

RESPONSE TO ABBOT CUTHBERT'S PAPER
“SOME INSIGHTS TOWARD APPLYING THE VISION OF VATICAN II
INTO MONASTIC LIFE”

It is an honor and a privilege for me to have been asked to give a response to Abbot Cuthbert's fine paper, and I can only hope that my small offering will in some way be worthy of a man and of an abbot of wisdom and of virtuous living such as he.

May I first note a few of many points of Abbot Cuthbert's paper which I believe should be objects of particular attention. And firstly, his insistence that a monastic community which seeks authentic renewal must be a community which seeks to think with the Church. One may well ask how any monastic community could suppose that it is living rightly if it does not seek always to think with the Church. But very sadly, it would appear that in the decades immediately following the Council there were communities which supposed this. The truth surely is that we have a serious obligation always to seek to think with the Church, and experience and observation tell us also that a community which does not accept this obligation will inevitably suffer a diminishment and then an absence of vocations, and will have death as its only future.

Secondly, I note Abbot Cuthbert's extremely helpful bibliography of the eleven magisterial documents issued in the last twenty-five years which he regards “as of particular importance”, and his pointing out the singular importance of the Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the Plenary Session of the CICLSAL in 2008. As an abbot who has not yet done this, I presume nevertheless to say that an abbot could find no better use of his time than to devote himself to a prayerful and careful study of all these texts.

Thirdly, I point to Abbot Cuthbert's listing on page 4 of his paper of what he regarded as the five fundamental principles, drawn from Pope Benedict's Address of 2008, of a renewed monastic spirituality. And I note that if one regards *lectio divina* as a form of prayer and so combines principles 2 and 3, then, after the foundational principle, number 1, we have the threesome of prayer and liturgy, fraternal communion, and hospitality, which could well be taken as the monastic forms, understood in general, of the three essential elements of consecrated life identified by *Vita consecrata*, viz., consecration, communion, and mission. So taken, their recognition is seen to have as a basis the special authority of that document.

In the remainder of his paper, for the sake of brevity, Abbot Cuthbert chooses just two elements of this renewed monastic spirituality, fraternal communion, and that form of prayer which is *lectio divina*, and gives us very thought-provoking short treatments of each. Again manifesting his gift for seeing what is of particular importance, he begins his treatment of communion with the foundational text on that topic

of Saint John Paul II from *Novo millennio ineunte*. In this text, Saint John Paul II speaks first of communion in the full sense of the Second Vatican Council, that is, communion with the Three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity, and in and through them with one's brothers and sisters. The foundation of fraternal communion, then, is our heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, in each of our brothers and sisters in faith, and in all of us together, who are members of the Mystical Body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit, and directed to the Father. It is this participation in the mystery of the Triune God, not the sharing of any particular human characteristics, which is the basis, and the only possible basis, of the profound unity among us which constitutes communion. In the old language, this participation is a supernatural reality, consisting in our loving contemplation of God in himself, and God in all of us. I would suggest that it is this loving contemplation, and the mystery of communion with God and with one's brothers and sisters which flows from it, which is the only essential goal of the monk, which is what seeking God is for him, what distinguishes his life from all other forms of consecrated life. From this participation in the Triune God, if it is authentic, there necessarily flow the various concrete aspects of fraternal communion, chief ones of which Saint John Paul II goes on to point out in the passage being considered, and so these concrete aspects become signs of the authenticity of the participation.

After considering this text from Saint John Paul II, Abbot Cuthbert notes the frequent appearance of the theme of communion in magisterial texts both preceding and following *Novo millennio ineunte*, and then identifies what he calls idiorhythmicity as a phenomenon in monasteries which is very incompatible with communion. A fruitful topic for our discussion might be the topic of what idiorhythmicity is, and how it is distinguished from eremitism, for of course we cannot say that the eremitical life, recognized through many ages in the Church and lately in the most recent magisterial documents as a true way of salvation and indeed as an authentic form of monastic life – we cannot say that the eremitical life is incompatible with communion. But then, further points for discussion arise. If indeed it is not only possible but necessary that communion exist in the eremitical life, what form does this communion take. And indeed, what form does communion take in the cenobitic life? For surely there is an eremitical element – some would say core, would they not? – in the life of every cenobitic monk. I would suggest that a fuller treatment of the form communion takes in the monastic life, both eremitical and cenobitic, is a development of doctrine in the Church's most recent magisterium on communion which would be very welcome, and presumably the Church would look to us monks, guided by the Spirit, as central to the process of formulating that fuller treatment. I think it should be noted, too, that in a full treatment of monastic communion, the recognition of this communion as the monk's goal would be accompanied by the recognition that the goal is never perfectly realized in this life. Indeed, an examination of the adjectives Saint Benedict uses to describe monks in the monastery he is conceiving quickly shows that he considered that at any given time there would be negligent monks, disobedient

monks, rebellious monks, etc., and furthermore, we have to note too that he considered that at any given time there were monks who were excommunicated – precisely *out* of monastic communion. Yet at the same time, strikingly, he did not consider that this necessarily showed that there was anything, so to say, “wrong” with the monastery, and perhaps indeed, in our language, he even considered that in some sense the communion of the monastery continued in this situation. How could this be? Part of the answer is, perhaps, that in the monastery Saint Benedict was conceiving there was a system of discipline, that is, a system for assisting a monk to take responsibility and accountability for his behavior, and for assisting him to come to deeper conversion. I suppose it would be commonly acknowledged that one of the greatest lacks of monasteries in our day, at least many of them, is precisely the lack of such a system. Would we wish to discuss what such a system would look like for monasteries of our time? In any case, the full treatment of communion as the goal of the monk must be accompanied by a treatment of conversion and of the means by which we can help one another to ever deeper conversion.

Next Abbot Cuthbert turns to *lectio divina*. Again he calls our attention to a foundational text of Saint John Paul II. In connection with this text, I would suggest that we might wish to discuss how we form newer monks – and first ourselves – in *lectio divina* in proper balance with the other paths of sanctification which are essential for the life of the Church and for monks. Saint John Paul II says that monasticism shows in a special way that life is suspended between *two* poles: the Word of God *and the Eucharist*. How do we maintain in our own lives and in our formation the proper balance between the Word and the Sacraments? Again, he says that the *starting point* for the monk is the Word of God, but of course the encounter with the Lord in his Word leads to the encounter with him in his Sacraments. Again, we need to note the objects of *lectio divina* mentioned in the text from *Potissimum institutione* which Abbot Cuthbert points out to us: the text of the Bible itself, indeed, but not only that, but a liturgical text, or a great spiritual page of Catholic tradition, as well. In the same text, we note that *lectio divina* is said to have four aspects – reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation – each of which is said to be unique and necessary. I have the impression that while a great deal of fine work has been done in the monastic world for the recovery and renewal of the meditative and prayerful reading of Scripture, little has been done for the recovery and renewal of the great tradition of contemplative prayer in both Western and Eastern monasticism. A question for our time, I believe, is this: how can all the elements of the monastic spiritual life be integrated in a balanced and unified order?

With regard to the matter of shared *lectio divina*, Abbot Cuthbert notes this text from *Vita consecrata*: “Meditation of the Bible *in common* is of great value. When practiced according to the possibilities and circumstances of life in community, this meditation leads to a joyful sharing of the riches drawn from the word of God, thanks to which brothers or sisters grow together and help one another to make progress in the spiritual life.” Here is concisely, richly, and beautifully expressed the great promise

shared lectio divina carries with it for the promotion of communion – and so holiness – in communities. But Abbot Cuthbert also points us to the following cautionary text from *Congregavit nos*: “Differences of age, formation and character make it advisable to be prudent in requiring [shared lectio divina] of an entire community. It is well to remember that the right moment cannot be rushed. . . . Where it is practiced with spontaneity and by common agreement, such sharing nourishes faith and hope as well as mutual respect and trust; it facilitates reconciliation and nourishes fraternal solidarity in prayer.” I suggest that a deeper understanding of what *monastic* communion consists in would help us to find the right place for shared lectio. And, might we like to discuss Abbot Cuthbert’s intimation that deaneries might be a way forward for many of our monastic communities toward “real communion between us”?

Lastly, Abbot Cuthbert’s final comment in his text: the necessity of promoting the great Benedictine characteristic of perseverance among all the brethren. Might we wish to share with one another thoughts as to how, by the grace of the Lord, we might do this?

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