

## Monasticism, what identity?

Workshop presentation, Abbots' Congress 2016

Soon after I received the request to moderate this session, there arrived the December 2015 copy of *The American Benedictine Review* with an article by Joel Rippinger OSB, "Transmitting A Common Core of Monasticism: A Survival Kit for the Future", and another on the new monasticism in the wider ecumenical context, "Bringing It to completion: American New Monastics and the Benedictine Tradition" by Alden Bass. A further approach can be found in "The Essential Elements of the Monastic Life", a discussion paper of BECOSA (Benedictine Communities of Southern Africa), published in the AIM English Language Bulletin 2014 No.107. Here we have three approaches to the topic in recent literature, offering a variety of reflections.

What distinguishes monasticism as a way of Christian living?

I would like to put this question as a way of opening the discussion. We can look at the externals and give the romantic view as cowl, cloister and chant. While these have been important signs and retain their place, they are externals. I suggest that, for Benedictines, the distinguishing mark is the formula of commitment proposed by Benedict in his Rule, a formula that both expresses an older tradition and provides a framework for contemporary emphases, as in the above articles.

Two phenomena that give some indication of expectations regarding identity are the growth of lay interest in monastic spirituality in the West and the tremendous renewal of Coptic monasticism in the East. In both cases I see the importance of connectedness and a formative rhythm of life, corresponding to Benedictine stability and *conversatio morum*.

### STABILITY

Stability originates in the desert tradition of sitting in the cell. Of the many sayings reported, I take that of Hierax and offer a somewhat allegorical interpretation:

A brother questioned Abba Hierax saying, "Give me a word. How can I be saved?" The old man said to him, "Sit in your cell, and if you are hungry, eat, if you are thirsty, drink; only do not speak evil of anyone, and you will be saved."

The saying invites an interpretation in terms of connectedness on three levels: connectedness to place (sit in your cell), to the self (eat and drink according to need) and to the other (do not speak evil of anyone). This connectedness is something emphasized several times by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si*. He speaks, for example, of "harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God" (n.210).

#### *Connectedness to Place*

In a contemporary mobile society this is counter-cultural, but it also witnesses to some contemporary values and concerns. Being connected to place implies a concern for the surrounding environment, an ecological responsibility and a respect for the land, echoing the concern for material things expressed in the Rule of Benedict. It means we cannot ignore the questions of consumption, pollution and energy that threaten our planet and challenges us today in such practical ways as the use of energy saving devices, recycling and decreasing our consumption. It calls us to a simplicity of life, manifested in reducing our dependence on material things and not always wanting the latest in technology in every field. It is a witness to harmony with creation versus exploitation of creation.

This connection to place which stability involves also means having a firm base of operations, a rootedness that gives confidence and consistency, helping us to persevere and not be swept away by the many attractions of our day. This perseverance means keeping control of our thoughts. The discipline of sitting in the cell was intended for this, knowing that with mastery of thoughts comes mastery of actions and so the possibility of persevering in the teaching of Christ in the monastic life. This perseverance, hypomone, was emphasized in a talk at the recent May 2016 Assembly of the Union of Superiors General, as characterizing the prophetic character of religious life seen as rooted in its eschatological force.<sup>1</sup>

### *Connectedness to Self*

The second element, connectedness to self, invites a holistic approach to the spiritual life. We do not seek God as disembodied spirits but as whole persons. Attention to the needs of the body is thus care of the self so that the body is a support and not an obstacle in the search for God. Connectedness to self calls us to acknowledge our needs and to the self observation that helps us come to a genuine self knowledge. Only through this radical self honesty can we begin to move to the calm at the centre of our being in union with the indwelling God. Amma Theodora puts this challenge succinctly in face of the temptation to escape:

Amma Theodora also said, 'There was a monk, who, because of the great number of his temptations said, "I will go away from here." As he was putting on his sandals, he saw another man who was also putting on his sandals and this other monk said to him, "Is it on my account that you are going away? Because I go before you wherever you are going."'

### *Connectedness to the Other*

With a stable point of reference in place and self, we are well equipped to reach out to the other. The way this is expressed, "do not speak evil of anyone", reminds us of the insistence in the *Sayings of the Desert Elders* on not judging others as judgment belongs to God alone. It calls us to care and compassion, to adapt ourselves to others, and to the hospitality that is so much part of the monastic tradition. St Benedict took the spirituality of the desert and placed it in a community context, emphasizing the connectedness not only to the abbot but also between members and especially to those in need: the sick, the elderly, the young, the wavering. The call to charity begins in the community and from there reaches out to others.

The witness this gives is in committing to others as they are, to seeing "one another's junk and talking about it"<sup>2</sup>. It provides a setting for mutual sharing, support and forgiveness. To help realize this there was once the chapter of faults, whose form outlived its purpose, but we are yet to discover contemporary equivalents for what it was intended to achieve, for talking, sharing, supporting and forgiving.

### FIDELITY TO MONASTIC LIFE (*Conversatio morum*)

The second aspect is the witness of a way of life reflecting the rhythms of Church and community. Monastic identity can be seen in these rhythms and is, in turn, formed by them. An analogy can be made with our mundane lives. If we reflect on a day's activities we no doubt find a pattern of repetition. We rise, wash, eat, go to our work, return, without reflecting on these rituals that make up much of our life. Yet these things are constantly forming us, the proof of this being seen in our reaction when this daily routine is interrupted. If, instead, we set in place a framework of daily rituals that are the result of reflection, the scope for positive formative growth is so much the greater. This is what *conversatio morum* offers us, a set of disciplines that open us to ongoing change and growth, from the structure of the monastic day with its rituals of Liturgy of

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<sup>1</sup>Saverio Cannistra OCD, "What is meant when speaking of the prophecy of the consecrated life?"

<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010) 2.

the Hours, Eucharist and *Lectio* to the personal disciplines we employ to be attentive to thoughts and their resultant actions. I suggest this is what is meant by the *praktike* of Evagrius or the *vita actualis* as Cassian calls it. As Lazare de Seilhac puts it, “what does not seem on the scale of a single day to favour interior unity, produces in time, with the passing of months and years, a sort of shift in the pole of confidence, a shift in one’s inner dynamism”.<sup>3</sup> A form of discourse which may help to express all this in contemporary terms is Michel Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ referring to how an individual acts upon self. In order to escape our addiction to the false self we need ascetic rituals, purifying thoughts, whose goal is purity of heart. It could perhaps be argued that *conversatio morum* is the technologies of self adopted by individuals in the monastic life to achieve their purpose. This approach will be further explored at a symposium in June 2017 to commemorate the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St Sylvester.

These two aspects are complementary and interdependent. Peter the Venerable wrote: “If they keep the first vow (stability) they are held by the content of the second (the monastic way of life). If they keep the second, they are bound by the constraints of the first”. Thus there is no stability without a way of life; no rhythm of life together without the commitment to stay.<sup>4</sup> The connectedness of stability and the formative rhythms of *conversatio morum* provide the basis of an identity which also responds to contemporary needs and searching.

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<sup>3</sup>Wilson-Hartgrove 69.

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