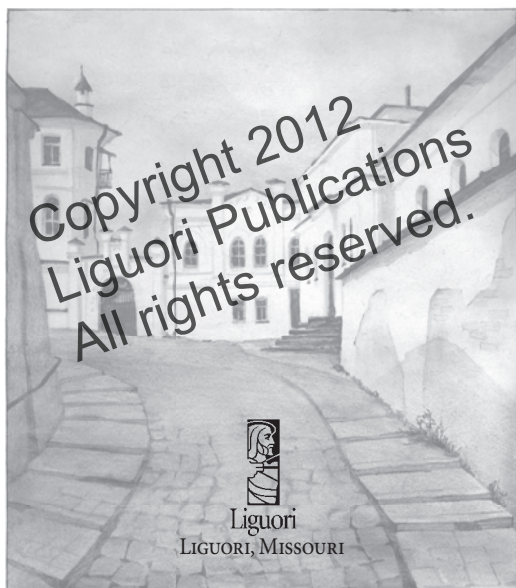


A RHYTHM OF LIFE: THE *Monastic* WAY

Brother Victor-Antoine
d'Avila-Latourrette



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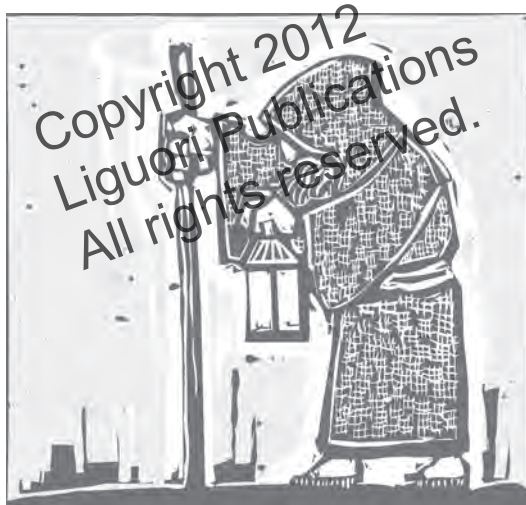
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Throughout my many years in monastic life, I have benefited a great deal from the experience, knowledge, wisdom, and richness of the monastic tradition at large, from that of the East and that of the West. The quotes in this book reflect my particular perspectives and interpretations and are often based on my own direct translations from the French, Spanish, Italian, or Latin versions of texts.

PART 1

THE SOURCES AND
ORIGINS OF
Monastic
LIFE



CHAPTER 1

The Origins

The Monk

The monk is one who is separated from all, yet is united to all.

EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, FOURTH-CENTURY MONK, *PRACTIKOS*

I believe that it is the witness of the monk to the eternal, to preach the tenderness of God, and to live it.

MOTHER MARIA, *HER LIFE IN LETTERS*

Monk comes from the Greek word *monachos*, meaning “alone.” The term applies to one who makes the choice to lead a life that is solitary, unified, integrated, pacified, and undivided in the quest for the absolute. For the sake of God, the monk leaves the world, its allures, pleasures, and all those ties that have been part of his life up until that point. This is painful and hard; after all, monks and nuns have much the same feelings and sensibilities as their fellow human beings. The difference is they have heard a call in their hearts, an inviting call that tells them, “Come. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Follow me.” The person who decides to become a monk or nun—to enter the solitude of the desert (a monastery or hermitage)—does it because he or she has heard this call, a call stronger than any other, a call to communion and fullness of life with God, a call that fulfills the deepest desires of the human heart.

He is toil. The monk toils at all he does. That is what a monk is.

ABBA JOHN THE DWARF, *THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS*

Monastic Life: A Mystery

To come face to face with the mystery of a monastic vocation and to grapple with it is a profound experience. To live as a monk is a great gift, not given to many.

JOHN DAIDO LOORI, ROSHI

Monastic life, like any life, remains essentially a mystery. God calls everyone in this world to a particular form of life, and monastic life is precisely a response to a call. The monk's call is to leave everything behind, as Christ invites us to do in the gospel, and to set out to seek God in silence and solitude. Throughout the ages, monastic life has essentially been the experience of the desert. From the early centuries of Christianity, the Holy Spirit has led certain men and women to the wilderness, where they could hear his voice and he could speak to their hearts. In the desert the Lord invites the monk to compunction and true repentance, to continual prayer and adoration, to voluntary silence, to the humble work of conversion of heart, which ultimately leads to the transfiguration of the monk's being by the power of God's love.

Monastic life is often misunderstood by our secular society as well as by many of our fellow Christians. The emphasis on self-denial, seclusion, and an absolute dedication to prayer makes some think that monastic life is a negative form of life. Some people think monks and nuns are odd people who flee from the company of other human beings and from the responsibilities of the world for an unknown reason. The truth, however, is just the opposite. Monks and nuns, and those who, from time to time, have come to share their life in the monastery, know that prayer totally opens their hearts to God and to the needs of their fellow human beings. If they choose to follow the path of self-renunciation, it is simply that they have heard

Christ's invitation to this particular calling. While they retire to the desert of the monastic life to pray continually, monks and nuns also take in their hearts the concerns of all humanity. Prayer vastly expands the dimensions of the human heart, making it capable of containing both God and the entire human family. Monastic prayer, when perfected by grace, leads the monk and the nun to recognize Christ's presence in every human being.

We can expect to spend our whole lives as monks entering deeper and deeper into the mystery of our monastic vocation, which is our life hidden with Christ in God. If we are real monks, we are constantly rediscovering what it means to be a monk, and yet we never exhaust the full meaning of our vocation.

THOMAS MERTON, *THE MONASTIC JOURNEY*

The Desert: The Quest for the Absolute

Christ's three answers to Satan resounded in the silence of the desert; it was therefore here that the monks came in order to hear them again and to receive them as the rule of their monastic life.

PAUL EVDOKIMOV, *THE STRUGGLE WITH GOD*

Christian monastic life had its humble origins in the desert. The first monks went to the desert to seek God and to pursue a life of union with him. The desert was a special place, for it was there, according to biblical accounts, that God revealed himself in all his glory. In the desert at Mount Sinai, God revealed his name to Moses. During the forty years in the desert, the Lord fed his people with manna from above and gave them water from a rock. It was also in the desert that the prophet Elias met God and entered into dialogue with him.

In the New Testament, we see that John the Baptist went to the

desert to prepare the way for the Lord. Later, Jesus himself, led by the Holy Spirit, retired to the desert to prepare for the mission for which his Father had sent him. He returned to the desert again and again, to rest and to pray, during the three years of his ministry. And it was in the desert at Mount Tabor, shortly before his passion, that he lifted for a short time the veil of his humanity and revealed to his apostles the splendor of his divinity.

By retiring to the desert, the early monks and nuns were not primarily seeking to renounce all human fellowship. Instead, their aim was to seek God unhindered by the cares of the worldly society of their day. There is no denying that the times of the Desert Fathers were turbulent and confusing (not unlike our own time) and not just in civil society but also in the Church of God. In the midst of all this confusion the clear message of the gospels often became blurred and distorted. The early monks and nuns, following the example of the apostles and martyrs, refused to compromise with the world. They instead sought refuge in the desert where they could clearly hear the word of God and live by it, with all its consequences. It is in this early desert adventure that the monastic movement originated, and it has ever since been shaped and influenced by it. The call to the solitude of the desert is a constant element in the monastic heart.

However, one thing the Desert Fathers and Mothers (in their deep realism) teach us today is that the desert does not always need to be a geographical place. It can also be found in the solitude and innermost spaces of our hearts. Prayer was the central activity of the desert life, but we can pray anywhere by heeding the gospel's words: "When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret" (Matthew 6:6). Continual, unceasing prayer coupled with the daily practice of Christian virtues: charity, humility, obedience, asceticism—these were the ideals for which

the desert monks strove in their desert solitude, and which remain valid for monks and Christians of all persuasions today. Ultimately, it means taking both the gospel and our Christian life seriously.

Faithful to this early monastic desert experience, many monasteries are established in isolated places. Today monks often retire for periods of time to a hermitage or take a once-a-week “desert day” in complete solitude, where we are given the opportunity to confront the absolute of God and the crude reality of our own bareness. It is an immense help in the spiritual life. This experience of the desert is so vital to all Christian life that monks and nuns hospitably allow their fellow Christians, and often non-Christians, to partake in the prayer, silence, and solitude of our monasteries.

The desert is fundamentally a state of insecurity. When lost in the desert, this place offers man one objective situation, only one solution: to look to God who redeems us and to wait with complete trust upon him, to abide by an absolute and radical confidence in God alone.

FATHER EDWARD SCHNILEBECKX, OP

Monasticism: A Gift From the East

Thus, there were in the desert monasteries, which were so many temples filled with heavenly choirs of men who spent their lives singing the psalms, reading the sacred Scriptures, fasting, praying, seeking their consolation in the hope of joys to come, working with their hands in order to give alms, living all together in a perfect charity and a union worthy of admiration. Thus, one could see in these places as it were an altogether different country, cut off from the rest of the world, and the fortunate inhabitants of that country had no other thought than to live in love and justice.

SAINT ATHANASIUS, *LIFE OF SAINT ANTONY*

Saint Athanasius describes the life led by the early monks in the Egyptian deserts, but the real origins of the monastic life are in the gospels, in the teachings and example of Jesus himself, and in the prophetic figure of John the Baptist, whose voice cried out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" The monastic ideal took root in the early years of Christianity, and it has always remained an integral part of the life of the Church. From the very beginning, there were Christians who took to heart Christ's invitation to leave all they possessed in order to follow him. Obviously, times have changed since Christ first uttered his invitation, but there has never been any lack of those who hear the call, recognize his voice in the depths of their hearts, and feel irresistibly compelled to leave everything behind to follow him.

Since the time of Saint Antony, many have felt the call to that mysterious place called the desert, the "wasteland," always the symbol and reality of total renunciation, where one went to do battle with the forces of evil and to seek God alone with purity of heart. For all monks, those following either the cenobitic or the eremitical life (in a monastic community or as a recluse, respectively), the desert remains the ideal prototype of what monastic life is meant to be: a generous renunciation of evil and not God; a dying to selfishness, so that the true self may emerge; a burning desire and a living thirst for God; and a total fidelity to the smallest commandments of the gospel, so that their lives may be transformed by the power of God's love and transfigured into his likeness.

As the Church was, Christian monasticism was born in the East. This is an important fact to keep in mind as we try to understand monastic life and see its continuity into our time. From the very early days of the Christian Church, there were ascetics and virgins who, while living at home, dedicated themselves to a more rigorous

form of Christianity by spending long hours in prayer, practicing fasting, and caring for the poor, the sick, orphans, and widows. In the third century, the first forms of organized monastic life began to appear in Egypt. Attracted by the example of Antony, who had become by then their spiritual father, other Christians began to settle in the desert, eager to be instructed by him. By the time of Antony's death, there were colonies of monks and nuns both in the desert land and also all along the Nile River, seeking God in the footsteps of the humble Father of Monks.

As the number of monks and nuns increased in the desert, the need for a more organized form of monastic life became apparent. At times some of the desert ascetics went to extremes, becoming known for their excesses in penance and other forms of asceticism. As a consequence, they sometimes tended to lose control over the real purpose of their monastic lives.

Just when they were in need of restoring equilibrium, the Lord sent a humble soldier to Tabennisi, a desert village along the east bank of the Nile, with the purpose of reorganizing monastic life in the desert. His conception was a communal form of eremitical life where the brethren could lead lives free from the anxieties and dangers found in the wilderness. The soldier, Pachomius, created the first desert monastery by building a wall around the cells or huts of the monks, protecting them from the world and also joining them to one another. An abbot presided over the community as its head and spiritual mentor, and the monks gathered together weekly for his instruction and for their Sunday worship. The disciples of Pachomius followed a common Rule, wore the same habit, attended the same Offices, and partook of the same work and meals. The discipline and order established by Pachomius in his monasteries enabled the monks to follow a monastic rhythm

of life free from the concerns of self and more attuned to the work of God in their souls.

At the same time that Pachomius was establishing monasteries, his sister, Mary, was organizing a community of nuns that could live together in a monastery not far from that of the monks. From the earliest appearance of monastic life in the desert, the presence of women has been felt in its midst. These courageous women's ascetics emulated the monks in their fierce determination to follow Christ, and they often surpassed their brothers in their fidelity and fervor.

The austere monastic life of the monks and nuns in the Egyptian desert became so admired by their fellow Christians that by the late fourth and fifth centuries, it had spread to Palestine, Syria, Armenia, Persia, Cappadocia, Gaul, Spain, and Italy. Late in the fourth century, another prominent monastic figure appeared on the Christian horizon: Basil the Great, a Greek, who was highly educated and was held in high esteem by the emperors, the bishops, and the learned laity. His great contribution to the early monastic movement was to enrich the communal form of monastic life with a solid theological grounding. Saint Basil provided his monastery with a form of legislation called the Longer and the Shorter Rules, which tempered some of the Egyptian monastic practices and thus invited moderately motivated Christians to embrace the monastic state. Basil saw the monastic community, patterned after the example of the early Christians (such as described in Acts 4:32), as the only place in which true Christian ideals could be realized. For Saint Basil, the communal life provided the monks with the opportunity to practice fraternal charity, fulfilling the Lord's commandment to love one another. Saint Basil's Rule was seen as a synthesis of all that was best in the monastic tradition, and it had a great influence both in the East and in the West. A Latin translation of Saint Basil's

Rule, brought to the West early on, served as the guide for many monasteries. The monastic ideal also came to the West via three very important figures: Saint Martin of Tours, Saint John Cassian, and Saint Augustine. They established monastic centers in the West, which fostered both the communal life and the strife for perfection of the individual monk.

These three and Saint Basil were the worthy predecessors of Saint Benedict, the inheritor of the monastic tradition of both the East and the West. Greatly influenced by Saint Basil's Rule, Saint Benedict—founding his monastery at Monte Cassino, seventy-five miles southeast of Rome, in 529—would create in his own Rule the most effective monastic synthesis of Eastern and Western traditions, a synthesis that has been faithfully transmitted for fifteen centuries, to our own days.

Saint Benedict conceived the communal monastic life as “a school in the Lord's service” where monks could work together to attain their salvation and sanctification. For Saint Benedict, the monk enters a monastery solely “to seek God,” and in the pursuit of this ideal, he is encouraged by the mutual support and example of the brethren who are there for the same purpose. Saint Benedict showed a great deal of wisdom and common sense in his Rule, pragmatically adapting the Eastern monastic pattern to the needs, customs, and culture of the West. By doing so, he was able to strengthen the community of his monks and make of it a living icon of what the Church of Christ ought to be like. This model of a perfect Christian community was, for Saint Benedict, a reality that had eternal implications.

The resilience and adaptability of the desert ideal to the different circumstances and different ways of life was in fact one of its chief virtues.

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE, *THE WORD IN THE DESERT*

CHAPTER 2

The Foundations of Monastic Life

The Gospel

See, in His loving kindness, the Lord showeth us the way of life. Therefore, having our loins girt with faith and the performance of good works, let us walk His ways under the guidance of the Gospel, that we may be found worthy of seeing Him who hath called us to His kingdom.

RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT, PROLOGUE

Since the life of the monk consists primarily of the imitation of Christ, the serious reading of, listening to, and study of the gospel becomes the most vital element of his monastic day. He seeks to shape his life by the teachings of Jesus, by trying to follow with integrity and great fidelity even the smallest precepts of the gospel, which leads him to the full knowledge of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It allows the monk to grow deeper and deeper into the “living experience” of him who reveals himself to the humble, the poor, the lowly, to the little ones.

Saint Benedict encourages the monk to walk in the steps of the gospel—for him, the monastery is “a school in the Lord’s service,” where the monk or nun comes to learn to live according to the teachings of the gospel. There is nothing more important to the monk, in the mind of Saint Benedict, than learning to know Christ through his word and then completely identifying with him. According to

Saint Benedict, the monk or nun must assiduously spend several hours a day in *lectio divina*; that is, in reading and meditating on the sacred Scriptures, in particular, the gospels. By fidelity to this practice, the monk brings his whole being, with all its powers and faculties, into a life-giving encounter with the revealed word of God. There illumined by the Holy Spirit, he is nourished in the knowledge of God.

The reading, study, and prayerful pondering of the word of God is a joint action undertaken at the same time by both God and the monk: God speaks and the monk listens. And this interaction between the two is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Practice fasting; then meditate on the Gospel and the other Scriptures, and if an alien thought arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards, and the Lord will come at once to your help.

MACARIUS THE GREAT, A DESERT FATHER

Following Christ

Jesus said, "If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

MATTHEW 19:21 (NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION)

These words from the gospel seized the heart of Saint Antony, the first monk, and transformed his life forever. Likewise, Jesus invites us today to follow him into the desert of the monastic life. The monk, touched by grace and seized by the love of Christ, slowly turns away from the ways of the world and wholeheartedly gives himself to following the Lord.

The monastic life, consecrated exclusively to following Christ, is lived in a spirit of great simplicity, humility, and poverty, accord-

ing to the gospel. The monk wishes to follow the poor Christ and live in solidarity with those who still reveal him to us: the poor, such as the oppressed, the rejected, and the underprivileged people of the world. In his daily life, the monk has concrete ways of living out this identification with the poor, as through his humble manual work. His diet, which includes fasting and abstinence from meat, he joyfully accepts for Christ's sake, mindful that a great many people of the world are starving and are often exploited because of the affluence and waste embraced by society. When he can, he gives individual assistance to those in need. The spirit of the Beatitudes remains always the ideal for all monks.



For Saint Benedict, obedience is one of the most important ways by which the monk imitates and follows Christ. In Hebrews 5:8–9 we learn that Jesus, “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” For the love of Christ, the monk willingly accepts submission to the will of another human being—the abbot, according to *The Rule of Saint Benedict*—sacrificing his own will and desires in order to imitate more completely the example of his master and Savior. It is not the abbot alone, however, that the monk is encouraged to obey. Saint Benedict goes a bit further, inviting the monks to obey one another, thus walking in the steps of Christ: “The brethren must render the

service of obedience not only to the Abbot, but they must thus also obey one another, knowing that they shall go to God by this path of obedience” (*The Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 71).

The monk hears the Lord’s exhortation to lose his own life in order to gain it, and it is in the experience of this paradox that the monk mysteriously finds his ultimate fulfillment.

The great ends of the monastic life can only be seen in the light of the mystery of Christ. Christ is the center of monastic living. He is the source and its end. He is the way of the monk as well as his goal.

THOMAS MERTON, *THE MONASTIC JOURNEY*

The Monastic Tradition

Tradition is the instrument of a perfect koinonia, communion, both in forms and in spirit, throughout the centuries and across frontiers.

BISHOP ANTONIE PLOIESTENUL,

LIBERTY AND TRADITION IN ORTHODOX MONASTICISM

The living monastic tradition is such that rich and common inheritance, which monks and nuns have received from the past, continue to live in the present and pass on to future generations. Tradition is the sap of monastic life. Without it, it is impossible to begin to understand this life’s mystery.

The monastic tradition is an objective reality and hence authenticates all monastic living. The reason we monks speak of and show such reverence for tradition is that our life is incarnated, so to speak, in a living tradition and cannot be separated from it. This living tradition is the flow of life that has been handed over to us from the sacred Scriptures, particularly the gospels, the teachings of the apostles, the example of the early monks and nuns of the desert, and the continual monastic living throughout the centuries,

with its ups and downs. Tradition is both continuity and a direct link to our roots. Tradition is the Holy Spirit's inner dynamic that keeps the monastic life, like the Church, ever ancient yet ever new.

However, as renowned monastic scholar Dom Jean Leclercq often used to remind us, there is Tradition and there are traditions. There is a great deal of misunderstanding in our time about these, and it is vitally important not to confuse them. The monastic tradition that we value is rooted in the word of God, in the example of Jesus, and is what the early monks and nuns inherited from the apostles and the first Christians. Tradition in this sense, conveying perennial gospel values, remains of timeless value to us. Some of these values—like faith, prayer, conversion, humility, charity, simplicity, good works, obedience, and hospitality—are always valid no matter how they are expressed throughout different cultures and times. Traditions, however, are another thing. Mere traditions are, more or less, culturally conditioned customs that originated at certain times and places. They are not essential to the monastic life, as are the values that spring from the gospel. Traditions in and of themselves are not necessarily bad, but it is important to see them in their historical contexts; otherwise, we may fall into danger of canonizing them. This distinction is particularly important for our time, with many people's great tendency toward fundamentalism.

To give one example of the difference between Tradition and traditions, let me speak of something greatly treasured in the life of a monastery, namely the Divine Offices. Up until the time of the last ecumenical council, in Western monasteries the Offices were always celebrated in Latin and sung in the Gregorian chant. However, since the council introduced the use of our vernacular languages into the liturgy, many monasteries have opted likewise, finding that their mother tongue facilitates and strengthens their liturgical prayer.

This option, in the light of Tradition, is completely valid, for those things which are important—prayer and the celebration of God’s praises—are retained and hopefully enhanced.

Thus, we see in this case that *Tradition* is upheld, while the *traditions* (Latin and the Gregorian chant) are replaced by other forms. Changes in traditions do not affect the nature of monastic life. It would be something altogether different, however, if the monasteries were to try to substitute prayer and the Offices themselves, which are intrinsic values in the monastic life. That would really be tampering with Tradition. (I do not wish to disparage Latin or the Gregorian chant, which are so dear to many monasteries and are, to some extent, used and retained here in our monastery. However, it is important to point out—even to those of us who retain such values—that these are part of traditions and not of Tradition.) After all, the early monks in the desert, like Antony and Pachomius, did not know Latin, yet they were quite happy praising God in their own tongue.

Saint Antony, the father of monks, was called a true inheritor of the fire of the Pentecost, for he was a man filled with the Holy Spirit. What we monks and nuns call the living monastic tradition is the precious pearl of the gospel, an inheritance we have received from our ancient fathers and mothers, an inheritance which contains within itself life in the Holy Spirit, a life filled with fire and love, capable of being transmitted again and again to every generation.

If we want to live as monks, we must try to understand what the monastic life really is. We must try to reach the springs from which that life flows. We must have some notions of our spiritual roots, that we may be better able to sink them deep into the soil.

THOMAS MERTON, *THE MONASTIC JOURNEY*