in responding to grace whether mediated by the community or received directly from God or His angels. Sarabaites, in contrast, are untrained, guided by their own will and therefore controlled by their own subjective "fancies and illusions," including even the illusion of sanctity (75). What is missing above all is the initiation into the specifically Christ-centered dimension of authentic spiritual experience: "Hence the sarabaites and gyrovagues *really know nothing of Christ*; they have not learned, by subjection, to share in the monk's interior, spiritual knowledge of union with Christ in the mystery of His passion and His humility and His

obedience to the Father" (76). There is no stability, no perseverance, no obedience to rule and superior: "The gyrovagues quite obviously are not only running away from the regular life but are in full flight from all responsibility whatever. They are in a lamentable condition, escapists who cannot bear to face themselves or to face other men for any length of time, always hoping for something better just around the corner. It is clear that they are simply the *logical consequence* of sarabaitism pushed to its extreme" (78). While Merton points out that "*Today*—obviously the sarabait and the gyrovague exist only in spirit" (78) rather than as distinct monastic types, that does not mean the attitudes and state of mind they represent cannot and do not assume contemporary forms.

The section on "THE ABBOT AND HIS MONKS" (79–152) that follows is the most wide-ranging, apparently somewhat heterogeneous in content, but in fact providing a broad and quite thorough picture of how life in the monastery actually operates. The fundamental role of the abbot for Benedict is evident from the fact that he turns his attention to him, addressing him directly, immediately after the introductory chapter on the kinds of monks. Merton stresses that for Benedict the abbot's role is not merely to oversee the monastery, or to enforce obedience to the *Rule*, but to act in the place of Christ, "to lead the monastic community as Christ led and formed and instructed the band of the Apostles. . . . He takes the place of Christ in the monastery. His leadership is the leadership not of a human organizer, but of Christ. His doctrine and formation are those of Christ" (81). This happens not automatically but through the faith of both abbot and community, who trust that the Holy Spirit will act through the abbot despite inevitable human weaknesses. The abbot has a responsibility both to the monks under his care and to God, to make the will of God for the community known and lived by both teaching and example, using discretion and discernment to deal with different types of monks in ways most appropriate to each. Merton points out that the complementary qualities of firmness and kindness in Benedict's portrait of the abbot receive different emphasis in the

two chapters allotted to him: "Firmness is stressed more in chapter 2; kindness is more in the foreground in chapter 64, the fruit of later years and of his most mature reflection" (90). The latter chapter, with its succinct phrases "*prodesse magis quam praeesse*" ("to benefit more than to rule") (93), "*oderit vitia; diligat fratres*" ("Let him hate the vices; let him love the brothers") (94), and "*ne quid nimis*" ("nothing in excess") (95), is seen as Benedict's seasoned wisdom on the principles of abbatial governance, though to conclude his discussion Merton returns to Benedict's reminder in chapter 2 that legitimate concerns for the material well-being of the monastery must never take precedence over "the true office of the superior, to see that love is sought above all else in the monastery" (97).

Just as the abbot represents Christ to and for the community, so the community itself is called to represent Christ. Therefore the community is not merely passive and inert in carrying out the abbot's commands, but participates in the life of Christ in freely and dynamically loving God and one another. The community is responsible not only for choosing the abbot, but for advising him about important matters, though decisions finally rest with him. Merton points out that such decisions are never made arbitrarily, in a vacuum, but according to the principles set down in the *Rule*. "He must judge according to the virtues of *prudence* and *justice*. In so doing, he will above all *follow the Rule* himself. The abbot does not just interpret the *Rule* to suit his own pleasure and interest—he is guided by the *Rule* like the others; he *applies* the *Rule* with freedom and prudence. But his government follows the lines laid down by the *Rule*" (101–102). Community members, on their part, are called to be frank yet detached and respectful in giving their ideas and opinions, and above all willing to surrender their own will and let go of their own desires whatever a decision and directive may be: "detachment and humility crown the work of the disciple. He follows the decision of the superior with a truly supernatural spirit, and gives up the will of his own heart. This, again, is one of the tests of the true monk" (103).

Relations among community members should likewise be marked by “mutual respect and affection,” especially toward the “seniors,” those who are “elder” in the monastic life, whatever their relative age, who in turn should be “a *channel of grace*” (104) for those junior to them. Merton stresses the realism of the *Rule*, which doesn’t naively presume that everything is perpetually “lovely and spiritual”; monastic life requires “much patience, self-denial, prudence, discretion, mortification, and above all *humility*. . . . *It is simply a question of taking things as they are, but with patience, humility and a spirit of faith*, and thus overcoming evil with good” (107). Benedict’s repeated warnings against “murmuring,” discontent whether expressed or suppressed, are “really fundamental to the whole Benedictine spirit, so that a monk who allows himself to complain and criticize, even if only interiorly, no matter how regular he may be in everything else, is not really a monk according to the mind of St. Benedict” (112). Merton lets his novices know that such detachment and equanimity are far from easy, even for “souls who have progressed a great deal” (113). He points out that “in so far as it leads to a recognition of our own poverty and weakness, and prompts us to pray for help and forgiveness, the inner bitterness may be turned to good account” (113). Ultimately, the foundation on which relations within the community are to be based is to regard others as Christ, a phrase explicitly used to refer to the sick and to guests, but implicitly extending to all within (and outside) the monastery (115).

In turning to the other offices mentioned in the *Rule*, Merton emphasizes that qualifications for leadership include first of all bearing witness to “Christ living in the monastery” (118), then a sense of maturity and responsibility and a certain amount of initiative, being “someone who can be left on his own to carry out an assignment—not one who has to be constantly watched and told what to do next” (118). In St. Benedict’s portrait of the cellarer, the monk most responsible for the efficient operations of the monastery, Merton finds not just a list of job requirements but “a picture of a *completely mature monk*, according to the mind

of St. Benedict" (119). He is marked by wisdom, "a *wholesome blend of faith and common sense*" (120), reflectiveness, sobriety, fear of the Lord, humility, kindness toward others, "treat[ing] those in their care *as persons and not as objects*" (122). Merton points out that "The officers in a Benedictine monastery are *not mere functionaries or bureaucrats*" (122): the relations between officials and subordinates are not institutional and impersonal, the mentality of the secular world, but marked by care, affection and understanding. The same sense of responsibility, of being of service to others, should be evident in all assigned tasks—manual labor, cooking, reading in the refectory, etc.

These reflections lead naturally to consideration of the role of work in the monastic life, and from there to the balance of work and prayer, with consideration of the importance of *lectio divina*, spiritual reading. Merton questions the standard view that "the monk has three main obligations: choir, *lectio divina*, and manual labor—their importance graduated in this order" and suggests that it is "more truly the mind of St. Benedict to put it this way: the monk leads an overall life of prayer, in which two things are important . . . : (a) formal prayer whether public (divine office) or private; (b) useful activity" (130). Merton lays heavy emphasis on the principle of balance and integration: "A contemplative life that is all words and ideas and never takes effect in any kind of work is utterly useless. Work (intellectual or physical) integrates thought and life into a single unity. Without this integration, 'contemplation' leads only to illusion and ruin. On the other hand, *busy and solicitous activity* or 'activism' is equally ruinous for the monastic spirit. The monk must learn to strike the happy medium, in humble, peaceful and productive activity of mind and body" (131–32). He also notes that Benedict speaks not simply of labor but of manual labor, from a Cistercian perspective, at least, "an *integral part in the life of a monk*, and this cannot be passed over without harm and loss" (132), both as a way of earning one's living and as "a true safeguard of a genuine interior life" (133). This is balanced not only by the public prayer of the *opus Dei* but by *lectio*, "listening to God, hearing His word, and preparing to

respond to His word with our whole being" (134). Returning to the dimension of work, Merton notes the way the *Rule* fosters respect for genuine craftsmanship "because even humble skills are gifts of God and enable man to participate in some measure in the creative activity of God. In the exercise of his skills and arts, as well as in all other work, man acts as a child of His Father, the Creator" (136). Such an attitude toward skillful work counters an over-dependence on time-saving technology as a supposed way of increasing opportunities for prayer: "{It is} good to use machines {but we should} avoid using them merely to 'get through work and get to prayer,' avoid using machines to highlight {a} false opposition between work and prayer" (136).

Neither individual members nor the community as a whole should regard the products of such work primarily from the perspective of material gain. The community should be self-supporting to the extent possible, "But the *desire of gain* and especially *the desire to hoard up and accumulate money or goods* is absolutely alien to the monastic spirit and is disastrous to it—so much so that in a monastery where the love of money and possessions prevails, it is extremely difficult even for a detached monk individually to become a saint" (140). In this context, the central importance of poverty for the monastic life is considered as the culmination of this lengthy discussion of the community. "The spirit of the *Rule* is to renounce all proprietorship, even spiritual—including attachment to everything that is distinctly 'mine,' even 'my' spiritual life, 'my' way of doing and seeing things, 'my' contemplation" (144). Poverty is seen first of all as a means of being joined with Christ, "dying with Christ—the bare Cross," then as a way to "reproduce the *charity of the apostolic community gathered around Christ*" (145). In the Jerusalem community, the first Christians gave up private ownership of property and shared all they had with the community as a whole.

These two elements are essential to the idea of monastic poverty. It is a poverty in which proprietorship is renounced *in favor of the community* (or of the whole Church). The monk

becomes poor in order to share whatever earthly goods he may have had with the poor and with the community. He labors to share the poverty and labors of the poor. He shares the fruits of his labors with the poor. The fruits of the monastic labor are then distributed by the abbot to the brethren *not according to their merit but according to their need.* (148–49)

Such detachment, then, is both integral to the material well-being of the community and at the heart of the monk's own commitment to center his life on Christ present in "the least of these," among his monastic brothers and among those who look to the monastery for sustenance, material and spiritual.

The final portion of Merton's "Spiritual Commentary" turns to "the longest" and "most important" chapter of the *Rule*, chapter 7 on humility (152–216), both the culmination of Benedictine asceticism and the foundation for genuine contemplation: "*here we have for St. Benedict the real interior life of the monk.* Hence this section of the *Rule* is of the greatest importance. Nothing is equal to it in the whole teaching of St. Benedict. This is, in a nutshell, the *whole* of the monastic life [T]he degrees of humility are a summary of the whole *praxis* (active life) which prepares us for *theoria* (contemplation) which is hinted at as the chapter ends" (152–53). Merton begins by encouraging the novices to learn the chief points of the chapter by heart, not only to memorize them but through meditative reflection to allow them to penetrate beneath the surface, to "go down into the depths of the heart, and reach the real roots of our nature" (154). This reflection must be complemented by action: "No amount of commentaries can help us to understand St. Benedict's humility better if we do not *practice* it" (154). The monastic vow of conversion of manners, of commitment to deep inner transformation, is dependent upon a progressive appropriation of the successive stages of growth in humility, drawing the monk to embrace truth, the truth about himself but also Christ the Truth, who is also the Way and the Life: "It is by union with the humble Christ that we travel to union with Christ Who is Truth and Light. The way of humility is simply the way of the imitation of Christ" (157). Chapter 7 is

even more rooted in the scriptures than the rest of the *Rule* “because St. Benedict believed that the way of humility was essentially the way of the Gospel, and that it summed up in practice the whole ascesis of the Gospel” (158–59). In this conviction St. Benedict is in conformity with the patristic and monastic tradition that preceded him, as Merton illustrates by his examination of St. Basil’s *Homily 20, On Humility*, which shows how the authentic glory of being created in the image of God was distorted by the fall into the false glory of human vanity, and can be restored only by the way of humility in union with the humble Christ.

Reflecting on the introductory lines of this chapter, Merton uses language that corresponds closely to that found in some of his most familiar and influential writing. He notes that for St. Benedict, “the essence of pride lies in *exalting ourselves above others*, giving ourselves an exaggerated preference, imagining we are vastly greater than we actually are, or than others are. This means in effect placing ourselves practically in the position that belongs rightly to God alone. *Pride then is making of oneself one’s own god*. Humility is only restoring the right order and truth” (168). Because it is built on illusion, pride inevitably breeds insecurity, a constant desire to be affirmed in our own falsehood, whether that desire is expressed in an aggressive desire to control others, in constant criticism and jealousy of others, or in “the virulent form of pride that is hidden under the apparently sweet and humble, apparently self-deprecating exterior of so many of us in this country” who want to be liked, accepted, affirmed by everyone (169). Such efforts, whatever form they may take, involve an “immense waste of energy” in one struggling “to manipulate reality and make things come out in accord with his illusions about himself” (169). In contrast, facing and accepting reality, above all the reality of one’s own common humanity, “brings relief and rest. . . . In this sense, he who humbles himself is exalted: he is relieved from the tyranny of his illusions about himself. He no longer has to struggle for vain feelings of security—he can have *real security* in acceptance of the truth. And he becomes *able to love*” (170). Here Merton makes the teaching of

this sixth-century document come alive for his mid-twentieth-century audience by finding a tone and terminology that powerfully convey the essential meaning and perennial significance of a life of humility. "The degrees of humility properly understood," he sums up, "do not by any means imply an artificial and strained *perfectionism*, but rather a complete and integral adaptation to reality" (173).

The same perspective marks the discussion of the individual degrees of humility that occupies the rest of the text. The first degree, "*the avoidance of all deliberate sin*" (173), is motivated above all by a sense of the continual presence of God. More explicitly than Benedict, Merton notes that God looks upon human actions not just to judge and to punish but to show love and mercy, and that this can be a powerful motive to overcome temptation: "The thought that *Love* sees me is a deterrent from sin. Shall I hurt Him Who loves me infinitely? . . . At the same time, the thought that God sees me is a source of hope. He will give me grace." Consistent with his contemplative outlook, Merton also points out that God is watching not only in His transcendence, "from heaven," but "in a mysterious way God sees us from the depths of our own soul" (177). Ultimately what is fundamental to this degree is to surrender one's own will, which is also to surrender one's own limited and distorted perspective: "Thus to preserve ourselves from illusion and blindness and to retain our spiritual vision, we must *deny ourselves* and turn aside from our desires and try to *see things as God Himself sees them in us*" (181). The second degree moves from avoiding deliberate sin to making "what is good in itself or good for others," rather than one's own desires and preferences, the criterion for one's actions (182). In the third degree, "the motive of love comes in to color the whole concept of humility," not just fear or prudence or a sense of duty (184). One is obedient to God in union with the love of Christ who "humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death" (Phil. 2:8): "ours is a life of *imitation of Christ*, and not just of imitation of His virtues and life in general but above all imitation of *His Passion*. . . . In imitation of Christ, the monk

empties himself of his worldly self and renounces worldly liberty in order to become obedient even to the point of laying down his life if necessary" (185). Humility is seen by Benedict, and by Merton, not just in a moral but more deeply in a soteriological context, as a participation in the kenosis of Christ. The fourth degree puts this in concrete, practical terms—putting up with unpleasant and even unjust demands of the life of monastic obedience patiently and without resentment. Merton sees this degree as the real test of growth in humility, because it entails the surrender of what he calls elsewhere the empirical ego. "We are not willing to give up our superficial and outward self, and live in the depths where insults do not penetrate. But it is this superficial and worldly identity that must be renounced" (186). To realize the fourth degree of humility is to become sharply aware of the distinction between the illusory "persona" created by one's own desires and fears and "the true person of a man, his inner spiritual self, [which] is not affected by insults and lack of consideration" (186). The fifth degree moves to a willingness to be perfectly honest with one's spiritual director in "putting aside *all fear* of being known for what we are, of being known by another as we know ourselves, the good points and the bad points, without glossing things over, without ambiguities" (191), in order to receive appropriate guidance; Benedict explicitly mentions evil thoughts, but Merton points out that true humility also involves openness about positive aspirations without giving way to pride or self-satisfaction. The experienced novice master also cautions that this manifestation of conscience is not to be equated with scrupulosity, or with placing on display a complicated personality. "*Beware of trying to gain attention by being too interesting or important in the eyes of the director. Just be yourself, and desire to be known as you are, not as you would like to be*" (192). The sixth degree, contentment with poor and insignificant goods and circumstances, is not only a way of being detached from one's own will but a way of sharing the lot of those on the margins of society: "The poor don't get what they want" (197). It is not merely a matter of putting up with discomfort or deprivation:

“it means *contentment and peace* in the sacrifice of the ordinary natural goods, or even in some way spiritual goods, of the monastic state. . . . A monk who has reached this degree of humility will not complain or even be surprised or distressed interiorly: if the community is not perfect, if there are many things lacking in it, if even the atmosphere of peace and regularity is somewhat lacking, provided it is not his own fault” (199–200). To practice the sixth degree of humility is to let go of the desire to be recognized and appreciated, to be held in high respect by others: “*it is the humility of a man of virtue who has altogether ceased to attach any importance to his virtue, and does not give himself any airs before God, knowing that his virtues are as nothing in God’s sight*” (201). It is even the surrender of the desire for consolations in prayer, or of “progress” in the spiritual life: “So many monks are disconcerted because they have ‘made so many efforts’ and still ‘don’t get anywhere.’ Why do they think it so important to ‘get somewhere’? The important thing is to do the will of God, not to be rewarded for it in this life. . . . It is a form of pride to be surprised and to get upset because we do not feel ourselves to be like saints. Who do we think we are?” (201). The seventh, the last of the “interior” degrees of humility, the acceptance of one’s own nothingness, must not be equated, Merton cautions, with “morbid self-depreciation” (201). It is not a matter of putting oneself down, but of “complete self-forgetfulness in order to have one’s eyes wide open to the wonderful qualities of others and to rejoice in these with childlike simplicity. . . . *The humble man does not regard himself as the last in a collection of criminals but the last in a community of saints.* This is the real key” (202–203). Moreover it has its real effect in binding one more closely to the humble Christ.

It implies also *union with Christ on the Cross*—and communion in His self-emptying. . . . [T]o try to practice this seventh degree without reference to the Cross of Christ and union with Him would be silly and morbid. Merely to consider oneself a worm and no man, as an isolated human individual lost in his own nothingness, without any access

to God, would be almost hellish. One must be prepared to *feel* this extreme isolation, perhaps. But faith always shows us that the value of such a moral trial consists in our secret union with Christ, *and in the fact that He suffers in us*—that consequently it is good to be humbled thus in the sight of men in order to be united to the sufferings of Christ, the key to all true glory. (204–205)

Merton spends less time on the last five, exterior, degrees of humility, noting first of all that they “have no meaning, or very little meaning, when they are not founded on interior humility” (205). Outward actions need to be an expression of, not a substitute for, inner transformation. Apart from interior humility, the eighth degree, faithful practice of the common rule of the monastery, “would be *mere conformism* which would be a plague in the monastic life” (206) instead of a Christ-like willingness to share fully the ordinary lives of one’s brothers. The ninth, tenth, and eleventh degrees, all of which “refer to the monk’s manner of speaking and his outward expression of what is in his soul,” should be “an eloquent expression of the interior peace and tranquility of a soul united to God” (207). Love of silence, refraining from laughter, practice of sensible speech are the hallmarks of a humble monk who does not need to be constantly calling attention to himself. At the same time, while warning against a kind of artificial and self-conscious piety that has no depth, Merton notes that “it cannot be said either that one should wait until he has acquired the seventh degree before he even attempts to practice the exterior degrees of humility. Some would never begin at that rate” (208). The development of a humble spirit will naturally show corresponding effects in one’s outward deportment, but the important thing is for humility to grow from the inside out, which explains why the exterior degrees are placed after the interior. This applies to the twelfth and final degree as well, which is not merely walking around with eyes lowered: “The true essence of this degree is that the monk’s whole body and all his actions should be penetrated by humility and manifest it, just as his soul is penetrated and saturated with it. . . . The twelfth

degree implies that a man is everywhere just as quiet and collected as he is at prayer" (212–13).

Merton concludes his discussion of the degrees of humility, and thus of the *Rule* as a whole, by noting that the ladder of humility leads the monk from a salutary fear of the Lord "to a charity which casts out fear altogether" (215). The humble person is freely and joyfully drawn toward the good, in "union with the Incarnate Word, implying the realization that all our works are His works and that all our faults have been assumed by Him," and in response to the interior leading of the Holy Spirit (215). The spiritual guidance of the *Rule*, and therefore of this "spiritual commentary" on the *Rule*, leads "not to absolute perfection, nor even to the highest perfection possible in this present life, but only to the summit of the *bios praktikos* or active (ascetic) life. Here a new life begins, the life of charity and contemplation, the life of purity of heart" (214). As Merton points out in his concluding words, the *Rule* directs those who follow it to drink more deeply from the sources of its own inspiration: "UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF THE DIVINE SPIRIT THE HUMBLE MONK IS NOW READY FOR THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE for which St. Benedict refers us to other books, especially Cassian and the Fathers" (216)—which is, not by coincidence, the title of another set of conferences, one that introduces the novices to contemplation in the monastic tradition.

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The handwritten title page of Merton's own typescript of the *Rule* conferences, now at the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville, includes the date "1957"; the same date is also found on the typed title page of the multigraphed version of the notes retyped from Merton's typescript and distributed to the novices. On some copies of these notes, however, reproduced from the same masters, the date "1957" is crossed out and "1960" is added by hand. It is evident, then, that these conferences were given at least twice during Merton's tenure as novice master. Other documentation, while fragmentary, can provide somewhat greater precision as to the time period during which the conferences were given. Not

surprisingly, perhaps, there is very little mention of these conferences in Merton's private journals, since their preparation required considerably less wide-ranging reading than for other courses with more historical breadth. Since Merton's talks to the novices only began to be taped in April, 1962, they are unavailable for most, though not all, of the period when Merton was presenting these conferences. There is, however, documentary material that can assist in the dating of the presentation of the *Rule* conferences. On the verso pages of Merton's typescript he frequently jotted brief notes for introductory comments before beginning the conference proper. Some of these notes concerned practical details of communal life (e.g. "Leaving books around // Laughing + talking" [2v]; "clean feet / save water—shaves" [74v]) or instructions for performing certain monastic functions (e.g. "Agnus Dei—beat breast" [21v]; "Chapter Faults—short objective . . . not humorous" [32v]) or work details ("work. power line. Martin / Basil / Yvo / Alberic" [9v]; "Work—woods—big trees—Fence" [70v]); but frequently there was mention of feast days, or of particular persons or events, whether pertaining to the monastery or to the world at large. While the writing is tiny, the references often cryptic, and the notations usually cancelled after use, enough information can be gathered from these notes to provide a fairly clear idea of the sequence of the conferences.

The 1957 conferences were evidently begun sometime during the summer, as a work schedule for "oblates" extending over six days of the week is presented, which would seem to suggest people staying at the monastery for a fairly extended period; in the same note, "Fr [i.e. "Fratr"—"Brother"] Lawrence" is mentioned; this is Ernesto Cardenal, who was still a postulant in July 1957.¹² Page

12. See Merton's letter of July 5, 1957 to Dom Gabriel Sortais, the Abbot General, in which he mentions "a postulant who as a poet is fairly well known in Nicaragua" (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990], 103).

15v of the typescript¹³ mentions “L’ville Dickey etc.” which is likely a reference to a trip to Louisville that Merton made on September 6, 1957 to consult Terrell Dickey about layouts for a postulants’ guide.¹⁴ In the same note mention is made of “Bruno James” in connection with “St Bern[ard] statue” which may be a reference to a letter Merton had received from Fr. James “about his new book on St. Bernard.”¹⁵ No further useful information is found until typescript page 32v¹⁶ where Merton mentions a Columbian postulant, Guillermo Jaramillo, who has apparently not yet arrived; he is first mentioned in a journal entry of January 24, 1958.¹⁷ This reference is followed shortly (on page 34v¹⁸) by mention of Candlemas (the Feast of the Purification, February 2). Later references to “Our Father Athanasius,” whose feast is May 2 (44v¹⁹) and to “Nativity BVM” (54v²⁰) on September 8 apparently bring the conferences through the summer months. On typescript page 56v,²¹ references to “Romanus”, “bishop” and “war—pray peace” seem to refer to Merton’s trip to Louisville on September 25, 1958, when he saw Fr. Romanus Ginn off to Rome for biblical studies and stopped at the Chancery to speak with Bp. Maloney; in the same journal entry, from the following day, Merton mentions the current crisis with China over the offshore island of Quemoy.²² Further evidence for this dating is found in the left margin about midway

13. Page 42 of the present edition.

14. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals*, vol. 3: 1952–1960, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1996), 116 [9/10/57]; the typescript note also mentions “Carmel etc.” but Merton’s journal does not mention a visit to the Louisville Carmelite convent, so the identification is not certain.

15. *Search for Solitude*, 109-10 [8/10/57].

16. Page 82 of the present edition.

17. *Search for Solitude*, 159; he actually arrives, unexpectedly, on February 20 (see *Search for Solitude*, 173).

18. Page 86 of the present edition.

19. Page 108 of the present edition.

20. Page 132 of the present edition.

21. Page 139 of the present edition.

22. *Search for Solitude*, 218–19.

down page 57 of the typescript, where there is a notation that appears to be the date “9-1-58” with “p. 74” and an arrow pointing upward written above it, and a horizontal line extended between the lines of typed text; this marks the exact spot at which page 74 of the multigraphed copy of the text ends,²³ and suggests that the typist, probably one of the novices, marked the place where he had stopped typing for the day. Information becomes somewhat more abundant for the final section of the course. On typescript page 67v²⁴ there is a reference to “kerygma,” which may refer to Merton’s privately printed *Nativity Kerygma*, copies of which arrived on December 19, 1958;²⁵ reference to the antiphon “O admirabile” in the same note probably refers to the liturgy of the Feast of the Circumcision. Mention on the following page of “Hanekamp” (68v²⁶) with the additional notation “loneliness” almost certainly refers to the death of neighbor and one-time monk Herman Hanekamp on December 30, 1958;²⁷ the same note mentions “F circumcison”—New Year’s Day. Subsequent notes refer to “Epiph” (January 6) (70v²⁸), “St Anthony” (January 17) and “Chair of Unity Octave” (January 18–25) (77v²⁹), “St Agnes” (January 21) (81v³⁰) and “St Alberic” (January 26) (86v³¹). On page 89 of the typescript³² there is another marginal notation, presumably again by the typist, reading “1/31” with a horizontal arrow, pointing to the place where page 119 of the multigraphed copy begins.³³ Finally, on

23. Page 139 of the present edition (after “. . . tragedy.”).

24. Page 162 of the present edition.

25. *Search for Solitude*, 240.

26. Page 166 of the present edition.

27. *Search for Solitude*, 242.

28. Page 171 of the present edition.

29. Page 187 of the present edition.

30. Page 194 of the present edition.

31. Page 203 of the present edition.

32. Page 209 of the present edition (at “b) Laughter”).

33. There are two additional handwritten notations of dates: in the bottom left margin of typescript page 78 (page 187 of the present edition) is the date “1/17”, and on typescript page 85 (page 201 of the present edition) is the date “Jan 29”; neither of these notations, however, corresponds precisely to page endings in the

typescript page 90v,³⁴ opposite the second last page of the notes, is a reference to “Foresters,” who are also mentioned in a February 7, 1959 journal entry: “The foresters were here the other day looking at what we had done to the woods.”³⁵ The evidence, then, indicates that the *Rule of St. Benedict* conferences began sometime during the summer of 1957, continued throughout the following year, how regularly it is impossible to determine, and concluded in early February, 1959.

The evidence for the 1960 conferences is more extensive and more varied than that for the earlier presentation of the course. Introductory notations for this second presentation can usually (but not always³⁶) be distinguished by use of different ink or more generally by chronological sequence from those of the 1957–1959 conferences sometimes found on the same verso pages of the typescript. On page 5v of the typescript,³⁷ mention of the Bishop of Kandy (Ceylon) refers to his visit to Gethsemani in mid-June, 1960,³⁸ confirmed by mention of the Feast of Corpus Christi (June 16, 1960) on the same page. This dating indicates that the reference to Krushchev on page 4v³⁹ almost certainly pertains to the

multigraphed copy: page 103 of the copy ends 8 lines above the bottom of typescript page 78, and page 113 of the copy ends 8 lines beyond the end of typescript page 85.

34. Page 212 of the present edition.

35. *Search for Solitude*, 256.

36. References to the Feast of Corpus Christi and to an exam on July 4 (45v), and to the Feast of St. Camillus (July 18) (on a separate handwritten page following typescript page 47) could fit chronologically either the sequence from 1958 or that from 1961; other evidence suggests that Merton stopped giving exams in these courses in later years, so perhaps at least the first two references are more likely to refer to the first presentation; in either case the attribution does not affect determination of the overall chronological sequence for the course either time it was given.

37. This note is opposite the first page of Latin texts from Gregory’s *Vita Benedicti*, inserted after the outline of Benedict’s life in the text (page 18 of the present edition).

38. See *Turning Toward the World*, 14 [6/21/60].

39. Page 16 of the present edition.

U2 spy plane crisis referred to in Merton's journal for May 18, 1960,⁴⁰ and to Pasternak farther down on the same page (probably a note for the following class) to the author's death in late May.⁴¹ Thus Merton began this second presentation of the *Rule* conferences sometime in mid- or late May 1960. Subsequent mention of the feasts of St. Innocent (July 17) (11v⁴²), the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus⁴³ (July 27) (15v⁴⁴), St. Bartholomew (August 24) (separate page after 19⁴⁵), the Nativity of Mary (September 8) (21v⁴⁶), Holy Cross (September 14) (separate page after 21⁴⁷) and St. Jude (October 28) (separate page after 25⁴⁸) bring the conferences through the summer and into the fall of 1960. The next traceable reference, on typescript page 42v,⁴⁹ reads "General in Bro Nov" and evidently refers to the visitation of Abbot General Dom Gabriel Sortais beginning on February 15, 1961.⁵⁰ There is no further definitely datable reference until mention of "Berlin Crisis etc." on typescript page 47v,⁵¹ probably datable to September or October 1961.⁵² A reference to "Pax bulletin—Pax Mv" (55v⁵³) corresponds to Merton's early acquaintance with this British peace

40. *Search for Solitude*, 391.

41. See *Turning Toward the World*, 6 [6/1/60].

42. Page 33 of the present edition.

43. Merton's interest in this legend was stimulated by his friendship with Louis Massignon, who encouraged its celebration as a bond of communion between Christians and Muslims, since it was also referred to in the Qur'an; see *Search for Solitude*, 345 [11/18/59]; Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 262 [8/24/59 letter to Herbert Mason]; 277 [5/12/60 and 7/20/60 letters to Louis Massignon].

44. Page 43 of the present edition.

45. Page 52 of the present edition.

46. Page 57 of the present edition.

47. Page 57 of the present edition.

48. Page 65 of the present edition.

49. Page 103 of the present edition.

50. See *Turning Toward the World*, 94–97.

51. Page 115 of the present edition.

52. See *Turning Toward the World*, 166 [9/30/61], 170 [10/15/61].

53. Page 135 of the present edition.

group, first mentioned in the journal on November 7, 1961.⁵⁴ “Xmas trees” are mentioned on the verso of the second inserted handwritten page after typescript page 56.⁵⁵ The only explicit reference in the journals to this set of conferences occurs on January 3, 1962, when Merton writes: “Talking to the novices about craftsmanship in the Rule, and [Eric] Gill, and ‘Good Work’ and Shaker furniture. All subjects that are dear to me. And the sunny quiet room. Their presence and their love.”⁵⁶ Opposite the page of typescript text (56⁵⁷) containing this reference is the note “Asbury” which probably is a reference to Merton’s visit to Asbury Seminary on January 10, 1962.⁵⁸ This is the last clearly datable reference to this set of conferences in the typescript, but beginning on the Feast of the Translation of St. Benedict, July 11, 1962, sixteen conferences on chapter 7 of the *Rule*, running through December 19, were taped. As he mentions in the first of these conferences that it had been a while since the *Rule* had been discussed, Merton had evidently left off the *Rule* conferences shortly after his consideration of craftsmanship—probably after some discussion of poverty, the last topic before the long closing section on humility that he now takes up. It is evident from the tapes that these half-hour conferences were usually, but not always, given on Wednesdays,⁵⁹ generally on a weekly basis, though with a month-long gap between late July and late August. This schedule of approximately five months to discuss about a quarter of the text of the *Rule* notes is consistent with the time

54. See *Turning Toward the World*, 178.

55. Page 224 of the present edition.

56. *Turning Toward the World*, 193; see pages 135–36 of the present edition.

57. Page 136 of the present edition.

58. See *Turning Toward the World*, 194 [1/12/62].

59. Some of the tapes, now remastered on compact disc and part of the collection at the Bellarmine Thomas Merton Center, are dated; for some but not all others, dates can be determined from references made in the conferences themselves. A complete table of correspondences between the text and the tapes, including publication information for those tapes available commercially, is found in Appendix B of the present edition (261–62).

span of roughly a year and a half for each of the two presentations of the conferences. It is also clear both from the documentary evidence provided by the notations in Merton's typescript and from the absence of any further taped conferences on the *Rule* after 1962 that this series of conferences was only presented twice, in 1957–59 and 1960–62.

Merton did not teach from an identical text each time that he presented the course. Like any good teacher, he continued to add material for successive presentations. Over one hundred additional handwritten notes, most of them brief, are found in the typescript but not in the multigraphed version typed from the version of the notes in their original form. The references to Eric Gill and *Good Work* mentioned in Merton's January 3, 1962 journal entry, for example, are additions made after the typing of the first version. There are also ten longer handwritten notes made on separate sheets, not clearly integrated into the original text although generally on topics included there. Two of these notes, on the monk and study (222) and on *lectio divina* in the patristic tradition (224–25) draw on works published in 1961,⁶⁰ another, also on *lectio* (223–24), is based on a book he was reading in October of that year,⁶¹ while that on faults and penalties (219–21) uses as a main source a work published in 1941⁶² but only obtained in a photostatic version by the Gethsemani library in 1961, so these notes show Merton incorporating material he has recently discovered. His use of the new material in the conferences as delivered is evident in the recordings, as he draws on

60. A. J. Festugière, *op*, *Les Moines d'Orient I: Culture ou Sainteté: Introduction au Monachisme Oriental* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961); Gerard Sitwell, *osb*, *Spiritual Writers of the Middle Ages*, *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, vol. 40 (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961).

61. See *Turning Toward the World*, 170–71 [10/19/61]: "Also have been reading more Biblical theology—esp. G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* [Chicago, 1952], a book given to me by Eric Rust, the Baptist theologian. And a very fine book too."

62. Sr. M. Alfred Schroll, *osb*, *Benedictine Monasticism as Reflected in the Warnefrid-Hildemar Commentaries on the Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).

material from the last of the notes (229–32), on traditional images for spiritual ascent, to begin his July 11 opening conference on chapter 7 of the *Rule*, and continues to do so in the following conference of July 20. His conference of July 25 discusses in some detail a sermon of St. Bernard (158–59) that was not considered in the first version of the conferences. Even the minor addition of the word “*virtù*” to the revised text (178) is mentioned in the September 7 conference as pertaining to a current reading in the refectory. It is safe to assume that similar modifications based on added information would have been made during the earlier portions of the 1960–1962 course that were not yet being taped.

* * * * *

A comparison of the conferences as actually delivered with the written text reveals, as with previously published conferences,⁶³ that Merton made a considerable effort to present the material orally in as effective and engaging a manner as possible. Since the novices would eventually receive a multigraphed copy of the text (though in the case of the students of 1962, a somewhat outdated one), Merton did not have to concern himself that all his information was conveyed during his presentations. He could therefore concentrate on making the material as lively and pertinent as possible, and focus on the central spiritual message of, in this case, the degrees of humility as found in chapter 7 of the *Rule*.

One of Merton’s standard tools in the classroom setting was humor, often directed at himself, as when during the July 11 conference, in the course of mentioning various patterns of spiritual ascent, he notes that a traditional number of stages is seven, and after a brief pause calls attention to books with “seven” in their titles. At the end of the same conference he mentions that as a novice he was tempted to pride by his skill at shoveling manure with a pitchfork. In the announcements at the beginning

63. See *Cassian and the Fathers*, xlvii–liv, and *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, li–lxi, for discussion of the oral presentation of these sets of conferences.

of the following class he asks who had been playing bebop at 5:30 in the morning, and remarks that it sounded like “somebody was trying to frame me” since it seemed to be coming from the direction of St. Mary of Carmel (the hermitage). Referring to the fourth degree of humility, to obey even in difficult circumstances, during a mid-July conference, he remarks that one of the greatest difficulties for humility and obedience comes when the superior has gone along with an idea of someone you profoundly disagree with, and adds, “It can be difficult—believe me” which draws a good deal of laughter from the novices.

He also makes continuous efforts to situate Benedict’s teachings on humility in the context of other spiritual, social, and even political perspectives and events. In discussing the first degree of humility in the August 28 conference, Merton brings in the Bohemian reformer John Hus, who had appeared in the refectory reading of the previous day, in connection with the question of conscience, which he regards as basic for this first degree; he points out that Hus “got a dirty deal” from the Church, which was “a mess at the time,” and that he was subjectively sincere, yet contrasts him with Joan of Arc, who remained loyal to the Church even in the face of institutional betrayal, and mentions the importance of the gift of counsel as the guidance of the Holy Spirit not to “go too far one way or the other.” Later in the same conference he points out that consciousness of the last things, of death and judgement, is the basis of Buddhist meditation as well, and then goes on to relate a contemporary refusal to face death to the attitude of denial in the face of the massive destructive power of “the bomb.” In the September 7 conference he contrasts Benedict’s counsel of surrendering one’s own will with the attitude of secular society, traced back to Adam Smith, that if everyone pursues his own will, “everything will work out for the best.” On October 3, the Feast of St. Thérèse, he points out that her “little way” and the degrees of humility, particularly the fourth, have remarkable affinities; Benedictine humility and obedience exemplify “spiritual childhood” in the best sense. In discussing the fifth degree, on manifestation of conscience, in the following

conference, he brings in a Zen saying about swallowing a ball of red-hot iron to illustrate the negative consequences of keeping interior struggles concealed from a spiritual director. In the October 24 conference, he connects the sixth degree of humility, the acceptance of poverty, with the Cuban Missile Crisis, commenting that the illusory idea that one can run the world on one's own "leads to the situation we're in now." By making connections such as these Merton is showing the novices that the degrees of humility, the *Rule*, and the monastic life in general are not to be studied, and more importantly not to be lived, in a vacuum, but must be situated in the wider life of the Church and of the world if they are to be truly fruitful.

Merton frequently shows his spiritual and psychological sensitivity in explaining the meaning and exercise of humility. In the July 20 conference, for example, he points out that humility cannot simply be equated with passivity, and that for some people who "prefer the back seat" genuine humility might involve putting oneself forward. He emphasizes that humility must be connected to love to be fruitful—putting the other before oneself is not necessarily the same as putting oneself below others, which can be a way of self-pity and so still centered on self. In the July 25 conference he follows St. Bernard in focusing on humility as going down to the root of truth, the truth of our own nothingness apart from God, and stresses that this cannot be simply a formula, an abstract idea, but must be an experiential reality in which one can "take refuge"—finding a source of consolation and strength in total dependence on and trust in God. Later in the same conference he points out that often there is no immediately clear indication what God wills or does not will in some particular situation, and humility entails a willingness to remain in "the provisional," without attempting to manipulate uncertainties to become certainties. In the September 26 conference, he observes that we are naturally inclined to defend the superficial ego-self, with which we too readily identify, yet it is this self that must be renounced in order that the deeper self, the real self, the person as image of God, can be recognized and ac-

cepted. Humility, he notes in the November 7 conference, is not just resignation, a fatalistic acceptance of the status quo: this is an unhealthy attitude, not a virtue. True contentment with one's situation, whatever it may be, is a matter of decision, of choice, a spiritual practice, an act of putting things in perspective: if I have God, the gain or loss of other things loses its significance. In considering the last of the interior degrees of humility, the seventh, Merton warns the novices that one can go wrong in two ways, by misunderstanding it or by simply disregarding it. To accept oneself as the worst of all must not be reduced to a pathological condition, a kind of self-denigration that is self-love turned inside out, a kind of perverse pride in one's inferiority that is still self-centered. It is rather to rejoice in a brother's goodness as if it were my own, to leave behind all self-concern. Likewise the exterior degrees (8-12) properly involve a renunciation of singularity, an outward tranquility that is a sign and expression of interior peace.

Throughout these conferences, Merton is above all concerned to highlight the ways in which the way of humility is the way of discipleship, of following Jesus to the cross and to the Father. The paradox of ascending by descending, he points out in the first of these conferences, finds its model in the self-emptying of Christ described by Paul in the Philippians hymn. In the following conference he notes that suffering is not an end in itself but a way of sharing in the passion of Christ, and that real suffering often results not from physical deprivation but from damage to our self-esteem, to our sense of our own identity, which if accepted humbly can lead to a salutary death to self. As members of Christ, he reiterates in the September 26 conference, we are never isolated, never alone in our problems, for Christ himself suffers what we are suffering. In considering the seventh degree, he considers the paradox that even my sinfulness, which separates me from Christ, can unite me with Christ, who has taken upon himself the burden of our sins; accepting without morbidity one's own sinfulness is an acceptance of the need for grace and salvation and therefore a point at which Christ breaks into our

lives and brings about complete interior purification. The transformative power of the cross makes possible this completely supernatural dimension of humility.

* * * * *

It is no coincidence that *The Rule of St. Benedict* conferences were composed and delivered during the period when Merton's published writing focused largely on the monastic life, no doubt due in considerable part to his responsibilities as novice master for the formation of prospective monks. While there is no direct textual overlap between the conferences and the book and pamphlets written at this time, numerous thematic parallels help to situate the *Rule* conferences in the context of Merton's overall body of work in the latter part of the 1950s. *The Silent Life*, published in 1957 but written in 1955, around the time of first becoming novice master,⁶⁴ provides an overview of key aspects of monastic life in its opening section, entitled "The Monastic Peace," followed by discussions of "The Cenobitic Life" (Benedictines and Cistercians) and "The Hermit Life" (Carthusians and Camaldolese). Its early pages quickly focus attention on humility and obedience as the key virtues of monastic asceticism, described in terms that will characterize the conferences as well. Thus monastic humility is seen as "the victory of the real over the unreal—a victory in which false human ideals are discarded and the divine 'ideal' is attained, is experienced, is grasped and possessed, not in a mental image but in the present and concrete and existential reality of our life."⁶⁵ Such a victory is not attained through human effort but through the redemptive work of Christ and the invitation to share in the paschal mystery: "The monastic life is not only devoted to the study of Christ, or to the contemplation of Christ, or to the imitation of Christ. The monk seeks to *become* Christ by

64. See the February 7 and April 16, 1957 letters to Dom Gabriel Sortais for the circumstances in which this work was composed and the controversy that ensued (*School of Charity*, 99–102).

65. *Silent Life*, 5.

sharing in the passion of Christ."⁶⁶ The successive steps of humility as set out by the *Rule* are explicitly recognized as "participation in the mystery of the obedience of Christ" leading, as Benedict quotes from the First Letter of John at the end of chapter 7, to "that perfect charity which casts out fear."⁶⁷ In looking to St. Benedict, as presented by St. Gregory's *Life* and in the *Rule* itself, as the model of the monastic life, "the spirit, the 'form' without which no monk can truly call himself a Benedictine,"⁶⁸ Merton focuses on Gregory's key phrase "*soli Deo placere desiderans*"—"he sought to please God alone,"⁶⁹—the same message that forms "the essence" of the *Rule*, where it is presented in a more Christocentric language: "the renunciation of self-will in imitation of Christ . . . the following of Christ in obedience, humility and charity."⁷⁰ While recognizing that the *Rule* is an adaptation of the monasticism of the Desert Fathers, Merton adamantly denies that "St Benedict was in any way repudiating the primitive monastic ideal,"⁷¹ including a recognition and appreciation of the anchoritic life; he finds an "implicit orientation of the Rule of St Benedict towards eremitical solitude,"⁷² which is realized most directly in the Camaldolese form of Benedictine life, but is not, Merton implies, limited to that branch, for "as a representative of the authentic tradition in this matter, [Benedict] takes it for granted that some monks, after long testing in the cenobium, will want to go off into solitude and will receive permission to do so."⁷³ The pertinence of this passage for Merton's own monastic aspirations, at the time and later, is of course quite evident.

66. *Silent Life*, 9.

67. *Silent Life*, 18–19.

68. *Silent Life*, 62.

69. *Silent Life*, 63.

70. *Silent Life*, 65.

71. *Silent Life*, 146.

72. *Silent Life*, 148.

73. *Silent Life*, 148.

The pamphlet *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality*,⁷⁴ also published in 1957, likewise predates the conferences.⁷⁵ This text too takes as its starting point a profoundly Christ-centered view of the monastic life as one that “like all Christian life, the life of the Church, prolongs the mystery of the Incarnation on earth We come to the monastery to live more fully, more perfectly and more completely *in Christ*.”⁷⁶ Merton goes on to situate monastic life in the context of Christ’s passion and resurrection: “we receive our Redemption by mystically dying together with Him and rising with Him from the dead.”⁷⁷ Thus the whole purpose of the *Rule*, Merton writes in the central section of the pamphlet, of the disciplines “of silence, obedience, solitude, humility, manual labor, liturgical prayer,” is “to unite us with the Mystical Christ, with one another in charity, . . . to form Christ in us, to enable the Spirit of Christ to carry out, in our lives, actions worthy of Christ. . . . Having ascended all the degrees of humility, our hearts are empty of self, and God Himself can produce the likeness of Christ in us by the action of His Spirit.”⁷⁸ It is in this context that the liturgy, manual labor and *lectio divina* mandated by the *Rule* reveal their deepest value and purpose,⁷⁹ that the true meaning of the monastic vows is revealed,⁸⁰ and that monastic asceticism leads to a self-forgetfulness that makes possible both union with the Word, the Risen Christ—and also, Merton adds in the final section of the work, “The Monk in a Changing World,” an “Epilogue” that actually follows the “Conclusion,” “with those

74. Thomas Merton, *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1957); reprinted in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977), 11–38.

75. See the August 26, 1957 letter to Thomas Aquinas Porter, ocsa and the September 1, 1956 letter to Dom Gabriel Sortais for information on the circumstances of composition of this work (*School of Charity*, 96–98).

76. *Basic Principles*, 7; *Monastic Journey*, 15.

77. *Basic Principles*, 15; *Monastic Journey*, 22.

78. *Basic Principles*, 19; *Monastic Journey*, 26.

79. *Basic Principles*, 21–24; *Monastic Journey*, 27–30.

80. *Basic Principles*, 24; *Monastic Journey*, 30–31.

with whom he is actually or potentially united 'in Christ'—in the Mystery of our unity in the Risen Savior, the Son of God. . . . Their needs are his own, their interests are his interest, their joys and sorrows are his, for he has identified himself with them not only by a realization that they all share one human nature, but above all by the charity of Christ, poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who is given to us in Christ."⁸¹

Monastic Peace,⁸² another pamphlet published the following year but probably written around the time the *Rule* conferences began,⁸³ develops this "social" dimension of monasticism by presenting the monk as "before all else a peacemaker" insofar as he serves Christ the "*Rex Pacificus*, the king of peace"⁸⁴ as "a living member of a community which by its peace and unity fully represents Christ."⁸⁵ The whole purpose of the *Rule* is to form a community where this manifestation of the peace of Christ truly takes place. Merton points out that while the "monk is important more for what he *is* than for what he *does*,"⁸⁶ the *Rule* is primarily oriented toward what would have been considered the "active" life in St. Benedict's time, "the life of ascetic purification and the practice of virtue which leads to the pacification of our passions and brings them under the control of the spirit," in order to lead the monk to "a state of peace and interior purity (*apatheia*) which disposes his soul for contemplation." Thus "St Benedict legislates for beginners in terms of the 'active,' or ascetic life . . . with a view to contemplation later on."⁸⁷ But to be "transformed and

81. *Basic Principles*, 29; *Monastic Journey*, 35.

82. Thomas Merton, *Monastic Peace* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1958); reprinted in *Monastic Journey*, 39–84.

83. This is probably the "pamphlet on the monastic life" written "this summer" that Merton mentions in his July 5, 1957 letter to Dom Gabriel Sortais (*School of Charity*, 103); it is definitely the "other booklet we are printing in St. Paul" mentioned in a journal entry of October 22, 1957 (*Search for Solitude*, 126).

84. *Monastic Peace*, 5; *Monastic Journey*, 41.

85. *Monastic Peace*, 11; *Monastic Journey*, 45.

86. *Monastic Peace*, 9; *Monastic Journey*, 44.

87. *Monastic Peace*, 12; *Monastic Journey*, 46.

elevated by community life⁸⁸ requires not merely outward conformity to customs and observances but “surrender to God’s action” of grace and love, “uniting us to Himself and to our brethren by His own Holy Spirit of love.”⁸⁹ The vows are oriented to this great work of wholehearted self-surrender. Poverty is understood both as having the “prophetic” function of serving as “a silent and implicit condemnation of the misuse of ownership” marked by greed and injustice to the poor, and as expressing “a state of direct dependence on providence out of love for God, and for the poor.”⁹⁰ Chastity, like poverty understood to be included in the Benedictine vow of conversion of manners, “does not merely stifle passion, but enlists the energies of our sensible nature in support of a higher love, the love of God.”⁹¹ Obedience is not “compulsive submission and abdication of responsibility” but rather a mature exercise of freedom, “a voluntary assumption of responsibility, a clear-sighted renunciation of private and limited interests in favor of the general good of the community,”⁹² as a way of participating in the salvific obedience of Christ to the will of the Father: the monk “obeys above all out of love for Christ, in imitation of Christ, in union with the sufferings and the death of Christ, in order to share with Christ the great work of restoring liberty to mankind and of renewing all things in the power and sanctity of the Spirit of God.”⁹³ Stability “is one of the foundation stones on which St. Benedict raised his edifice of monastic peace”⁹⁴ because it commits the monk to the ongoing work of making the Kingdom of God visibly present in a particular community, a specific place and time. Such a commitment is paradoxically a willingness to face inner conflicts and communal struggles with faith that genuine peace is “a gift of the

88. *Monastic Peace*, 22; *Monastic Journey*, 54.

89. *Monastic Peace*, 23; *Monastic Journey*, 55.

90. *Monastic Peace*, 31; *Monastic Journey*, 62–63.

91. *Monastic Peace*, 32; *Monastic Journey*, 63.

92. *Monastic Peace*, 34; *Monastic Journey*, 65.

93. *Monastic Peace*, 35; *Monastic Journey*, 66.

94. *Monastic Peace*, 36; *Monastic Journey*, 67.

divine mercy."⁹⁵ Therefore the monastery is not only a school of the Lord's service and a school of charity but a "school of freedom,"⁹⁶ where the monk is called not "to renounce his freedom, to remain inert and apathetic in the hands of others," but to make "a sacrifice of a lower and more material kind of autonomy in order to attain to a higher and more spiritual autonomy—the autonomy of one who is so closely united to the Holy Spirit that the Spirit of God moves him as his own spirit."⁹⁷ Such freedom is the fruit of long training, but it develops from the initial presence of "the four main signs" which "St. Benedict, with his usual simplicity, sets down in the Rule":⁹⁸ the desire to "truly seek God",⁹⁹ acceptance of obedience as the foundation of genuine community life; commitment to a life of communal and personal prayer; and finally, appreciation of "the value of humiliation and spiritual poverty" as the way to "love the cross which kills his self-love at the very roots and establishes him firmly and totally in the heart of Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁰

The closest parallels to material in the *Rule* conferences are found in one of the more obscure items in the Merton canon, a multigraphed pamphlet, probably dating from Merton's early years as novice master, entitled "Monastic Courtesy,"¹⁰¹ which is also the subtitle for a section of these conferences (104–16). While

95. *Monastic Peace*, 41; *Monastic Journey*, 71.

96. *Monastic Peace*, 48; *Monastic Journey*, 77.

97. *Monastic Peace*, 47; *Monastic Journey*, 76.

98. *Monastic Peace*, 54; *Monastic Journey*, 81.

99. *Monastic Peace*, 54; *Monastic Journey*, 81.

100. *Monastic Peace*, 56; *Monastic Journey*, 83.

101. Thomas Merton, "Monastic Courtesy," ed. Patrick Hart oco, *The Merton Annual*, 12 (1999), 13–21. Brother Patrick Hart speculates (13) that this pamphlet, which apparently survives only in a single copy in the Gethsemani archives, dates from Merton's time as master of students (1951–55), but the very basic nature of the directives, and in particular the mention of "Courtesy to postulants, when one is a guardian angel" (14)—i.e. an experienced novice assigned as guide to a new entrant to the monastery—suggests that novices were the more likely audience and that Merton wrote it after becoming novice master in October 1955.

the pamphlet goes into considerably more specific, and at times amusing and entertaining, detail,¹⁰² both texts note the importance of bearing one another's burdens,¹⁰³ both cite the phrase "*honore se invicem praeveniant*" ("anticipate one another in showing honor") from chapter 72,¹⁰⁴ both focus on the idea of mutual obedience found in chapter 71,¹⁰⁵ both quote the phrase "*ut nemo perturbetur neque contristetur in domo Dei*" ("that no one may be troubled or saddened in the house of God") from chapter 31.¹⁰⁶ As the text of the conferences will also do (119–24), the pamphlet presents Benedict's portrait of the cellarer as a model for the mature monk.¹⁰⁷ While it is impossible to determine which text was written first, and while it seems clear that Merton did not have one text in front of him as he was writing the other, conference notes and pamphlet share a common perspective and spirit.

Perhaps the most remarkable piece of writing from this period that is related to the *Rule* conferences is a journal entry from October 27, 1957, a Day of Recollection at the monastery. It begins with a reflection clearly inspired by Merton's reading for the course: "There is nothing whatever of the ghetto spirit in the Rule of St. Benedict. That is the wonderful thing both about the Rule and the saint. The freshness, the liberty, the spontaneity, the broadness, the sanity and the healthiness of early Benedictine life. The same healthiness and sanity in the early commentaries—

102. See for example the instructions on "Courtesy in Choir": not "bowing in such a way that [one's brother] has no room left, pushing him out of the way in order to make a bow, bowing with your back in his face" etc. (17); "Avoid much head scratching, examining of nails, sighs, yawns, etc. Be discreet in keeping awake" (18); on "Courtesy When Serving Mass": "Nothing is more out of place than two ministers arguing in the sanctuary and refusing to give in on a point of rubrics" (18); on "Courtesy in the Refectory": "Avoid mouth noises—belching. Be restrained in coughing and nose-blowing. Don't pick teeth with your fingers. . . . Don't finger the bread to get a fresh piece" (19).

103. "Monastic Courtesy," 15; page 111 in the present text.

104. "Monastic Courtesy," 15; page 108 in the present text.

105. "Monastic Courtesy," 16; page 110 in the present text.

106. "Monastic Courtesy," 17; page 110 in the present text.

107. "Monastic Courtesy," 16.

Smaragdus, Hildemar (and therefore {Warnefrid })."¹⁰⁸ This warm praise for the *Rule* and its early interpreters then leads into a consideration of the meaning of authentic tradition and of the genuine principles of renewal that is one of the earliest expressions of Merton's mature vision of monastic life and its relationship with the world beyond the abbey walls:

But closed in on itself, interpreting interpretations of interpretations, the monastery becomes a ghetto.

Reforms that concentrate too excessively on a return to *strictness* do not in fact break the spell. They tend to increase the danger of spiritual suffocation. On the other hand, fresh air is not the air of the world . . .

Just to break out of the ghetto and walk down the boulevard is no solution.

The world has its own stink too—perfume and corruption.

The fresh air we need is the air of the Holy Spirit "breathing where He pleases" which means that the windows must be open and we must expect Him to come from any direction.

The error is to lock the windows and doors in order to keep the Holy Spirit in our house. The very action of locking doors and windows is fatal.

What about enclosure? What about the world?

St. Benedict never said that the monk must *never* go out, *never* receive guests, *never* talk to anyone, never hear *any* news—But that he should distinguish what is useless and harmful from what is useful and salutary, and in all things to glorify God.¹⁰⁹

108. *Search for Solitude*, 130; text reads "Warnefaid"; see also the revised version of this passage in Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 6.

109. *Search for Solitude*, 130–31; the *Conjectures* passage ends with a brief additional paragraph that situates the issue more firmly in the context of the *Rule* itself, specifically chapter 53, on the reception of guests: "Rejection of the world? The monk must *see Christ* in the pilgrim and stranger who come from the world, especially if they are poor. Such is the spirit and letter of the *Rule*" (6).

The imagery of course anticipates that which Pope John XXIII would use a few years later¹¹⁰ to describe the program of *aggiornamento* that led up to the Second Vatican Council (which would mandate both an openness to the contemporary world in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,¹¹¹ and the recovery of the charism of the founder in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life¹¹²). But it also prefigures Merton's own awakening from "the dream of my separateness, of the 'special' vocation to be different" at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets some five months after this passage was written,¹¹³ and sounds a note that will recur in many of the powerful essays on monastic reform that will be written in the following decade. The passage provides an early indication that Merton's turn to the world was not only compatible with but even inspired by his commitment to authentic Benedictine monastic life. Much of his effort in his remaining years would be to "distinguish what is useless and harmful from what is useful and salutary, and in all things to glorify God."

110. The story, perhaps legendary, of the window and fresh air was popularized by Norman Cousins in "Pope John and His Open Window," *Saturday Review*, 46 (19 January 1963), 20–22; it is related to his call for "a new Pentecost" in his Apostolic Constitution "*Humanae Salutis*" of December 25, 1961, summoning the Council: see Walter Abbott, sj, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966), 709.

111. Abbott, *Documents*, 199–308.

112. Abbott, *Documents*, 466–82, especially n. 2 (468).

113. *Search for Solitude*, 181–82 [March 19, 1958, reflecting on the previous day's experience]; the more familiar revised version is in *Conjectures*, 140–42, with its memorable expansion of the quoted phrases that reject more explicitly the "ghetto" mentality of an inward-turning and rigid monasticism: "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of 'separation from the world' that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudoangels, 'spiritual men,' men of interior life, what have you" (140–41).

Anyone familiar with Merton's life during these years knows of his restlessness and periodic dissatisfaction with life at Gethsemani. Little of this appears in the conferences, which generally present a view of life under the *Rule* as it should be lived, though not without a realistic recognition of individual and communal shortcomings. It is worth noting however, that Merton's efforts during these years are largely oriented toward finding an environment in which the *Rule* might be lived out more faithfully,¹¹⁴ whether it be in the established milieu of Camaldoli¹¹⁵ or in the putative Cistercian foundations in Ecuador or elsewhere in Latin America,¹¹⁶ or in some connection with the primitive Benedictine foundation in Cuernavaca, Mexico of Dom Gregorio Lemercier,¹¹⁷ or even in one of the quasi-eremitic locations in the American west, the island of Tortola, the Corn Islands etc.¹¹⁸ How much of this was prompted by Merton's natural restlessness, both psychological and spiritual, and how much was due to a motivation similar to that which led to the original exodus from Molesme

114. Note his comment in a journal entry for July 5, 1959 that the problem is "Not because of the Rule of St. B but because of the hopeless way in which it is interpreted here" (*Search for Solitude*, 302), and his horarium for an experimental South American monastery in a July 25, 1958 journal entry considered as "A return to St. Benedict—or an application of St. B." (*Search for Solitude*, 209–10).

115. On Merton's efforts in 1955 to transfer to this eremitical branch of Benedictinism see Christine M. Bochen, "Camaldolese," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 40–41.

116. See the journal entries for July 30, 1957 (*Search for Solitude*, 103–104), December 24, 1957 (*Search for Solitude*, 148–49), February 1, 1959 (*Search for Solitude*, 254), and the letters of July 5, 1957 to Dom Gabriel Sortais and July 15, 1957 to Dom James Fox (*School of Charity*, 102–106).

117. See journal entries for July 25, August 2, 17, 18, 30, September 9, October 6 and December 17, 1959 (*Search for Solitude*, 308–309, 314–15, 317–18, 324–25, 327–28, 335, 358–59) and for June 21 and August 19, 1960 (*Turning Toward the World*, 14, 32–33).

118. See the journal entries for June 30, July 2, 5, 12, 21, 1959 (*Search for Solitude*, 298–304, 307–308), and letters collected under the heading of "Vocation Crisis: 1959–1960" in *Witness to Freedom*, 200–30, which include correspondence with bishops of various mission territories and with Vatican officials, among others.

to Cîteaux is difficult to say, but his efforts are not intrinsically alien to or incompatible with his ruminations on the *Rule* in these conferences, however mainstream and uncontroversial they may be. In the event the building of the “retreat center” on Mount Olivet that would become his hermitage, occurring at the mid-point of the period spanned by these conferences in their double presentation, would provide a way for Merton to live out the *Rule* in a more unconventional but completely faithful (at least in intent if not always in execution) manner, and would provide the context for his more challenging and provocative insights on monastic life in later essays collected in *Contemplation in a World of Action* such as “Openness and Cloister,”¹¹⁹ and “The Place of Obedience”¹²⁰ that would make him one of the most eloquent and influential voices for contemporary monastic renewal in the Benedictine tradition. *The Rule of St. Benedict* conferences need to be properly situated in this continuum and progression in order to appreciate their contribution to Merton’s developing vision and revisioning of what it means to be a monk.

* * * * *

There are two versions of the Conferences on the *Rule* extant, the dittoed notes distributed to the novices toward the end of the course,¹²¹ and Merton’s own typed and heavily reworked notes that he had in front of him as he lectured. The first consists of a 123-page “spirit master” (purple) text run off on both sides, entitled “THE RULE / OF / ST. BENEDICT // GETHSEMANI / CHOIR NOVITIATE / 1957.”¹²² When the course was repeated

119. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 129–42.

120. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 117–28.

121. These notes are included in Volume 18 of the “Collected Essays”; while the Table of Contents to this volume reads “1960 reprint of ‘57 ed”, the text, at least in the Bellarmine Merton Center copy, actually corresponds in its pagination to the 1957 version.

122. Pages 43–49 of this version are all mistyped “42” and altered on the ditto to: “43, 44, 45, 48, 46, 47, 49”; “48” is then changed in pencil to “46”; “46”

in 1960, the identical ditto masters were reused,¹²³ with only the date on the title page altered by hand.¹²⁴

Merton's typescript begins with a handwritten title page: "THE RULE / OF ST BENEDICT. / Gethsemani / Choir Novitiate 1957."¹²⁵ The basic text consists of 92 numbered pages,¹²⁶ all but one typewritten,¹²⁷ preceded by a single typewritten introductory page.¹²⁸ Handwritten additions to the text are found both on the typed pages themselves and on the blank facing pages; some of these additions are included in the multigraphed version of the text and therefore date from the first presentation of the conferences, while others are not included in that version and therefore presumably date from the second presentation. Page 5

to "47"; and "47" to "48". In the process of reproduction page 24 was run off twice, and the verso of page 46 (misprinted "48") was left blank, so that for subsequent pages the recto pages were again odd-numbered.

123. Merton begins the fourth last conference by asking if anyone knows where the stencils for this course are; in the second last conference he mentions that they have shown up, and presumably they are run off and distributed by the end of the course, Merton's usual practice.

124. The mispagination of pages 46–48 was left uncorrected in this reproduction, page 34 was run off twice, and page 64 was also run off a second time instead of page 65, which is missing.

125. It is also marked with Merton's "Fr Louis" stamp, made for him from an eraser by fourteen-year-old Nelson Richardson, briefly a postulant at Gethsemani in the summer of 1960 at the time when Merton was beginning the *Rule* conferences for the second time (see *Turning Toward the World*, 14 [6/21/60], 25 [8/5/60]).

126. The first page is unnumbered; on pages 2–63 "St Benedict" generally precedes the page number (page 48 has "Rule of St Ben" and pages 52–53 have "Rule"); on pages 64–92 "Rule" generally precedes the page number (page 67 has "St Ben Rule"); on page 16, the original correct number is cancelled, "17" is interlined by hand above and cancelled and "16" is restored by hand on line; on the following page, "17" is added by hand on line following cancelled "16"; on page 69 "Rule 69" is added in pencil; on page 71 the correct number is added by hand after cancelled "70"; on page 84 "3" is altered by hand to "4".

127. Page 24 is handwritten.

128. This page, numbered "Rule a-" and headed "NOTES ON THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT." has the handwritten note "(to go in beginning of all the notes)" in the upper margin.

is followed by five separately numbered pages, typed on both sides of the page, of passages from St. Gregory the Great's *Vita Benedicti*.¹²⁹ A typed page numbered "55a" and headed "*Lectio Divina*" is inserted in the text after page 55; it is not found in the ditto. Ten handwritten pages on various topics relating to the course are inserted in the text; none of this material is included in the ditto, so it was added at the time of the second presentation. Four handwritten nontext pages, on various liturgical feasts, are also interleaved in the text.¹³⁰

Merton's typescript, with its handwritten additions and alterations,¹³¹ is the copy text for the present edition of *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Only the Table of Contents, not found in the typescript, a lengthy quotation added by the typist according to Merton's instructions, and a few minor changes, usually involving redundancy, are adopted from the ditto; these readings are recorded in the first section of Appendix A, Textual Notes. The second section of these notes lists all additions and alterations, including on-line corrections Merton made in the process of typing (i.e., crossing out one word or phrase and immediately substituting another) found in the ditto, and therefore dating from the first presentation of the conferences in 1957–1959; the third section lists all additions and alterations incorporated into the text of this edition that are not found in the ditto and therefore date from the second presentation in 1960–1962. The textual apparatus does not attempt to record every variation between the different versions of the text. Errors, whether of omission or of mistranscription, in the multigraph version of the text where

129. The note "Latin notes St Ben. Translate—" on the verso of the first page of text suggests that these excerpts were perhaps assigned to be translated by the novices.

130. Material on the Feast of St. Bartholomew is found after typescript page 19, of the Holy Cross after page 21, of St. Jude after page 25, and of St. Camillus after page 47. This material is not included in the present edition.

131. One handwritten addition, all the material of which is also found in a more extensive additional note, is not incorporated into the text of this edition; it can be found in Appendix A for page 134 of the text.

these are not being used as copy text, are not recorded since they have no independent authority vis-à-vis the copy text. Thus the textual notes allow the interested reader to distinguish between the preliminary draft of Merton's notes, the additions that he made before his initial presentation of the conference lectures, and those made for the subsequent presentation of the course.

Because the extra handwritten pages are not marked for insertion and cannot be easily integrated into the text, they have been separately transcribed and gathered as Appendix 1: Additional Notes on the *Rule* of St. Benedict (217–32). The passages from the *Vita Benedicti* have not been incorporated within the text proper,¹³² where they would interrupt the flow of the material, but have been included, with translations by the editor, as Appendix 2 (233–45).

All substantive additions made to the text, in order to turn elliptical or fragmentary statements into complete sentences, are included in braces, as are the few emendations incorporated directly into the text, so that the reader can always determine exactly what Merton himself wrote. No effort is made to reproduce Merton's rather inconsistent punctuation, paragraphing, abbreviations and typographical features; a standardized format for these features is established that in the judgement of the editor best represents a synthesis of Merton's own practice and contemporary usage: e.g., all Latin passages are italicized unless specific parts of a longer passage are underlined by Merton, in which case the underlined section of the passage is in roman type; all other passages underlined by Merton are italicized; words in upper case in the text are printed in small caps; periods and commas are uniformly included within quotation marks; patterns of abbreviation and capitalization, very inconsistent in the copy text, are regularized. All references to primary and secondary sources are cited in the notes. Since Merton generally

132. A note in the typescript at the conclusion of the material on the *Life of Benedict* (38) reads "*Texts from St Gregory go here in the complete set of notes*" but in fact the Latin selections were not included in the ditto.

refers to Dom Justin McCann's edition of the *Rule*,¹³³ all citations of passages from the *Rule*, unless otherwise noted, are from this edition, although the text Merton quotes sometimes is not identical to McCann's. When Merton quotes only the Latin, or provides his own translation, page references are to McCann's Latin text only; when Merton quotes McCann's English translation, page references are to both the Latin and the facing English text. Untranslated Latin passages in the original text are left in Latin but translated by the editor in the notes. (McCann's rather archaic English translation of the *Rule* is thus not used, but page references to his Latin text are included with the translations from the *Rule* in the notes.) All identified errors in Merton's text are noted and if possible corrected. All instances where subsequent research and expanded knowledge affect Merton's accuracy are discussed in the notes.

A table of correspondences between the written text and the recorded conferences from July through December 1962 is included as Appendix B in order to facilitate comparison of Merton's version of the material as published in this edition with the conferences as actually delivered to the novices. A list of suggestions for further reading is included as Appendix C, consisting first of other sources in Merton's published works where the topic of this volume is discussed, followed by a list of important recent editions and studies on Benedict and the *Rule*, that will provide helpful updating on material discussed by Merton.

* * * * *

In conclusion I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have made this volume possible:

- to the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust, Peggy Fox, Anne McCormick and Tommie O'Callaghan, for permission to publish the *Rule of St. Benedict* conferences;

133. *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English*, ed. and trans. Justin McCann, OSB (London: Burns, Oates, 1952).

- to the late Robert E. Daggy, former director of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College (now University), Louisville, KY, for first alerting me to the project of editing Merton's monastic conferences, and for his encouragement in this and other efforts in Merton studies;
- to Brother Patrick Hart, ocsa, for his friendship, for continued encouragement in the publication of the volumes of the conferences in the Monastic Wisdom series, for which he serves as editor, and for facilitating my research visits to the library at the Abbey of Gethsemani;
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- again and always to my wife Suzanne and our children for their continual love, support and encouragement in this and other projects.

CONFERENCES ON

THE *RULE*

OF

ST. BENEDICT

GETHSEMANI
CHOIR NOVITIATE

1960

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As explained in the introductory note (pp. {5–6}) Benedictine obedience is discussed *everywhere* in these notes, and therefore no particular chapter is assigned to the subject.

NOTES ON THE *RULE OF ST. BENEDICT*

These notes are not intended to cover thoroughly every aspect of the *Rule* or every chapter of it. They concentrate on some of the main features of the *Rule* in order to give a *detailed and concrete picture of what a real monk is like in the eyes of St. Benedict*. For this purpose we have started out with a discussion of St. Benedict's own life and character, for he is the model of his own monks, and his *Rule* must be seen in the light of his own practice. Then there is a detailed discussion of the Prologue, which contains the basic theological principles upon which the *Rule* is built. After that we go into the chapters on the abbot in order to show the responsibilities and tasks of the representative of Christ in the monastery and to indicate the correlative obligations of the monks who serve God under him. Chapters on the various officers in the monastery, on the work of the monks and on their poverty complete this picture of the monastic life in its externals and in the practice of obedience. The remaining pages of this commentary are devoted to a somewhat lengthy treatment of the Degrees of Humility which are the very heart of the *Rule* of St. Benedict and contain the marrow of his asceticism. We have not gone into St. Benedict's teaching on obedience *ex professo* since this is discussed elsewhere, in notes on the Vow of Obedience.¹ But everywhere in the chapters on the abbot, on humility, etc.,

1. See "An Introduction to the Life of the Vows," a set of conference notes for a course given by Merton as master of novices and found in volume 14 of "Collected Essays," the 24-volume bound set of published and unpublished materials assembled at the Abbey of Gethsemani and available both there and

not to mention the Prologue, the essential Benedictine doctrine of obedience is to be found on every page.

What we have *not* discussed here at any length includes the long sections on the *Opus Dei*² and the chapters on punishments and excommunication. The structure of the office is fully discussed in our notes on the Observances³ and the chapters on excommunication, though important in their own right, cannot be fitted in due to lack of time.⁴

The important thing is for monks to love the *Rule*, not as a document printed on paper but as a life that should take possession of their inmost hearts. St. Benedict did not call us to the monastery to serve him, but to serve God. We are not here to carry out the prescriptions of men, but to love God. The purpose of the *Rule* is to furnish a framework within which to build the structure of a simple and pure spiritual life, pleasing to God by its perfection of faith, humility, and love. The *Rule* is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, and it is always to be seen in relation to its end. This end is union with God in love, and every line of the *Rule* indicates that its various prescriptions are given us to show us how to get rid of self-love and replace it by love of God.

It should be noted that the spirit of the *Rule* is a spirit of unaffected simplicity and deep piety. It is based above all on respect for *reality*. It accepts all the simple things of life and incorporates them into the work of serving God. St. Benedict wants his monks to avoid everything that savors of exaggeration and preoccupation with themselves. He does not encourage ascetic rivalries or spectacular feats of penance and prayer. His way of

at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY; the material on the vow of obedience is found on pages 137–60.

2. “the work of God”—i.e. the divine office (*Rule* of St. Benedict [RB], cc. 7, 22, 43, 44, 47, 50, 52, 58, 67) (*The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English*, ed. and trans. Justin McCann, OSB [London: Burns, Oates, 1952], 46, 70, 102, 104–106, 108, 116, 118, 130, 152–154).

3. See “Our Monastic Observances,” in “Collected Essays,” vol. 15; the material on the office is found on pages 16–63, 118–23.

4. But see Additional Note 3 below (219–21).

penance is a way of obedience and humility, a way of simplicity. He legislates not for outstanding individuals but for humble men living in community and loving one another in Christ. This atmosphere of simple and sincere charity pervades the whole *Rule*. Nowhere does St. Benedict incite the monk to “get ahead” of all his brethren in the “race” for sanctity. It is not a race. The community *is* holy and its members work together to make it more holy, by helping one another to grow in holiness. This can only be done by mutual love based on the faith which sees Christ in the community and Christ in every one of His members. *Faxit Deus.*⁵ *Amen.*

NOTES ON THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT

Part 1

The Study of the *Rule*—its importance; St. Benedict and the Cistercian Fathers; St. Benedict and the Popes

The Study of the Rule

We make vows to live until death according to the *Rule* of St. Benedict. This means not only carrying out the prescriptions of the *Rule*, and obeying those who command us according to the *Rule*. Much more, it means allowing ourselves to be *formed by the Rule*. {The} *Rule* {is to be understood} as *education*—{from} *educere*: what {is brought forth}? {the} image of God. Our whole life must be molded and shaped, it must develop, be nourished, by the *Rule*. Our life is a *discipline* in which God forms us through the instrumentality of the *Rule*, and through the fatherhood of St. Benedict, who exercises a very real formative influence upon

5. “May God bring it about” (a standard phrase in Medieval Latin); it is not found in the *Rule* of Saint Benedict itself but is used by Edmond Martène, OSB at the very end of his commentary on chapter 7 of the *Rule*: see J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1844–1865), vol. 66, col. 410A (subsequently referred to as *PL* in text and notes).

the souls of his sons. We are called to be sons of St. Benedict. The likeness of Christ must be formed in us as it was formed in St. Benedict. We must follow Benedict's *via vitae*.⁶ We interpret the Gospel as he did, we live as he did, our sanctity is to be his sanctity. The Holy Spirit must work in us as He worked in him. In St. Benedict we see *the perfect form of our monastic sanctity*. The lessons of the desert fathers, of oriental monasticism, of other Western spiritual traditions before or after St. Benedict are good for us in so far as they accord with the spirit of St. Benedict, enable us to deepen that spirit, and understand it better. For this, they must come to us through St. Benedict.

Note: we must not be too absolute in excluding all other "spiritualities" and enclose ourselves in a rigid framework of what we consider to be "Benedictine," or even more rigid, "Cistercian," spirituality. One of the characteristic features of St. Benedict is the fact that he is *not exclusive* and that anything good for monks, in any spirituality, can be adapted to the monastic life according to the *Rule* of St. Benedict. Nothing is excluded except what is essentially opposed to the monastic life itself—for instance, (the) married state, or a completely active (apostolic) life, or a life without stability in the cloister, or without obedience, or without the office, or without silence. Anything opposed to these things would be opposed to the *Rule* and spirit of St. Benedict. But forms of spirituality that accord with the monastic life of prayer and penance can easily be adapted to the Benedictine life. Note, however, that the adaptation must be made. Carmelite spirituality must bring its values to us in a *Benedictine* context and with a Benedictine orientation. We cannot superimpose St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa upon St. Benedict. We must see the truths they saw as St. Benedict himself would have seen them, and apply them as he would have applied them.

We must first of all *love the Rule in a spirit of filial piety*. Our study of the *Rule* cannot and must not be merely an intellectual exercise. It is a meditation on which our life itself depends, for if

6. "way of life" (*RB*, Prol.) (McCann, 8).

we do not absorb the spiritual teaching of the *Rule*, we will not be monks. But we do not absorb that teaching merely by “knowing” what the *Rule* says. If we do not live the *Rule* we do not understand the *Rule* or know it. The spirit of filial piety with which we study the *Rule* should be based on faith in the mediation of St. Benedict in our lives. St. Benedict has a distinct mission for the sanctification of monks. He intervenes personally and directly in the lives of all his sons. He teaches them not only through the written word of the *Rule*, but through a charismatic intervention in the lives of his monks, which continues and will continue as long as Benedictine monasticism lasts. This is St. Benedict’s great work as the Father of Western Monasticism.

But if we do not love St. Benedict, this supernatural action of his prayers and love cannot function in our lives. It is by love and filial trust and respect for him that we open our hearts to the graces that God has willed to bestow on us through his mediation. In order to love St. Benedict, we must have a personal knowledge of him. This personal knowledge is gained through a communion with the soul of our monastic Father and lawgiver, a union of will and understanding, and this union is brought about by obedience of faith, a faith which sees God speaking to us through St. Benedict and giving us St. Benedict as our guide in the ways of the Gospel.

The spirit of St. Benedict lives on in the traditions of the Benedictine family. Our tradition is a kind of corporate “memory” in which, guided by the Holy Spirit, we interpret and understand, as our fathers have interpreted and understood, the mind of St. Benedict, who himself understood the Gospel and monastic tradition as they had been understood by the monks before him. To love St. Benedict means to *love our monastic tradition* that goes back to him and beyond him to St. Basil and St. Anthony—and to Jesus. Hence, our study of the *Rule* will be relatively sterile and useless if we only study the *Rule* itself, without any background, without any roots, in monastic tradition. *Our love for St. Benedict includes a love for all things Benedictine and all things monastic.* To exclude other forms of monasticism from our view

would in fact make us unable to understand St. Benedict completely. He is for us the *main organ of monastic tradition* and when we go to St. Benedict, we go not only to learn his doctrine as though it were opposed to other monastic teachings (for instance, of Cassian) but we go to him as *to the authoritative and inspired guide* who will open to us all the rest of monastic tradition and show us how to understand it and apply it to our own monastic lives.

The Cistercian tradition: from the beginning, the Cistercians sought to penetrate more perfectly and more deeply into the full teaching of St. Benedict, in all its completeness, and in all its purity. The first Cistercians were, to some extent, *exclusive* in matters of observance. They set aside observances which were good in themselves, but which seemed to them at the time to obstruct the real understanding of and fidelity to St. Benedict. In this matter we follow our fathers. We observe and interpret the *Rule* according to the tradition of Cîteaux. This tradition is *austere and simple*, and seeks to return to the pure sources of monastic tradition both in observance and in spirit—hence, {there is an} emphasis on poverty, manual labor, silence, enclosure, mortification, etc. But once again, we would not be faithful to our own monastic tradition if we confined ourselves narrowly within purely “Cistercian” or “Trappist” limits in our study of the *Rule*. On the contrary, to be true Cistercians we must, like our fathers, seek with all spiritual thirst the *pure springs of the monastic tradition*. And here again, everything that is living and authentic, especially in all forms of monastic reform and return to primitive sources, is not alien to us. We must be acquainted with all that is genuine and vital in the monastic tradition.

However it should be noted that the Cistercians and other branches of the monastic family are interested not primarily in an abstract tradition, but in the concrete persons in whom that tradition is embodied. Thus when St. Bernard goes to preach a sermon on St. Benedict, he preaches not on the monastic tradition, or the Benedictine ideal, but on *St. Benedict* himself as a quasi-“sacrament” of God’s will and God’s love for monks. Our mo-

nastic life, for St. Bernard, is built upon the life and miracles, the virtues and doctrine of St. Benedict. *Pascit vita, pascit doctrina, pascit et intercessione* (PL 183:379).⁷ His *miracles* are important to us as the basis for our confidence in him, as the proof that he was the instrument of God, as the witness to his special divine mission. His *doctrine* is our way to heaven; it leads us in the way of peace. But his doctrine is embodied in his *life and example* which strengthen and nourish our faith. St. Ailred says that all the graces of prayer we receive as monks and the progress we make in virtue come to us through the intercession of St. Benedict our Father.⁸ Bl. Guerric compares St. Benedict to Moses⁹ (this comparison is made by the liturgy itself, which says St. Benedict was “filled with the spirit of all the just”¹⁰). Just as Moses led the chosen people out of Egypt, so St. Benedict by his charismatic action leads us out of the darkness of the world into the light of God. But St. Benedict is superior to Moses in the “law” which he gives us. Moses gave only the letter which killeth; St. Benedict gives the Spirit which bringeth life.¹¹ The whole *Rule* and teaching of St. Benedict is summed up by Guerric as: *Iste solam puritatem*

7. “He feeds by his life, he feeds by his teaching, and he feeds by his intercession”: *In Natali Sancti Benedicti Abbatis Sermo* 8 (PL 183, col. 380A).

8. *In Natali Sancti Benedicti, Sermo* 5 (PL 195, col. 239A).

9. *In Festo S. Benedicti, Sermo* 4 (PL 185, cols. 111–16).

10. The phrase comes originally from the *Vita Sancti Benedicti*, c. 8: “*vir iste spiritu justorum omnium plenus fuit*” (PL 66, col. 150B; see below, n. 27). It is found in the vespers (eve) and lauds prayer for the Feast of St. Benedict (March 21): “*Vir Dei Benedictus omnium Justorum spiritu plenus fuit: ipse intercedat pro cunctis monasticae professionis*” (“Benedict the man of God was filled with the spirit of all the just; may he himself intercede for all who have made monastic profession”) (*Breviarium Monasticum: Pauli V Jussu Editum Urbani VIII et Leonis XIII Cura Recognitum Pii X et Benedicti XV Auctoritate Reformatum [editio tertia]*, 2 vols. [Bruges: Desclée, 1941], 1.851, 859); it is also found in the vespers (eve) and lauds prayer for the Feast of the Translation of St. Benedict (July 11), which begins: “*Deus, qui beatissimum Confessorem tuum Benedictum omnium justorum spiritu replere dignatus es . . .*” (“God, who deigned to fill your most blessed confessor Benedict with the spirit of all the just . . .”) (*Breviarium Monasticum*, 2.495, 510).

11. Col. 111D.

evangelicam simplicemque morum tradidit disciplinam . . . rectissimam vitae { . . . } *Regulam, sermone luculentam, discretionem praecipuam . . .*¹² (PL 185:103-111).¹³

The Church speaks:

The Benedictine breviary: *O caelestis norma vitae, Doctor et Dux Benedicte, cujus cum Christo spiritus exultat in caelestibus: Gregem, Pastorem, servam, sancta prece corrobora, via caelos clarescente fac, te duce, penetrare.*¹⁴

Council of Douzy (A.D. 874): "The Holy Spirit through St. Benedict wrote the *Rule* of the monks, in the same way as He speaks in the sacred Canons of the Church."¹⁵ In other words, the *Rule* has the authority of the ordinary magisterium of the Church (*not* inspired in the same sense as Scripture).

Pope Pius XII {in} *FULGENS RADIATUR*¹⁶ stresses the following points about St. Benedict:

1. The *solidity* of his doctrine and spirituality. Strength of St. Benedict—his wisdom {is} a source of support and salvation for the whole Church in his time. {This} proves {the} perennial youth and vigor of {the} Church.

12. "He handed on only the purity of the gospel and clear instruction in how to live, . . . a most perfect Rule of life, rich in teaching, outstanding in discretion" (col. 112A, which reads ". . . *vitae scribit Regulam, . . .*" ["he wrote a most perfect Rule of life"]).

13. Though the references have been to *Sermo IV*, these columns contain the second (cols. 103B–107C) and third (cols. 107C–111C) of Gueric's four sermons on Benedict (the first is found in cols. 99A–103B).

14. "O Heavenly model of life, Benedict, teacher and leader, whose spirit rejoices with Christ in heaven, watch over your flock, kindly shepherd, strengthen it with your holy prayer, make clear the way so that led by you it may enter heaven" (Magnificat antiphon [vespers] for the Feast of the Translation of St. Benedict [July 11]) (*Breviarium Monasticum*, 2,495, 502; the first eight words are also found as the title for the portrait of Benedict used as the frontispiece of both volumes of the breviary).

15. PL 66, col. 214B.

16. *Acta Apostolica Sedis*, 39 (1947), 137–55 (March 21, 1947); an English translation is found in *St. Benedict: Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XII on St. Benedict of Nursia* (Washington: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1947).

2. The great work of his genius was *to adapt oriental monasticism to the West*. This he did by *a balanced cenobitic life* in which there was no undue austerity or severity, but in which all could become saints, especially by the royal way of *charity*. (Read #13, 14.¹⁷) His *Rule* is thus a “splendid monument of Roman and

17. “13. It was here that Benedict brought the monastic life to that degree of perfection to which he had long aspired by prayer, meditation and practice. The special and chief task that seemed to have been given to him in the designs of God’s providence was not so much to impose on the West the manner of life of the monks of the East, as to adapt that life and accommodate it to the genius, needs and conditions of Italy and the rest of Europe. Thus to the placid asceticism which flowered so well in the monasteries of the East, he added laborious and tireless activity which allows the monks ‘to give to others the fruit of contemplation’, and not only to produce crops from uncultivated land, but also to cultivate spiritual fruit through their exhausting apostolate. The community life of a Benedictine house tempered and softened the severities of the solitary life, not suitable for all and even dangerous at times for some; through prayer, work, and application to sacred and profane sciences, a blessed peace knows not idleness nor sloth; activity and work, far from wearying the mind, distracting it and applying it to useless things, rather tranquilize it, strengthen it and lift it up to higher things. Indeed, an excessive rigor of discipline or severity of penance is not imposed, but before all else love of God and a fraternal charity that is universal and sincere. ‘He so tempered the rule that the strong would desire to do more and the weak not be frightened by its severity; he tried to govern his disciples by love rather than dominate them by fear’. When one day he saw an anchorite, who had bound himself with chains and confined himself in a narrow cave, so that he could not return to his sins and to his worldly life, with gentle words Benedict admonished him: ‘If you are a servant of God, let not the chains of iron bind you but the chains of Christ’. 14. Thus the special norms of eremitic life and their particular precepts, which were generally not very certain or fixed and often depended on the wish of the superior, gave way to Benedictine monastic law, outstanding monument of Roman and Christian prudence. In it the rights, duties and works of the monks are tempered by the benevolence and charity of the Gospel. It has proved and still proves a powerful means to encourage many to virtue and lead them to sanctity. For in the Benedictine law the highest prudence and simplicity are united; Christian humility is joined to virile virtue; mildness tempers severity; and a healthy freedom ennobles due submission. In it correction is given with firmness, but clemency and benignity hold sway; the ordinances are observed but obedience brings rest to mind and peace to soul; gravity is honored by silence but easy grace adds ornament to conversation; the power of authority is wielded

Christian wisdom."¹⁸ N.B. {the} basis of {the} humanities here—what is Roman wisdom?

3. The Benedictine spirit is characterized by *the balance of prudence and simplicity and of humility with generous practice of virtue*. Obedience and silence bring peace, in an atmosphere of discipline and mercy and charity.

4. (#16) The monastic life is praised as *a Christian family life* in which sons live together under a loving and prudent Father, who represents God Himself, and whose decisions are seen by the eyes of faith as those of God. Note that it is *faith* and not natural feeling which is the basis of the monastic family spirit. It would be a mistake to seek this family spirit merely in the natural gregariousness of man, but our social instincts, offered and consecrated to God by our vows and by the spirit of faith, contribute much to this family spirit which is the nursery of all monastic virtues.

5. Monastic stability, manual labor, study {are} seen in this context of the "family." But the principal care of the monastic family is the common praise of God in the *Opus Dei*. In all his legislation, St. Benedict has produced a marvelous work of supernatural prudence which is nevertheless *most in accord with the good that is in man's nature*. History itself proves this, by the fact that the Benedictines kept alive arts, crafts, learning, etc. in the dark ages.

6. (#19) The principal thing about the Benedictine life (*hoc enim in Benedictinae vitae Instituto praecipuum est . . .*¹⁹—{the} English translation {of} *praecipuum* as "essential"²⁰ misses {the} point and changes {the} emphasis) is *constant prayer*—during work, reading, etc., by *raising our minds to Christ in perfect love*. The monk

but weakness is not without its support" (8–9; the quotations are from Thomas Aquinas, *Sunma Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 188, n. 6; Jean Mabillon, *Annales Ordinis Sancti Benedicti*, 1.107; Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, 3.16, respectively).

18. This translation, which does not accord with that of the English version already quoted, is apparently Merton's own.

19. *Fulgens Radiatur*, 147.

20. "It is essential in the Benedictine way of life . . ." (11).

must know better than all others that earthly things are incapable of satisfying the heart, and he must base his life on St. Benedict's maxim "*nihil amori Christi praeponere.*"²¹ From this flows charity to our neighbor, which is equally essential. What neighbor? The poor, the sick, the guests who are received as Christ, and all one's brethren.

7. He praises the great *missionary work* of the Benedictines in the dark ages; their studies and learning; the sanctity of the monks; the great number of Benedictine popes and bishops.

8. Practical conclusions for sons of St. Benedict: to follow their Father and reproduce his virtues in our lives. *Addiscant imprimis . . . praeclaris ejus vestigiis auctiore cotidie studio insistere, eiusque virtutis sanctitatisque principia atque exempla in suum cuiusque vitae usum deducere.*²² Thus they will taste sweet peace in their hearts and bear fruit in the Church of God.

9. All the Church must turn to St. Benedict to learn most valuable lessons, particularly his *sense of the majesty of God* and *respect for the divine will*; not only that, but *supreme love of God as our Father*; then *fraternal charity*; and the *dignity of labor*; *detachment* from material things. (Read #29-30.²³)

21. "to prefer nothing to the love of Christ" (*RB*, c. 4; McCann, 26).

22. *Fulgens Radiatur*, 151; "Let those first of all [who belong to his numerous family] learn . . . to follow daily ever more closely in his illustrious footsteps and let each reduce to the practice of ordinary life the principles and example of his virtue and sanctity" (14 [n. 24]).

23. "29. Besides, Venerable Brethren, the author and lawgiver of the Benedictine Order has another lesson for us, which is, indeed, freely and widely proclaimed today but far too often not properly reduced to practice as it should be. It is that human labor is not without dignity; is not a distasteful and burdensome thing, but rather something to be esteemed, an honor and a joy. A busy life, whether employed in the fields, in the profitable trades or in the liberal arts does not demean the mind but elevates it; does not reduce it to slavery but more truly gives it a certain mastery and power of direction over even the most difficult circumstances. Even Jesus, as a youth, still sheltered within the domestic walls, did not disdain to ply the carpenter's trade in his foster-father's workshop; He wished to consecrate human toil with divine sweat. Let those therefore who labor in trades as well as those who are busy in the pursuit of literature and learning

In the homily *Exsultent Hodie* (Sept. 18, 1947)²⁴ the Holy Father calls St. Benedict the “Father of Europe.”²⁵ His “*ora et labora*”²⁶ sums up all that we need to know about man’s true culture and life on earth.

Part 2—*The Life and Character of St. Benedict*

1—St. Benedict’s Life; 2—His Mission; 3—His Sanctity.

1—*St. Benedict’s Life.*

All that we know of St. Benedict is drawn from St. Gregory the Great’s life of Benedict in Book II of his *Dialogues* (written 593 or 594).²⁷ How credible is this “life”? St. Gregory was writing within fifty years of the saint’s death. He was basing himself on

remember that they are performing a most noble task in winning their daily bread; they are not only providing for themselves and their best interests but can be of service to the entire community. Let them toil, as the Patriarch Benedict admonishes, with mind and soul elevated towards heaven, working not by force but through love; and a last word, even when they are defending their own legitimate rights, let them not be envious of the lot of others, labor not in disorder and tumult, but in tranquil and harmonious unity. Let them be mindful of those divine words ‘in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread’; this law of obedience and expiation holds good for all men. 30. Above all let this not be forgotten that looking beyond the fleeting things of earth we must daily and increasingly strive after heavenly and lasting goods, whether we be engaged in intellectual work or study or in a laborious trade; when we shall have gained that goal, then and then only will it be given to us to enjoy true peace, undisturbed repose, and everlasting happiness” (16–17).

24. *Acta Apostolica Sedis*, 39 (1947), 452–56.

25. *Exsultent Hodie*, 453.

26. “pray and work” (*Exsultent Hodie*, 453–54); this phrase, often considered the unofficial motto of Benedictine life, is not found in the *Rule*, but apparently was first used in the nineteenth century by Maurus Wolter, OSB, a German abbot: see M. D. Meeuws, “Ora et Labora: Devise Bénédictine?” *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, 54 (1992), 193–214.

27. The *Life* is found in *PL* 66, cols. 125A–294C, as an introduction to the *Rule*; the other three books of the *Dialogues* are in *PL* 77, cols. 149–430.

accounts given by those who had known the saint (see {the} names in *Dialogues* II: Prologue²⁸). He knew many who had lived under Benedict, and Monte Cassino was not far from Rome. St. Gregory's intention was above all to edify, and not to write a scholarly history. It is possible that some of the details of the story are perhaps forced a little to fit this plan, without any insincerity on the writer's part. The biography is essentially simple and plain, {a} very straightforward narrative quite obviously clear of all frills and embellishments. The evident austerity of the style and the manner in which the story is told show that St. Gregory was striving to keep, with Benedictine simplicity, to the bare facts as he had received them. His only purpose as a writer was to interpret these facts in a spiritual way, and the spirituality that is assigned throughout to St. Benedict may well be colored by the personality and spirituality of St. Gregory himself, but one cannot help believing that it is essentially the true Benedict whom we see in this narrative. (The best modern life of St. Benedict is the beautiful book of Cardinal Schuster, OSB—a book full of true Benedictine spirit and monastic charm.²⁹)

Outline of Benedict's Life

{He was} born at *Nursia* or in the Province of Nursia about 480. The people of Nursia are naturally austere, and Benedict had the character of his race. His family was not necessarily noble. *Liberiori genere ortus*³⁰—a good family, but not necessarily of the high nobility. Perhaps about 495—he goes to Rome to study, but immediately (496?) leaves for Enfide (near Tivoli). {He} lives with a colony of ascetes. About 500 {he} goes to Subiaco to live alone, after the manner of the Desert Fathers. {This is} a rocky valley, near the ruins of the country place of Nero. When disciples

28. Col. 126B: the names mentioned are Constantine, Valentinian, Simplicius and Honoratus.

29. Ildefonso Schuster, *St. Benedict and His Times*, trans. Gregory J. Roettger (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1951).

30. "born of a quite respectable family" (col. 126A, which reads "*exortus*").

come, he begins a cenobitic group like that of Pachomius—small “cells” of twelve monks each, scattered about the hillside. This {was} about 503.

St. Benedict at Subiaco gains the reputation of a great saint and miracle worker. He suffers from the jealousy of priests and other monks. The jealousy of Florentius gives Benedict an excuse to change his location and way of life. He goes to Monte Cassino around 529. This is about half-way between Rome and Naples—on a high mountain, {containing} ruins of an ancient acropolis with a temple of Jupiter (say the scholars, rather than Apollo as St. Gregory has it). Here at Monte Cassino Benedict has reached his full development, after the growth and evolution of his early years through all the stages of monastic life known in his time—ascete, hermit, Pachomian cenobite. Having tried all these, he has reached his own conclusions and it is at Monte Cassino that he puts his own formula into effect. Here also he writes the *HOLY RULE*, the fruit of his maturity and experience and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The *Rule* was written probably *after* 534 (since he quotes St. Cesarius,³¹ whose rule for nuns was not written before this time). Benedict died on March 21, probably in 547. His feast is celebrated on that day. The Benedictines celebrate the solemnity of St. Benedict on July 11 ({which} commemorates the transfer of his relics to Fleury).

The Youth and Conversion of St. Benedict

Every word counts in St. Gregory’s *Vita Benedicti*. It is by a close meditative study of the *Vita*, weighing the words in the light of monastic tradition, that we can begin to understand the sanctity and spirit of St. Benedict. This study is in a way essential to a true understanding of the *Rule*.

31. See *Sancti Benedicti Regula Monasteriorum*, ed. Cuthbert Butler, OSB (Freiburg: Herder, 1930), 8 [Prologue], 109 [c. 58], 190 [index]; the borrowed passages are actually taken from the first chapter of Cesarius’ *Rule for Monks*, not that for nuns.

Texts have been gathered together (see below³²). We refer to them only briefly here.

1. *Fuit vir vitae venerabilis*, etc.³³ The opening words of the *Dialogue* have made such a deep impression on all following generations that they have practically obsessed artists, and made them portray St. Benedict with a long white beard. St. Gregory, himself a great artist, here strikes the keynote of a theme that will recur throughout the *Vita*. A dominant characteristic of the saint is brought before us from the beginning:

Gravity, seriousness, maturity—this is not the seriousness of stupidity—the solemn vacuity of an empty and unimaginative mind—nor is it a sphinx-like pose—a front. (Too often the rather inept efforts of artists simply present Benedict with a gloomy and forbidding facade.) This seriousness and gravity of Benedict have a *charismatic* quality, which is therefore radiant and joyous. It is a seriousness that belongs to one filled from childhood with the Holy Ghost, radiating the power, wisdom, and mercy of God. It is a *gentle and prudent* seriousness, full of wisdom, recognizing the nothingness of the world and the greatness of God. It is not an aggressive and gloomy sulkiness of the irate Father who is always trying to find fault with his children and to prevent them from expressing themselves, trying to frown down all spontaneity.

Detachment—from the very beginning, Benedict, a wise child, prudently held himself aloof from the world and kept his heart untouched by its corruption and its illusions. The implication is especially that he recognized the transitory and fleeting character of worldly values, and that he made a *clear-sighted and deliberate choice*.

2. His withdrawal from Rome. Sent to Rome to study, Benedict observed how others rushed headlong into the life of vice as though

32. In his typescript Merton had written "*Texts from St Gregory go here in the complete set of notes*" at the end of his discussion of the *Vita Benedicti* as a note added on page 13v, but they were not included in the dittoed version. The Latin texts have been included in this edition with an English translation as Appendix 2 (233–45 below).

33. "He was a man whose life was worthy of deepest respect" (col. 126A).

plunging over a cliff into an abyss. St. Gregory portrays him marvelously as one who had just lifted his foot to put it into the world, and who prudently steps back. The whole picture is one of a quiet, alert, simple but prudent person who realizes what is going on while others are carried away by passion and imprudence.

3. His flight to solitude—his *experience* having taught him the vanity of worldly knowledge, he withdraws *scienter nescius*.³⁴ {The} implication {here is} of the higher knowledge of the spirit, which is beyond conceptual and discursive learning. St. Benedict was moved by divine counsel, and a very little human experience was sufficient to teach him more than volumes of ethical theory. Schuster points out that he was, however, *educated*.³⁵ Note, too, already here is implicit a character of *silence* about the wisdom of Benedict. He sees and acts. He does not make any speeches about it. But above all, it is not the negative side that is stressed, but his positive motive, which outweighs everything else: THE DESIRE TO PLEASE GOD ALONE—*solī Deo placere desiderans*.³⁶ He has seized intuitively upon the great value which is alone real: the will of God, the desire to please God. (For the will of God here is not a blind dictate of an inexorable Absolute; it is the love of a kind Father Whom His sons will seek to please and to gratify by a return of love.) But this love is *exclusive*: *solī Deo*. Note—it is not said that Benedict desired to possess, or to enjoy God alone, but to *please* God alone. {The} emphasis {is} on the fact that God is not for him a commodity to be “had” but a Person to be loved and honored with one’s whole heart. (It is only in that way that He can be possessed!)

4. *Benedict embraces the life of an ascete*. He goes to Enfide, and joins a group of pious men (*multis honestioribus viris*³⁷) living around the Church of St. Peter. The *ascetes* were the ancestors of the monks. They were not yet true monks, still less were they

34. “knowingly ignorant” (col. 126B).

35. See chapter 6, “Literary Progress” (41–42).

36. “desiring to please God alone” (col. 126A).

37. “many highly admirable men” (c. 1; col. 128A, which reads “*multisque*”).

hermits. They had no organization; they just lived good lives, devoting themselves to prayer and penance and a certain degree of retirement, but without withdrawing completely from the towns or villages. St. Anthony had begun his monastic conversion in the same way. The amusing side of the story {is that} St. Benedict still has his “nurse” with him. She is in reality a faithful old servant, still acting as his housekeeper, and being somewhat of a mother to him. “Apparently she was one of those pious women from the mountains, full of faith and generosity. The young master regarded her as a second mother and she showed him a truly maternal affection” (Schuster, p. 43). Schuster compares her with the nurse of Aeneas, who followed him in his travels to Italy.³⁸ St. Benedict works a miracle when an earthenware sieve borrowed by Cyrilla (the nurse) is broken. The sieve was kept for about three centuries as a relic: *super fores ecclesiae!*³⁹ St. Benedict decides to flee into complete solitude, to avoid the reputation and cult that rise up around him as a little thaumaturgus.

5. *Hermit at Subiaco*—St. Gregory gives the motives for the flight: here again {is} another *key theme* in the spirituality of St. Benedict. *Plus appetens mala mundi perpeti quam laudes.*⁴⁰ St. Benedict in the fear of the Lord remembered the warning of Christ: if you were of the world, the world would have loved its own. He realized the vanity of and deceptiveness of a reputation for holiness. Note these were good people, good Christian folk, and he had worked a genuine miracle. Why not settle down to a good fruitful apostolate. . . . ? That would have contained, in St. Benedict’s case, a subtle worldly temptation. His ideal was *God alone*. He was not ready for the apostolate that God Himself would initiate later on. It is a *certain sign* of the Holy Spirit when one with true, sincere, interior purity of love for God seeks abjection

38. Schuster, 43; the reference is to *Aeneid*, 7:1-4, which refers to Aeneas burying his nurse Caieta upon reaching southern Italy.

39. “above the entrance of the church” (c. 1; col. 128C).

40. “preferring to endure the hostility of this world more than to receive its praises” (c. 1; col. 128C).

and hiddenness rather than to be in the limelight. {There is} no false humility here. {He is} not escaping in disgust from a world that shames him by his praises, but {is motivated by} a sincere desire for God, for intimacy with Him unobscured by the smoke-screen of human adulation, which blinds and perverts the clear vision of the soul.

Plus pro Deo laboribus fatigari. . . .⁴¹ In addition to the sincere desire for a humble and hidden life, here is the desire for *labor and poverty*—not just labor as an amusement, a recreation: *laboribus fatigari*, labor as a salutary penance, labor in a spirit of compunction. Note how this key passage, on St. Benedict's vocation, is filled with the spirit of compunction, a spirit of salutary sorrow at the nothingness and dangers of the world, and at the thought that true values, the love and will of God, penance and prayer, are underestimated and neglected by the world which God so loved as to give His only-begotten Son to save it. So now he even flees from his faithful nurse, and leaves all friends, relatives, etc.

*Deserti loci secessum petiit.*⁴² Here he is following the classical example of St. Anthony. For the early hermits—to seek the desert was to seek reality: that is to say, to evade the deceptive mirage of the world, and to face the fact that this life is an arid conflict and struggle. Benedict sought solitude in a spirit of *deep compunction*: not the “consolation” of being alone. To be alone in a place like Subiaco for three years would not, at first, be consoling: it would be a severe trial of strength and endurance. Undoubtedly there were very pure and spiritual consolations, but his solitude was first of all penitential, and led through suffering to a higher kind of joy. Subiaco—{note} the nature of the place—a rugged and stony gorge. But St. Gregory with his usual mastery paints an attractive and austere picture of it, with its streams and springs of fresh water. {It is} in the Apennines, forty miles or so from Rome. He speaks of the lake, then of the river which flows from

41. “rather to be exhausted by working for God” (c. 1; col. 128C).

42. “he sought the solitude of a deserted place” (c. 1; col. 128C).

it. *Frigidas atque perspicuas emanat aquas.*⁴³ He meets Romanus, monk of a nearby monastery {and} arranges with him for a secret supply of food. Romanus gives him the habit—“*Sanctae conversationis habitum tradidit.*”⁴⁴ He became a monk by this simple act. Why? The very wearing of the habit was the sign that he had consecrated his life to God by conversion of manners (*sancta conversatio*⁴⁵) (*conversatio morum*⁴⁶). It was assumed that this was sufficient. “Let your speech be ‘Yea, yea’ and ‘Nay, nay’.”⁴⁷ Benedict himself would realize later that it was not sufficient, in the case of most monks, just to put on a habit: there would have to be an explicit vow, which would imply certain very definite obligations. Let us remember however that the mere wearing of a religious habit, although the novice does not yet take vows, implies a desire to consecrate one’s life to God, and the intention to live a holy life entirely pleasing to God. The incident of the bell {follows}⁴⁸—{it is} typical of St. Gregory’s manner as a writer: incisive, simple, clear. Note the presence of the devil in this story: this is the right place for the devil to make his appearance. Later (c. 2) the devil will make a more formidable assault, in the form of a carnal temptation, which St. Benedict overcomes in the most heroic manner.⁴⁹

St. Benedict overcomes temptation. {Note the} delicacy and clarity of the story: the little bird fluttering around the saint—the suggestion that follows—his impetuous heroism, and the delicate

43. “it pours forth cold and clear waters” (c. 1; col. 128C).

44. “he provided the habit of a holy way of life” (c. 1; col. 128C).

45. “holy way of life” (*RB*, c. 21, which reads: “*sanctae conversationis*”; McCann, 68).

46. “conversion of manners” (*RB*, c. 58, which reads: “*conversazione morum suorum*”; McCann, 130); see below, n. 119, for the significance of this term.

47. Matt. 5:37.

48. Romanus lowered bread down to Benedict on a rope with a bell attached to let Benedict know when it was coming; the devil broke the bell by throwing a stone at it (c. 1; col. 130A).

49. He throws himself naked into a patch of briars and nettles (c. 2; cols. 132AD, 134AB).

psychology of the narration. He is at first obsessed, then returns to himself, called by grace, and throws himself into the nettles and briars nearby. It is, says St. Gregory, a question of fighting fire with fire—*bene poenalter foris ardere . . . Vicit peccatum quia mutavit incendium*.⁵⁰ The problem of temptation is the problem of rechanneling the force of desire, and turning the energy of concupiscence into anger against oneself and holy desire for the justice of God—arming oneself against the flesh with a burning zeal for the will and law of God. True love cannot subsist without this foundation of burning zeal. If we do not hunger and thirst after justice and righteousness, the desires for our own selfish satisfaction and the gratification of the flesh will overcome us. The spirit of *generosity in penance and mortification* is therefore essential to the Benedictine life and *Rule*: but we must not overlook the fact that here we see Benedict in an early stage of his development, and reacting to temptation in a way that is, in its practical details, neither demanded nor recommended for all his disciples. All must be generous and uncompromising in renunciation of self, but all are not called to take an equally dramatic or drastic exterior way of fighting temptation. {The} reason {is that} in very many cases this would not work at all but would have the opposite effect. This is a good example of a case in which we should imitate the *spirit* with which a saint overcomes himself, and reproduce his generosity, while not at the same time taking the exact same exterior means that he used. We should take the means explicitly prescribed in the *Rule*—and use them with the *spirit* of ardent generosity here portrayed.

Having overcome the flesh in this heroic manner, St. Benedict has reached the end of the active life. He has attained to *apatheia* or complete control of the passions, and is now entitled to undertake the direction of souls. Observe carefully that in all this, St. Gregory is simply following the steps laid out by theo-

50. "he made himself burn exteriorly through this salutary pain . . . He overcame sin by exchanging fires" (c. 2; col. 132C, which reads ". . . arderet . . . Vicit itaque . . .").

logical tradition in his time—Cassian, the Greek Fathers, etc. *Praxis*—culminating in *apatheia*—leads to *theoria* and {a} capacity for charismatic spiritual fatherhood. As long as one is dominated by the eight capital vices, one is not able to see the light of God with an untroubled eye, and one does not have enough light to see into the souls of others and guide them. From this time on, it is explicitly said,⁵¹ St. Benedict feels no more any movements of the flesh. Again, this is a very special charismatic grace, appropriate for one who had a particular mission, the spiritual fatherhood of all Western monasticism. Cf. St. Thomas received the same grace,⁵² because it was necessary for his theological mission—but note at the same time the balance and sanity of St. Thomas' own teaching: we do not have to be free from all first movements of passion in order to lead virtuous and fruitful lives.⁵³ Even St. John of the Cross teaches this.⁵⁴ Avoid wrong and

51. Col. 132C.

52. See Jacques Maritain, *The Angelic Doctor: The Life and Thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. J. F. Scanlon (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1931), 30–31: "The story is a familiar one, how 'the young and pretty damsel, attired in all the blandishments of love' was introduced into the bedroom where Thomas lay asleep; how he rose and, snatching a brand, drove the temptress out and burned the sign of the cross upon the door. And thenceforth, by an angelic grace, was never troubled by any impulse of the flesh."

53. See *Summa Theologiae*, 1a 2ae, q. 59, a. 2 ("Can There Be Moral Virtues Together with Passions?"), in *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby, op. et al., 61 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–80), 23.82/83–86/87.

54. See *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. 1, c. 11: "it is true that all the desires are not equally hurtful, nor do they all equally embarrass the soul (we are speaking of those that are voluntary), for the natural desires hinder the soul little, or not at all, from attaining to union, when they are not consented to nor pass beyond the first movements (that is, all those wherein the rational will has had no part, whether at first or afterward); and to take away these—that is, to mortify them wholly in this life—is impossible. And these hinder not the soul in such a way as to prevent attainment to Divine union, even though they be not, as I say, wholly mortified; for the natural man may well have them, and yet the soul may be quite free from them according to the rational spirit" (*The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers, 3 vols. [Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1946], 51–52).

exaggerated (essentially Stoic and pagan) ideas of *apatheia*.⁵⁵ At the same time, the negative work of asceticism being done, St. Benedict does not relapse into pure quiet and passive contemplation. He brings forth fruits of every virtue.

St. Benedict becomes famous as a father of souls. Discovered by a visiting priest (illuminated by God Himself) and by shepherds, Benedict begins to attract disciples. He unwillingly accepts the abbotship of Vicovaro. They try to poison him, and he returns to solitude. He plunges into deeper and more perfect contemplation. *Solus in Superni Spectatoris oculis habitavit secum.*⁵⁶ The interesting commentary on this is entirely St. Gregory's spirituality, but one may assume that it is also quite proper to St. Benedict. St. Gregory's explanation {is that} it was better to retire without resistance than to waste his time and lose peace in a futile struggle—in which he would have lost his own soul without gaining theirs. The Prodigal Son in the "far country" does not "return"—not with his true self. "*Vagatione mentis et inverecunditia sub semetipso cecidit?*"⁵⁷ Gregory adds {that} Benedict might have stayed at Vicovaro if there were *some good ones* he could have helped. The idea of *cordis custodia*⁵⁸—which is certainly found in the *Rule*⁵⁹—is the basis of the degrees of humility and forms the

55. See "The Question of Apatheia" in Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, Monastic Wisdom [MW], vol. 13 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 102–106.

56. "He dwelt alone with himself before the eyes of the Heavenly Observer" (c. 3; col. 136B).

57. "He fell beneath himself through the unsteadiness of his mind and his shameless behavior" (c. 3; col. 138B, which reads ". . . et immunditia sub semetipsum . . .": Merton is evidently relying on a different version of the text here).

58. "guarding the heart".

59. The phrase itself is not found in the *Rule*, but cf. "*Qui malignum diabolum aliqua suadentem sibi cum ipsa suasionem sua a conspectibus cordis sui respuens, deduxit ad nihilum*" ("Who has in some way brought to nothing the evil demon tempting him, driving him along with his temptation away from the sight of his heart") (Prol.; McCann, 8, 10) and "*Cogitationes malas cordi suo advenientes mox ad Christum allidere, et seniori spiritali patefacere. Os suum a malo vel pravo eloquio custodire*" ("To

substance of the first degree which is the foundation of the whole ascetic structure of the *Rule*. It is also prominent in all Benedictine mysticism: see especially Dom Augustine Baker, *Sancta Sophia*.⁶⁰ Attention to our own soul, purity of conscience, which permits us to see at once if anything is contrary to the will of God in us {is} *not* introversion in {the} psychological sense. The basis {is} not allowing ourselves to be carried away out of ourselves with trifles and superficial pursuits that lead nowhere. {See also} St. Bernard's *curiositas*⁶¹—concerning ourselves with things that have nothing to do with God's will for us and contribute nothing to our salvation. Note—this must not be taken in too absolute and rigid a sense. A person can have Benedictine *custodia cordis* and yet retain a variety of interests and occupations. It is not so much a matter of what you do and what you know, as how you do it and how you know it. Here too the motive is all-important. Cultivate self-custody not by strained and rigid introspection which leads to an unhealthy state, but by seeking God in all things and embracing His will with simplicity wherever it is made known to us. {The} emphasis {is} on sincerity—loyalty to truth.

dash immediately against Christ evil thoughts coming into one's heart, and to reveal them to one's spiritual father. To guard one's mouth from evil and depraved speech") (c. 4; McCann, 28).

60. Augustine Baker, *Sancta Sophia, or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation*, ed. Serenus Cressy (Douay: John Patte and Thomas Fievet, 1657); *Holy Wisdom, or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation, Extracted out of More than Forty Treatises . . . by Serenus Cressy*, ed. James Sweeney, 2.1.8.9 (New York: Harper, 1950), 238–39: "All the duties of mortification (and consequently the exercise of all virtues) may be reduced to *custodia cordis*, which is a wary guard of our heart, and it consists in not pouring forth our affections inordinately upon creatures, nor admitting into our souls any inordinate love: it is a chariness over our interior, to keep it in as much quietness as we can"; see Merton's article, "Self-Knowledge in Gertrude More and Augustine Baker," in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 154–77.

61. This is the first step of pride in St. Bernard's *De Gradibus Humilitatis et Superbiae* (X.28–38; *PL* 182, cols. 957B–963A); see also Appendix I, "Curiositas," in Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940), 155–57.

As Benedict was now famous, numerous disciples gathered around him at Subiaco. Here he divided them up into groups of twelve in separate houses, under minor superiors, according to the Pachomian tradition. It was at this time that he was joined by recruits from the Roman nobility, including St. Placid and St. Maur. At Subiaco, St. Benedict works several miracles and other stories are told of him which give indications as to his character:

1. (c. 4)—the monk who could not stay in choir during the “*oratio*”⁶²—which all authorities take to be mental prayer. Hence there was mental prayer in common in the earliest Benedictine houses. Benedict does not hesitate to use corporal punishment to deliver a monk from the evil spirit of negligence and distraction. Benedict demands serious attention to prayer and the spiritual life, and knows *the danger of sloth and neglectfulness*. We must be persuaded, with him, that it is not enough just to “be in the monastery”; one must also constantly strive to live a life of prayer as a true monk, and to make the sacrifices that this demands. It means we cannot give in to whims and to desires for our own convenience all the time.

2. (c. 5)—because of the inconvenience given to the monks of three houses up on top of the cliff, Benedict works a miracle so that there will be a spring on top of the mountain and they will not have to come down to the lake every day. Some of the desert fathers would undoubtedly have disapproved—they made a virtue of walking miles to get a little water. Note: St. Benedict, far from receiving their complaint with a rebuke, consoles them (*blande consolans*⁶³).

3. (c. 6)—the *Gothus pauper spiritu*⁶⁴—who had received the task of cleaning away briars by the lakeside, a site for a new garden. He drops the sickle in the lake, and Benedict gets it back miraculously, but above all we note the gentleness and kindness

62. Col. 142A.

63. “gently consoling” (col. 144A).

64. “Goth who was poor in spirit” (col. 144B, which reads “*Gothus quidam . . .*” [“a certain Goth . . .”]).

with which he gives it back to the Goth—*Ecce labora et noli contristari*.⁶⁵ All these little indications are of great significance. St. Benedict *might* have said, “You careless numbskull, don’t you know that all the tools are to be treated as the vessels of the altar?”⁶⁶ Would you throw a chalice in the lake, you sacrilegious rascal?” etc. etc.

4. (c. 7)—the famous rescue of St. Placid by St. Maur. St. Benedict sees the accident in {a} vision. St. Maur asks a blessing—then *runs*, and keeps on running, even over the water. St. Benedict attributes everything to the merit of obedience. St. Placid says he saw the Abbot’s *melotes* (cowl?) over him.

The Transfer to Monte Cassino: another attempt {is made} to poison St. Benedict {by} his enemy, the local priest Florentius (St. Gregory adds *hujus nostri subdiaconi Florentii avus . . .*⁶⁷). Benedict gives the poisoned bread to a friendly crow that shows up every day at dinner time . . . etc. Then Florentius hatches a plot to harm the souls of St. Benedict’s young disciples. Note that St. Benedict is not excited or scandalized. He looks out the window gravely and quietly decides to move to another place. This is the cause of the move to Monte Cassino. Note St. Benedict’s refusal to rejoice at the punishment visited upon his enemy. Again, his sense of deeper realities {is paramount}. He laments his death and the possible loss of his soul. All through the narrative one gains a vivid impression of a *man who sees things differently, whose eyes penetrate into the values of a higher world*. This indeed is one of the outstanding characteristics of St. Benedict.

St. Benedict vs. the Devil: note—the devil pursues him to Monte Cassino. “*Loca non hostem mutavit*.”⁶⁸ {Note the} traditional idea that the monk is the enemy of the devil, the chosen instrument, the soldier of Christ who, by his prayers and self-denial, continues the work of the Incarnation which is a reconquest, by

65. “So then, go back to work and don’t be upset” (col. 144D).

66. Cf. *RB*, c. 31 (McCann, 82).

67. “the grandfather of our own subdeacon Florentius” (c. 8; col. 148A).

68. “He has changed his place but not his enemy” (c. 8; col. 152A).

God, of His creation. Man plays a central part in this, the work of spiritualizing and divinizing the world. But note that the principal part is played by the great saints, those with special charismatic gifts, special purity of heart. It is clear that the other monks, more or less helpless, and not always aware of what is going on, depend almost entirely on St. Benedict to defend them, save them, open their eyes, undo the harmful work of the evil one, etc.

1. Benedict drives out the devil from Monte Cassino, in destroying the pagan shrines. Worship of the devil is united with worship of nature for its own sake; paganism and diabolism {are} intimately connected. (The devil curses Benedict—punning on his name—for “persecuting” him.)

2. {The} devil sits on a big stone so the monks cannot move it until St. Benedict gives his blessing. Then {follows} the *phantasticum incendium*⁶⁹ in the monastic kitchen. The devil overturns a wall and kills a young (child) monk. St. Benedict restores him to life.

The severity of St. Benedict: the discretion of St. Benedict must not be confused with softness. Realizing the seriousness of the struggle with sin and with the devil, St. Benedict is always firm and stern in regard to essential principles. He does not give in, where they are concerned (cf. the monk who kept leaving choir during mental prayer, above⁷⁰). Several instances of sternness—in the matter of monks *disobeying* by eating outside the monastery—are supported by miraculous knowledge on the part of the saint. {It is} also {evident} in the matter of *poverty*.

1—Eating outside the monastery. Here it is a matter of a *custom of the house—mos cellae*.⁷¹ (Later it became a point of rule not to eat outside without permission.) Two brethren are out late, and eat at the house of a pious lady. On returning, they do not make known the fact to St. Benedict and they deny having eaten when

69. “illusory blaze” (c. 10 [title]; col. 154B).

70. Page 28 (c. 4).

71. C. 12; col. 156B.

he reproaches them. He shows that he knew all about it; they fall at his feet and he forgives them because he knows they will not do it again, aware that he will be “present” wherever they are (c. 12).⁷² Note—the issue whether or not it is serious in itself to eat outside (the) monastery does not arise. This is not considered. It is a point of *obedience*. Also the monks were in bad faith, because they tried to hide their action. Benedict therefore demanded *great fidelity in the smallest points of obedience*. “Let no one in the monastery follow the will of his own heart”⁷³—this was to him a principle of primary importance, and one on which he did not compromise. Undoubtedly there is much that is light matter, and what is trivial must not be treated as a mortal sin. And here was slight matter, which St. Benedict easily overlooked, as long as the *principle of perfect obedience* was maintained. This is very important for a true understanding of the spirit of St. Benedict.

2—Note Benedict even rebuked the secular brother of one of the monks who had a resolution to come fasting to the monastery on his visits, and who broke this resolution once on the insistence of a fellow traveler.

3—The slave Exhilaratus—bringing two bottles of wine to the monastery—hides one for himself. St. Benedict knows of it, and knows that the wine has been changed into a serpent. Here we have two stories (this and the above) which legend may have embellished for the purpose of underlining St. Benedict’s prophetic power.

4—Benedict is severe to a monk who tries to keep for himself some handkerchieves he had been given. {This is} a clear violation of poverty in which St. Benedict does not compromise. Note he is always gentle and kind with the offender, without relaxing on the point of principle.

5—He is equally severe with *proud thoughts*.

We conclude—that to be true sons of St. Benedict we must be extremely faithful even in the smallest points of obedience,

72. Col. 158B.

73. *RB*, c. 3 (McCann, 24/25).

poverty, humility of heart, avoiding {a} critical spirit, and all levity or sloth and carelessness. These are *essential* to St. Benedict's spirit. All these stories, though perhaps embellished in certain details, give us a very clear view of St. Benedict's spirit. It is definitely not a spirit of easy-going compromise. St. Benedict takes a very broad view of his principles, he considers the weakness of human nature, he is realistic and kind, but in the essentials thus laid down he is inflexibly firm. He does not demand heroic corporal macerations, or any of the ascetic feats of the desert fathers. But he does not dispense his monks from these in a spirit of relaxation. On the contrary, he realizes that these are all accidental, and that the true self-denial is in the denial of our will, our desires, and in the breaking off of all attachments.

St. Benedict tolerates no inordinate attachments whatever. This point must be made very clear, because so many take advantage of Benedict's discretion in order to favor the weakness of sinful nature in dangerous ways. This is by no means the spirit of the saint. He is realistic and kind toward nature, but he is never indulgent to self-love and to sin. Hence, though there is abundant food, sleep, etc. and the life is not too hard on the body, and the atmosphere of the life is luminous and joyful, filled with all the consolations of a supernatural family spirit, nevertheless there is a price which must be paid. The monk *must renounce himself*. To live without renunciation and penance is not to live as a monk.

St. Benedict is unyielding in his demand for:

- a) perfect, uncompromising obedience, even in the smallest points, the slightest indications of the will of the superior;
- b) perfect poverty—"nihil omnino"⁷⁴—complete detachment from all material possessions, no exercise of ownership, no use of anything whatever without permission;
- c) fidelity in good works, keeping good resolutions, perseverance in prayer, works of penance;
- d) fidelity to the common life of the monastery is asked in a heroic degree—no one is to absent himself arbitrarily from com-

74. "nothing at all" (*RB*, c. 33; McCann, 84).

mon exercises, or from the common activities of the brethren (cf. the monk and mental prayer).

These are merely the points which we draw from the last few pages we have considered in the *Vita Benedicti*. There are of course many others. These are typical and suffice to make the desired point: ST. BENEDICT WILL COUNTENANCE NO COMPROMISE ON ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES, ESPECIALLY OBEDIENCE AND POVERTY.

Some other points on which St. Benedict showed himself severe:

chapter 28—When someone asked for a little oil, St. Benedict was angry when the request was not granted. The one who refused to give the oil explained that then there would be none left for the monks. St. Benedict threw the bottle over the cliff, rather than retain anything that should have been given “as to Christ.”⁷⁵ Here again, the matter is primarily obedience, but it also involves the *faith* by which the monk ought to see Christ in the needy, and ought to listen to the words of the Lord instructing to “give to all who ask of you.”⁷⁶ On this St. Benedict could not see any possibility of compromise. Would that we shared some of his faith. However on one point the Lord Himself set aside the severity of St. Benedict in favor of the higher law of charity. The occasion was that of St. Scholastica’s visit to him. He was with her all day in the guesthouse outside the gate and insisted on returning to the monastery at night according to his principles, but her prayers prevailed, a great storm arose, and St. Benedict was forced to spend the night in “holy conversation”⁷⁷ with his sister. Thus the Lord showed that He preferred charity to principle. However it was a special occasion—as St. Scholastica knew it was to be their last meeting on earth.

The Interior Life and Prayer of St. Benedict:

1. It is based above all on the solid foundation of Gospel virtues—unshakeable faith and confidence in God. St. Benedict

75. RB, c. 36: “*ut sicut revera Christo ita eis serviat*” (“so that truly service may be given to them [i.e. the sick] as to Christ” (McCann, 90).

76. Lk. 6:30; cf. Matt. 5:42.

77. C. 33; col. 194B.

was one who firmly believed that having left all for God, he would always be taken care of by his heavenly Father. Cf. chapter 21—where he rebukes the lack of confidence of his monks when they see there is no more wheat, in time of famine. (Note he rebukes and comforts them at the same time.)

2. More than anything else, he is a *kind and compassionate* Father, with a great tenderness and understanding of human frailty. He is only severe when this is really necessary to deliver one from a fault—that is to say his severity is *medicinal* only, never merely punitive. He is a man of *longanimity and patience*. That is to say he has a great ability to *bear in silence* things which would rouse others to anger. He knows how to wait upon God's time, and is slow to get excited about anything. But this longanimity is closely connected with prayer. St. Benedict built the edifice of his interior life upon this longsuffering patience—meekness, gentleness. This is something we seem to have forgotten in modern times. A life of prayer that does not rest on meekness and patience, a life of prayer that cannot "take" many things in silence, has no solidity. The one who is impatient can *never really be a man of prayer*. He can pray sometimes, indeed, but sooner or later his own violence will disrupt his prayer, or he will find himself subject to strain. One of the most impressive features of St. Benedict is his monumental *calm*: cf. chapter 31—how he liberates the serf from the Goth Zalla. This chapter gains in effect from the vivid contrast between St. Benedict and Zalla—{the} violence of the latter, driving the bound slave up the road with whips—we have already learned that a priest or cleric could hardly escape from Zalla's hands alive. St. Benedict is found sitting outside the monastery gate, reading. Here we have not only a contrast with the violence of Zalla, but with the comparative violence of St. Benedict's own youth. The heroism of Subiaco is here transcended by Benedict's supreme simplicity. He does not even look up when Zalla approaches, shouting *magnis vocibus*.⁷⁸ The bonds of the serf fall off when St. Benedict looks at them—Zalla falls to the ground in fear.

78. "in a very loud voice" (col. 190B).