



## DISCIPLINE: THE NARROW ROAD

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### TWO WAYS

Much of the world sees life as a struggle between good and evil, with humanity caught in the cross fire. Individual human beings or even whole cultures have to choose sides: to follow the way of darkness or the way of light; to take the narrow road or the broad road, to choose blessing or curse, to follow the way to Paradise or the way to Gehenna, etc. Our Christian heritage takes us to our roots in Judaism, where the "two-ways theory" was widely understood and accepted. When Jesus of Nazareth spoke of "the narrow road" and "the broad road," his message drew upon traditional imagery and needed no modern-day exegesis before its hearers could grasp its meaning and be moved by the message. While we can understand the same message with relative ease in our day, we can still benefit from a brief look at the tradition that our Lord found available two thousand years ago.<sup>1</sup>

In Jesus' immediate culture, those who spoke of an afterlife readily used various images to talk about life after death and how one might achieve everlasting life. The experience of seeing a great city after passing through a narrow gate in its walls was easily joined to the imagery of one's passing through difficulties and the observance of the Torah to everlasting life. Another image that was often used spoke of a road that is smooth in the beginning, but ends in thorns; while another way has thorns at the beginning, but then becomes smooth at the end. For the most part, all of these

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images were meant to encourage one to persevere in appropriate behavior all through life so that one may have joy in the next life or "in the world to come." Jesus' own image of the narrow gate and narrow road as opposed to the wide gate and broad road to destruction (cf. Matt. 7:13f.) is equally eschatological in outlook; but the right way to live is to be found specifically in doing the will of the Father (cf. Matt. 7:21) as distinct from a meticulous observance of religious legalisms. Early Christian literature outside of the New Testament also made use of the "two ways" metaphor, as in the *Didache* (1-6) and the Epistle of Barnabas (1 8-20).

#### FLESH VS. SPIRIT

The entanglement of contradictions that we experience between what we profess in our hearts as opposed to what we do in practice is seen by St. Paul as a struggle between the flesh and the spirit (cf. Gal. 5:16ff.). This image is but another form of the two-ways theory and refines it to some extent. In early Christian and monastic usage, "flesh" represented all of the sinful inclinations to which one's body *and soul* were subject. Consequently, self-will (*propria voluntas*), which proceeds from one's own soul, is the broad road to destruction and must be voluntarily rooted out so that the divine will can be accomplished in a person. This entails seeking guidance and advice from appropriate authorities and teachers who can help a person discern God's will or who can even mediate God's will because of their God-given authority and adherence to the Lord's commands. With scriptural passages such as John 21:17 ("Feed my sheep"), Matt. 28:20 ("Teach them to do whatever I have commanded you"), and Luke 10:16 ("He who hears you hears me"), the beginnings of western monasticism developed and supported its concept of obedience to a superior. "To submit to superiors is to set out on the road of trial, indeed of martyrdom."<sup>2</sup> This is the narrow road to life that monastic life chooses to follow.

#### THE NARROW ROAD IN MONASTIC LIFE

In the *Rule of Benedict (RB)*, the most significant passage that speaks of the narrow road to salvation is found in the Prologue 45-49, in the context of "the school for the Lord's service":

Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.

Benedict's employment of the expression and image of the monastery as the "school for the Lord's service" is taken directly from the *Rule of the Master (RM 4)*,<sup>3</sup> where the image is the climax to the Master's picture of humanity coming to Christ to receive Baptism and then entering into the Lord's school in order to persevere in one's renunciation of the world. Monastic life is thus seen as "an immediate prolongation of Baptism" and is a matter of "not returning" after baptismal regeneration to the "burden of sin," once it has been laid

aside.... For the man who is crushed by the consciousness of his faults, the law of Christ obtains an unspeakable 'relief,' a marvellous impression of 'lightness.' This passage from guilt to innocence, from a sinful conscience to justice and holiness, will have its end in the perfect 'repose' of eternity.<sup>4</sup>

The treatment given to the above material by the Master and Benedict brings together two *logia* from Matthew that seem to contradict each other. In Matt. 7:13f., the road to life is narrow, difficult, and few find it. But in Matt. 11:28-30, Jesus' burden is easy and the invitation is given to all who are burdened. However, our monastic legislators resolve the seeming contradiction by equating Jesus' yoke with the narrow road while all other burdens are the burden of sin, which is thus equivalent to the broad road to perdition. "Monastic life then appears as the natural development of the being who is 'renewed' by baptism and as the normal existence of the 'risen.' ...Consequently, it consists in submitting to the divine law, and more precisely to the 'Christian law,' the Lord's commandments."<sup>5</sup> This means further that the disciple of Christ must be ready and willing to share in the Lord's sufferings so as to be able to follow him to glory: "Never swerving from his [Christ's] instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the suffering of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom" (*RB* Prol. 50).

Although this paper is not intended to be a study in contrasts and similarities between the *Master* and Saint Benedict, it is occasionally appropriate to note a particular difference or similarity so that one may better appreciate and evaluate these two monastic legislators. One of the differences is the pronounced suspicion and pessimism found in the *Master* in contrast to Benedict. The *Master*, for instance, sees life here below as suffering upon suffering. Benedict, in contrast, sees matters in a more optimistic light as is evidenced by his addition to the *Master's* treatment of the school for the Lord's service: namely, the promise of the expansion of the heart through love, and progress in faith and an unspeakable sweetness to be found in running the way of God's commandments once one has passed through the initial narrowness of the way. The effect of this promise is the balance that is struck between a purely eschatological view of the narrow way to life eternal and our present life as a foretaste of the life to come. Those who are well-developed spiritually may be inscrutable to us who are not; but they are not mystical hypochondriacs pining away in this life while longing for eternal life and ineffable bliss.

#### THE WAY OF OBEDIENCE

Benedict's "formula for sainthood" is summed up in chapter 72 of his *Rule*: The Good Zeal of Monks. This zeal is to be shown especially in patient, mutual obedience, service to each other, and attention to the needs of one another. "To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life."

Loving obedience is central to the *RB* and the pursuit of the narrow way. In *RB* 5, On Obedience, Benedict could not be clearer about this:

It is love that impels them to pursue everlasting life; therefore, they are eager to take the narrow road of which the Lord says: Narrow is the road that leads to life. They

no longer live by their own judgment, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather they walk according to another's decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have an abbot over them. Men of this resolve unquestionably conform to the saying of the Lord: I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. (Cf. John 6:38).

#### THE WAY OF DISCIPLINE

In our examination of the metaphor of the narrow way, we have now arrived at the concept of obedience. Indeed, one may wonder if "Obedience: The Narrow Road" would not be the more apt title for this paper. Such a title could be defended; however, it could also be so narrowly construed that the road we are examining would be made even narrower than it need be. The term "discipline" includes obedience and more, but it could possibly be construed so broadly that the "narrow road" ends up looking more like some kind of broad road. Be that as it may, we will proceed to look at the concept of discipline and apply it, *mutatis mutandis*, to the theme of this paper and of this conference.

#### DISCIPLINE IN WISDOM LITERATURE

Even no more than "a passing acquaintance" with the Bible and the *RB* reveals the intentional parallel that the monastic founders drew between their *Rules* and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> The *RB* begins with "Listen carefully, my son," which clearly imitates Prov. 1:8 and other passages from wisdom literature. When Proverbs says "listen," it also means "obey."<sup>7</sup> Obedience is thus a clear theme of wisdom literature and is associated with the somewhat broader theme of discipline.

Prov. 1:2 asserts that the purpose of these sage remarks is "that men may appreciate wisdom and discipline." In 5:23, wisdom and discipline are virtually synonymous, for the wicked man "will die from lack of discipline; through the greatness of his folly he will be lost." In 6:23, "the reproofs of discipline" are necessary to resist the temptations of the adulteress.

Sirach 6:18 emphasizes that discipline is a prerequisite for wisdom:<sup>8</sup> "My son, from your youth embrace discipline, thus will you find wisdom with graying hair." Sirach 32:14 is unequivocally direct about the need for discipline if one is to achieve life's ultimate goal: "He who would find God must accept discipline." While "discipline" here would have meant observance of the law to the pious Jew of Sirach's time, the passage readily reminds one of St. Benedict's insistence that the novice in monastic life is to be tested to see if he is truly seeking God (*RB* 58.7).

Much of what can be said of wisdom in the Old Testament can also be said of the New Testament, even though one may well question the extent or degree of the similarities. However, Heb. 12:5-11 quotes from Prov. 3:11-12 in order to encourage Christians who are facing numerous trials and persecution to accept their sufferings in the spirit of salutary discipline: "Endure your trials as 'discipline'; God treats you as sons. For what 'son' is there whom the father does not discipline?" We need not belabor the point any longer: Discipline is a well-respected topic in both the Old and the New Testaments. Therefore, we now turn our attention to "fine tuning" the meaning of "discipline" for the purposes of this paper.

#### DISCIPLINE IN THE RULE OF BENEDICT

The North American Benedictine publication, *RB* 1980, commemorating the fifteen hundredth anniversary of the birth of St. Benedict of Nursia (c. A.D. 480), lists 22 references for the word *disciplina* in the *RB*. Exactly one half of these references are to the "discipline of the *Rule*," that is, the imposition of some sort of punishment or sanction for unacceptable behavior.<sup>9</sup> "Discipline" in this sense is only obliquely related to the topic at hand. Several of the references to discipline mean "good order" (e.g., *RB* 56.3 and 63.9), while other references treat discipline as a virtue related especially to humility (*RB* 7.9) and obedience (*RB* 64.2).<sup>10</sup> Discipline as various manifestations of and exercises in humility and obedience will be our main concern here; that is to say, "discipline," as used in this paper, means primarily humility and obedience.

Our first encounter with the word *disciplina* in the *RB* is in 2.14 where the abbot of the monastery is admonished to be exemplary in his behavior and observance of the *Rule* lest "God some day call to him in his sin: How is it that you repeat my just commands and mouth my covenant when you hate discipline and toss my words behind you?" (Ps. 49:16-17). Discipline in this passage is more akin to *conversatio morum* or "the monastic way of life," which is not essentially different from a Christian way of life marked by good morals and virtue. On the other hand, a lack of discipline includes a disregard for God's words and commands. Thus is it also a disregard for one's salvation.

Concern for salvation is also the major motivating factor in the case of the more severe forms of discipline that the *RB* prescribes for offending monks. An offender may be excluded from the table and the oratory and forbidden to associate with others in the community while he ponders "that fearful judgment of the Apostle: Such a man is handed over for the destruction of his flesh that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (*RB* 25.3-4; 1 Cor. 5:5).<sup>11</sup> When all efforts, including the prayers of the community, have failed to reform the recalcitrant monk, then the abbot may expel him from the monastery for the sake of the community "lest one diseased sheep infect the whole flock" (*RB* 28.6); for such persons may seriously erode the community's holiness.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, even in the case of expulsion from the monastery, St. Benedict wants the abbot to act that the offender's "spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord."<sup>13</sup>

#### DISCIPLINE IN OBEDIENCE AND HUMILITY

Thus far in our inquiry into the monastic view of "the narrow road" and discipline, we have seen that obedience and humility delineate best what is meant by "discipline" in the title of this paper. The monk is to be obedient in the spirit of Christ's obedience to his heavenly Father. Such obedience must be voluntary, free of self-serving will, motivated by love of Christ and one's superiors and confreres, and so on. Such obedience, however, requires humility. On the other hand, obedience helps one acquire humility and grow in it.

This is not a vicious circle, but a fact of life known from experience: One can potentially grow in humility through obedience even if one is at first reluctant to be obedient. Yet St. Benedict shows little patience for reluctantly given obedience and even says obedience given with a grumbling heart will merit punishment rather than reward, "unless he changes for the better and makes amends" (*RB* 5.19). On the one hand, it is clear that Benedict sees the possibility of growth from begrudging obedience to humble obedience that is

given, as it were, simultaneously with the command (*RB* 5.9). But it is equally clear that he does not want to encourage merely halfhearted obedience. Indeed he has less patience for such obedience than we might otherwise expect. Certainly he would have known the parable of the two sons who were asked by their father to work in the vineyard, with one saying "yes" immediately, but not going into the vineyard, and the other son saying "no," but then repenting and going into the vineyard and ultimately being acknowledged as obedient (cf. Matt. 21:28-31a). St. Benedict's more stringent treatment is easily explained in view of the fact that he is legislating at this point rather than giving pastoral counseling, and also because he is legislating for cenobitic monks: that is, for men who have chosen that way of life because, at least in theory, they want "to live in monasteries and to have an abbot over them" (*RB* 5.12).<sup>14</sup>

#### DISCIPLINE IN THE LIFE OF BENEDICT

Before we proceed farther with our abstract considerations about the monastic life and its view of the narrow road of discipline in arriving at salvation, it might be an informative and a welcome diversion to look at the topic in the context of the life of Benedict. The only drawback here is that we know very little about Benedict's life. Pope Gregory I wrote a biography of Benedict<sup>15</sup> in A.D. 593-594, some fifty years after the death of St. Benedict (A.D. 543?). Moreover, there is not only the question of the passage of time and the fading or transformation of memories to take into consideration, there is also the fact that Gregory never met Benedict and, following the literary conventions of his day, wrote in a genre that was more interested in presenting the supposed inner qualities of a person than in reproducing a factual description of a person's life.

Consequently, the qualities that Gregory sees portrayed in the life of Benedict may be qualities that Gregory himself especially values and therefore projects onto Benedict. It is not our purpose here to discern in every detail what is of Benedict and what is of Gregory; for those elements that reflect Gregory's values and character more than Benedict's actual life still fit the purpose of this study inasmuch as they reflect monastic values of the times and environs of Benedict and Gregory. Thus we proceed with this *caveat lector* now in place.

#### MORAL DISCIPLINE VS. INTELLECTUAL DISCIPLINE

According to Gregory, Benedict was born in Nursia (now Norcia), in very mountainous country some seventy miles northeast of Rome. Benedict's family must have been relatively well off since Benedict was eventually sent to Rome to round out his education. However, that did not last long. The licentious lives of the students proved all too disgusting for Benedict, who then struck out on his own to seek a life of solitude. For Gregory, this action was an indication that Benedict preferred a discipline different from that of intellectual learning. His discipline was to please God rather than self. From a more modern point of view, Benedict engaged in a process of the ego purging itself of egoism, the goal of true contemplation being "to please God" rather than "to see God."<sup>16</sup>

At Subiaco, about 35 miles from Rome, St. Benedict met Romanus, a monk, who clothed him in the garb of a monk. This action indicates Benedict's desire to pursue a tradition of discipline that leads to holy wisdom rather than secular wisdom. The next three

years of Benedict's life are spent in a cave. During this time and in later years as well, he is subjected to three forms of temptation and overcomes them with the help of God's grace. These temptations, reminiscent of the three temptations of Christ in the desert, correspond to the three principal regions of the soul or psyche according to the psychology of Gregory's day.<sup>17</sup> The first is the rational aspect of the soul, which St. Benedict mastered by overcoming temptations to vainglory when he secretly withdrew from the public's eyes and acclaim after his first miracle, the perfect rejoining of a dish that his nursemaid accidentally broke. In mastering temptations to lust and in his practice of fasting,<sup>18</sup> St. Benedict takes control of the second region of the soul, that of concupiscence. Finally, he masters the third region of the soul, the irascible aspect, by subduing desires to be aggressive and violent, and by returning good for evil. All of these spiritual conquests may be viewed as aspects of discipline, and a lack of discipline is equivalent to a lack of moral character and, if willful or due to negligence, also a sign of one's rejection of divine grace and disregard for one's salvation.

#### HUMILITY, THE FINAL LESSON

Toward the conclusion of his *Life of Benedict*, Gregory the Great introduces the reader to Scholastica, the twin sister of St. Benedict. On this occasion, Scholastica has come to visit her brother, who meets with her in a house belonging to the monastery but located some distance from the cloister. At day's end, Benedict wants to return to the monastery, but his sister prefers to continue their holy conversation. When she sees that Benedict is determined to abide by the rule and return to the monastery before dark, Scholastica puts her head down on her hands and prays. Suddenly, the clear sky is completely filled with clouds, lightning, and a downpour of rain that prevents Benedict from leaving the house to return to his cloistered quarters. Thus, he is forced to continue their holy discourse through the night. Gregory concludes from this account that God, who is love, heard Scholastica's prayer over Benedict's protest because "hers was the greater love."

The effect of St. Scholastica's prevailing over her brother is twofold: First, it marks the end to the miraculous powers of Benedict, and, secondly, it is a final lesson in humility for Benedict, who had to learn that love is greater than adherence to the letter of the law.<sup>19</sup> But, at least in Gregory's eyes, there is still another effect for St. Benedict. It is that of advancing to a still higher plane of sanctity; for now he is granted eyes to behold life everlasting beginning with a vision of Scholastica's soul ascending to Heaven upon her death three days after her all-night conversation with her brother. The significance of this account is made clear at the beginning of Gregory's fourth book of the *Dialogues*, where he explains that the mind's eye of one who has been cleansed by pure faith and prolonged prayer is capable of seeing a soul which has left the body. This all fits very well into Gregory's interest in contemplation as a religious phenomenon, a subject that St. Benedict does not concern himself with in any depth or detail. But this is a matter that also goes beyond the scope of this paper except to the extent that it illustrates the thesis that discipline in its various religious forms is the narrow beginning of the road to life upon which we hope eventually to run, "hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (*RB* Prol. 49).

## OBEDIENCE IN BROAD PERSPECTIVE

We return now to another look at the main ingredients of discipline: humility and obedience. We will consider obedience first and attempt to see its importance to the monk.

Ideally, a monk is someone who truly seeks God through "eagerness for the Work of God,<sup>20</sup> for obedience and for trials" (*RB* 58.7). The role of obedience is not merely to insure good order.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the way of obedience is prized as a response to God's call to his people to follow in the footsteps of Christ our Lord:<sup>22</sup> "The third step of humility is that a man submits to his superior in all obedience for the love of God, imitating the Lord of whom the Apostle says: He became obedient even to death" (*RB* 7.24; Phil. 2:8). Obedience is viewed as the condition for retaining Paradise (Gen. 2:16-17), an image that is persistently in the back of a monk's mind and close to his heart.<sup>23</sup> Obedience to God's voice and covenant makes his people dearer to him than all other peoples (Exod. 19:5). And most significantly, Christ's obedience reversed the effects of "one man's" (Adam's) disobedience (Rom. 5:19). The monk is brought to Christ and partakes of the fruits of Christ's salvific work through "the labor of obedience" (*RB* Prol. 2), an expression which implies that sin is very much akin to taking the easy course, the path of least resistance, indeed, the broad road to destruction.

The place that obedience is to hold in a monk's life becomes perhaps most pronounced in *RB* 68: *Assignment of Impossible Tasks to a Brother*. St. Benedict explains here that a monk is to accept a burdensome or impossible task "with complete gentleness and obedience." He may still consult with his superior and "without pride, obstinacy or refusal" explain why he finds the task impossible. But "if after the explanation the superior is still determined to hold to his original order, the junior must recognize that this is best for him. Trusting in God's help, he must in love obey."

No doubt our modern age (or, if one insists, our "post-modern age") finds little or no value in obedience and would pronounce a person to be of unsound mind for taking *RB* 68 seriously. Much could be said at this point about the problems of our modern age and the unfortunate "reasons" it finds authority and obedience distasteful and despicable; but that would take us much too far afield from the real topic at hand.<sup>24</sup> Instead, let us note especially the conditions of faith and love that St. Benedict attaches to obedience. It is not obedience for its own sake or for the sake of good order or for a quasi-military motive of accomplishing a task regardless of the internal attitudes of those carrying out the order. Instead, it is obedience that learns to trust in God and to act out of love in spite of all other difficulties.

The relation of obedience to faith and love is well attested in the New Testament: "Those who hear the word of God and keep it" are the truly blessed (Luke 11:28); the true disciple is one who bends to the loving will of the Father just as Jesus did (Matt. 16:21, 26:54, and 5:45-48); and love of God and Christ is identified with keeping the commands of God and Christ (John 14:15-21, 15:10, and 1 John 2:3-6). While these passages are not quoted in the *RB*, other passages that support the position taken here are quoted in the *RB* and sometimes cited elsewhere in this paper.

## HUMILITY AND FEAR OF THE LORD

It is tempting to place value judgments on humility and obedience and make them compete with each other. However, that process will not be undertaken here. For our pur-



poses, we shall consider them to be the two sides of the same coin that we have called "discipline." Obedience may also be seen as a "more external" virtue since it is more easily noted in a person's behavior. Humility is "more internal," but also affects the whole of one's behavior. Since it is "more internal" and lays claim to being the longest chapter in the *RB*, we may be inclined to place a greater moral value on humility over obedience. One modern commentator notes: "Humility was for our fathers what love is for us—the keyword which sums up everything."<sup>25</sup> But even before chapter 7, On Humility, St. Benedict notes in *RB* 5, On Obedience, that "The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all." Thus in some respects, Benedict appears to value obedience over humility. However, another question is raised at this point: Does this union of humility and obedience in *RB* 5 contradict chapter 7 where the first step of humility "is that a man keeps the fear of God always before his eyes and never forgets it"?

To date, there are no fully convincing explanations that reconcile *RB* 5. 1 and 7.10. It has been referred to as "a classic difficulty in Benedictine exegesis" that is perhaps best explained by Benedict's desire in *RB* 7 to follow the *RM* in treating of humility as a ladder of twelve rungs that one is to ascend.<sup>26</sup> Inasmuch as "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7 and 9:10) and wisdom literature greatly influenced St. Benedict, there is a congruity in Benedict's designation of fear of the Lord as the beginning of humility. Prov. 22:4 states that "The reward of humility and fear of the Lord is riches, honor and life." In Prov. 15:33 we read "The fear of the Lord is training for wisdom, and humility goes before honor."

While fear of the Lord and humility are not to be purely and simply identified with each other, it is clear from the above that they are at least first cousins if not siblings in the spiritual life. It is not necessary here to define the relationship with hair-splitting exactitude. Rather, we only need note the fact that they can appear in the same breath and in the same context in Scripture, albeit the goal of fear of the Lord and humility is still "this worldly" in Proverbs while, as we should expect, the goal is "other worldly" for Benedict: The degrees of humility are the rungs of the ladder of ascent to "exaltation in heaven" (*RB* 7.5) in place of riches and honor in this life. The love that casts out our fear does not obviate the fear of the Lord that characterizes humility.

#### ASCENT BY HUMILITY

In the ascent of the ladder of humility that leads one to "that perfect love of God which casts out fear" (*RB* 7.67), we note that there is no mention of grace—which might tempt a modern Christian to accuse St. Benedict of Pelagianism.<sup>27</sup> However, the chapter ends with an admission that the ascent of the ladder of humility is accomplished by the Holy Spirit "in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins" (*RB* 7.70). This rather belated acknowledgement of humility as the work of grace, i.e., the Holy Spirit, may be due either to a desire to place the concept of grace near the end as a sort of literary climax, or, what seems more likely, we are again confronted with the fact that the *RB* is primarily a book of legislation rather than a practical treatise on pastoral counseling and the theology of grace.

Another matter that strikes the reader in the chapter on humility is the paucity of examples of humility from the life of Christ<sup>28</sup> in spite of the fact that the *RM* 13.72 refers to Christ

as "the Lord of humility" (*Christo humilitatis Domino*). Again, we can only speculate as to the reasons. Perhaps the paucity of references was a reaction to Arianism, which was still rather virulent in Benedict's day and viewed Christ as less than truly divine. Or was it because a distinction is to be made between "following Christ" (*RB* Prol. 7; 4.10) and "imitating Christ" (*RB* 5.13; 7.32 & 34; 27.8)? Nevertheless, whatever the reason or reasons, St. Benedict points to Christ's humble obedience in doing "the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38) and to our Lord's acceptance of death on a cross (Phil. 2:8) as the motives for a monk's renunciation of his own will and for his obedience to superiors (*RB* 7.31-34).

#### RENUNCIATION: THE WAY OF HUMILITY

Perhaps the image of a monk that comes to mind most readily for the average person on the street is that of either a black-robed, bearded man walking placidly in a peaceful wilderness or garden setting with his cowl drawn up over his downcast head and holding his prayer book open in his hand, or a gaunt, scantily dressed, wiry old guru, wrinkled with years and harsh asceticism, giving holy advice to someone considerably better dressed and better fed than he himself. In the first case, the monk is felt to be one who has enough of everything he needs or wants so that now he can go about as one of "God's holy loafers." In the second case, the monk is viewed as one who has made himself so unattractive through his life of renunciation, that now he becomes an attraction and a curiosity because of his physical unattractiveness and apparent mastery of the appetites that drive others to a variety of excesses. Both images are overdrawn, but both have their elements of truth in them. A mature monk may very well be able to go about unhurried and in peace of mind once he has overcome the allurements of the various appetites. The ascetic practices or disciplines of monasticism have their purpose and their effect.<sup>29</sup> One purpose is to aid the monk to flee from sin. Another purpose, clearly related to the avoidance of sin, is the attainment of humility. Humility, however, is primarily directed to being the way in which a monk conforms and gives over his life to Christ, who is "meek and humble of heart" (Matt. 11:29).

Another popular image of a monk is that he is a man of silence. Again, the image may be overdrawn, but it is squarely on target inasmuch as silence is at the heart of monastic asceticism and spirituality. "It reminds us that monastic life consists in imposing on oneself certain renunciations."<sup>30</sup> Clearly the most significant renunciation for the monk is that of his own will, as we have already seen. All other renunciations directly or indirectly serve the purpose of reinforcing this basic renunciation.

In the case of renunciation of property and ownership, St. Benedict does not elaborate; he just legislates (*RB* 33: Monks and Private Ownership). In calling private ownership a vice that "must be uprooted and removed from the monastery," Benedict implies that private ownership in the monastery is opposed to the virtues that a monk is to acquire and exhibit. It does not take much imagination to see how a person can become proud and vain about possessions and use them to manipulate others and to curry their favor. Possessions can easily tempt a monk to exercise a material and psychological independence from the community that ultimately can be the monk's undoing, and possibly even the undoing of the community. Benedict implies as much when he cites Acts 4:32 (All things should be the common possession of all so that no one presumes to call anything his own) as the scriptural basis for

the monk's personal poverty. This conclusion becomes more evident in *RB 57: The Artisans of the Monastery*, where the tragic example of the fate of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) is given to dissuade artisan monks from becoming proud of their skills and from practicing any sort of fraud in the sale of their products "lest they and all who perpetrate fraud in monastery affairs suffer spiritual death."

Since monks are to belong entirely to Christ, they "may not have the free disposal even of their own bodies and wills." Such radical dispossession of oneself finds an equally radical rejection in today's modern societies. But the concept is saturated with the New Testament's admonitions to those who would be Christ's disciples. A passage such as Rom. 12:1 readily comes to mind: "...offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Other passages inform us that we are members of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15 and Eph. 5:28). In the final analysis, the renunciation of private ownership in the monastic tradition is aimed at producing a community of one heart and mind in its faith in divine Providence.<sup>31</sup> The radical nature of this disappropriation of goods and renunciation of ownership is highlighted by the concrete naming of some simple items such as books, writing tablets and stylus (*RB 33.3*) that monks may not own but for which "they are to look to the father of the monastery." Thus the monk's individual poverty does not even allow for the possession of the few simple items (the *peculium*) that ancient Roman law permitted to slaves. While poverty may be humiliating to those who have it thrust upon them by unavoidable circumstances, it is virtuously humbling for those who voluntarily accept it.

#### "TO LOVE FASTING"

We conclude our consideration of monastic renunciations with a brief look at abstinence and fasting, though the list of renunciations can be further expanded. Food and drink, as is the case with property, are morally indifferent in themselves. But as "occasions" for disorderly inclinations and excesses, they are "fair game" for monastic discipline and *ascēsis*. Fasting and abstinence (especially from flesh meat) in Christian monasticism are not practiced due to any belief about "unclean foods" (as in ancient Judaism) or for Gnostic notions (as in Manichaeism). Instead, such practices are meant as aids to mastering desires so that one is not mastered by desire.

In recent years, fasting has become less meaningful and significant as a religious practice even for Catholics. Ironically, at the same time, it has become more and more a political statement. But either as a religious practice or a political statement, "fasting witnesses to the intensity of the pain, the gravity of the concern, and the will to overcome evil."<sup>32</sup> Fasting among people of earlier times was virtually taken for granted and "enjoyed" widespread support from the "world of sports" as St. Paul himself states in 1 Cor. 9:25: Everyone who competes in a contest abstains from everything. In modern translations, this passage may not always use the term "abstain," but the Latin Vulgate that was well known to the early monks is quite unambiguous: *Omnis autem qui in agone contendit, ab omnibus se abstinēt*. Now let us establish the connection between the ascetical use of food and the spiritual dimensions of humility and obedience.

There is no difficulty in referring to ascetic practices as "discipline." But in our use of the term, we are referring primarily to ways of implementing humility and obedience.

However, when we consider that monastic life is a continuation of the penitential life developed by the early church, then we have an association of ascetic practices such as fasting and abstinence with the life of obedience and humility. The direct relationship between the renunciation of one's own will (*propria voluntas*) and obedience finds its counterpart in the renunciation of the appetites which, like one's self-will, can control and enslave a person and prevent genuine openness and charity toward others. In fasting, monks, like early Christians in general, hope to be able to expend fewer resources on themselves and thus have more to expend on the "economically disadvantaged" (to use today's "politically correct" terminology). "When the Master and Benedict invite the monk in two successive maxims to 'love fasting' and to 'relieve the poor,' there is no doubt that a connection of cause and effect unites these two 'Instruments' ...[of good works]."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, in the desire to assist the poor, it makes good sense spiritually for the monk "to love fasting," since that is part and parcel of exercising love toward the poor. Otherwise, it seems virtually impossible to love fasting unless undertaken for reasons of health and/or vanity, which are motives far removed from the *agape*-love that Christ calls us to exercise. But the monk is to love Christ above all (*RB* 4.21), and it is particularly in the poor that Christ is received and served (*RB* 53.15).

#### IN CONCLUSION

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives it do I give it to you" (John 14:27). In similar fashion, the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21) is not the freedom that the world exalts. The world's freedom is freedom in license that ultimately enslaves one to pride, appetites, etc. The freedom of the children of God is founded in truth. If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32). But the truth that is meant here is not some sort of intellectual grasp of facts; rather it is Christ himself: the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). The whole of monastic life is aimed at removing a variety of illusions from the monk so that he will face up squarely to himself and to God and seek the right relationship between himself and God. That is the goal of all the monk's discipline. It is a process of learning at the most basic levels of one's existence. One can learn about hunger only by experiencing hunger. One can learn about the freedom of the children of God only by experiencing it. But that requires freedom from any elements that hold us to the world's way of thinking and behaving, which is the broad way to destruction. The only genuine freedom is the freedom that comes with one's union or identity with Christ.<sup>34</sup> The monk's goal is "to put on Christ" (Rom. 13:14). But he cannot achieve this goal without the grace of Christ which is granted to him on the narrow road to life. To pursue that road means to forgo any number of choices and "lifestyles" that others might look upon as necessary for one's self-fulfillment. It is a free choice to limit one's outreach to various pleasures, pursuits, and material gains and to expand one's horizons beyond the immediate desires and concerns of this present life in a pursuit of God and ultimate truth. The monastic form of discipline associated with this pursuit is not everyone's cup of tea or everyone's call from God, though the pursuit of God and ultimate truth is everyone's moral responsibility, whether readily embraced or not.

The topic of freedom is addressed here because we can all too easily criticize an institu-

tionalized form of religious life as something that destroys a Christian's God-given freedom and responsibility toward oneself. Indeed, in recent times, we have seen the emergence of any number of religious cults that have so effectively robbed their members of their freedom that they have allowed themselves to be led to the strangest of beliefs and the most bizarre of behaviors, resulting in the death of others or in mass suicide. So the concern is understandable. However, Benedictine monastic life, if we date it from the time of St. Benedict, is the second oldest surviving institution in Western culture. Only the Church itself is older. There is something to be said for the test of time. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

The monastic way of life, its *disciplina*, exists ultimately to serve the monk, and not vice versa. No institution in Christianity, not even the church, may exist for its own sake and make its members subservient to itself. The witness of history has shown us the sad results when this principle is violated too often and too long. Yet no Christian institution or denomination is entirely immune to this possibility. Virtually any institution that survives more than a generation will have its share of skeletons sequestered away in the closet. Still, we live in the hope of Christ's promise to be with his *ekklesia* through all times and tribulations (Matt. 16:18). Regardless of our various concepts and definitions of *ekklesia*, we are keenly aware, perhaps as never before, that the church of Christ is found wherever two or three are gathered in *his* name (Matt. 18:20). Today, in this place, we are gathered in his name. Every encounter with Christ must change our lives for the better if it is not to be changed for the worse as we see so graphically portrayed in Judas Iscariot. We have been entrusted with the Good News of Christ, both a treasure and responsibility. May we treasure the responsibility and be faithful porters of the Good News.

#### NOTES

1. For a more detailed treatment of the tradition, cf. *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, by Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, vol. 1, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Munich, 1969), pp. 460-64.
2. Cf. Adelbert de Vogüé, *The Rule of Saint Benedict, A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary*, Cistercian Studies Series: No. 54 (Kalamazoo, 1983), p. 99.
3. *RM, This 45. The Rule of the Master*, an anonymous monastic rule that St. Benedict drew upon very heavily, has been most recently and thoroughly researched by Adelbert de Vogüé in his seven-volume work on the *RB: La Règle de saint Benoît* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1971-72).
4. Cf. A. de Vogüé, *The Rule*, pp. 14-15.
5. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 18.
6. Cf. *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, Timothy Fry, O.S.B., ed. (Collegeville, 1981), pp. 145-47 and 324-26. It is this translation of the *RB* that is used throughout this paper.
7. To those more acquainted with Latin than most modern people are, the word *audire*, meaning "to listen," that forms the root of *oboedire*, "to obey," is immediately apparent. Because careful, obedient listening is at the heart of the monastic life, silence (*taciturnitas*) is stressed as the necessary condition for faithful listening.
8. While Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus, not to be confused with Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth) is not considered a canonical work among most Protestants, it is still held in high regard by biblical scholars and further develops the theme of wisdom.
9. Cf. *The Disciplinary Measures in the Rule of Benedict*, in: *RB 1980*, pp. 415-35.
10. Modern Catholic theology often does not treat obedience as a virtue in itself, mainly

because Thomas Aquinas did not consider it to be a virtue in itself. Instead, he treats it as a part of the virtue of justice. Cf. *Summa Theologica*, 2 II, p. 104.

11. In the *RM* and the *RB*, these forms of discipline are called "excommunication." That is not, however, the same as expulsion from the community, which is used only as a last resort for the sake of the community's welfare. The *RM* 13, 2-3 refers to one who is to be expelled as "a heretic" and as "the demon's workman." For a more complete treatment of this topic and passage, cf. *RB* 1980, pp. 421-23.

12. Cf. A. de Vogüé, *The Rule*, p. 190.

13. Cf. K. Hein, "St. Benedict and the Second Coming of Christ," in *The American Benedictine Review*, 36:3 (Sept. 1985), pp. 318-24, where it is argued that St. Benedict and, indeed, the monastic tendency of his day was to eschew the theme of the Second Coming but to continue to emphasize the idea of Final Judgment.

14. Beginning several centuries before Benedict's time, obedience to properly appointed ecclesial authorities took on additional significance as a result of the increase of heretical divisions in the church and the threat that Gnosticism presented to the church. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons and the "Father of Catholic Dogmatics," had to shepherd a flock of mostly illiterate people who could not avail themselves of the written word of Scripture. On the other hand, he had to face down heretics who knew Scripture inside out. Under these conditions, he noted that true orthodoxy is a matter of being true to apostolic tradition, which includes "apostolic succession." Therefore, for Irenaeus, being able to quote Scripture in abundance is secondary to adherence to proper authority. Cf. K. Hein, "Eucharist and Excommunication: A Study in Early Christian Doctrine and Discipline," in: *European University Papers*, XXIII/1 9 (Bern, 1973), pp. 252-54. The connection made between orthodoxy and recognition of one's apostolic authority, however, was not invented by men like Irenaeus. St. Paul himself was quite insistent on it when he found himself under attack from the "super apostles" (cf. 2 Cor. 10-13; K. Hein, "Eucharist and Excommunication," pp. 87-89). Finally, as a footnote to this note, one must not overlook the fact that Johann Gutenberg's invention, moveable type, was virtually essential for Martin Luther's principle of *sola scriptura* and Protestantism's consequent emphasis on Bible reading and private interpretation of Scripture.

15. St. Benedict's biography is Book II of the four books that constitute the *Dialogues* by St. Gregory the Great.

16. Cf. A. de Vogüé, *The Life of St. Benedict* (Petersham 1993), p. 7.

17. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

18. Fasting and discipline in regard to food were especially significant to early Christians and monks in view of the New Testament's presentation of Christ in the desert where the first temptation was to turn stones into bread. Lack of food and water led the Israelites during the Exodus to complain and sin. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Adam and Eve are pictured in Genesis 3 as having sinned by eating of the forbidden fruit. Thus the fall of the human race appears to have resulted from lack of discipline in regard to eating. These ideas seem to resonate in St. Benedict's statement in *RB* Prol. 2: "The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience."

19. Cf. A. de Vogüé, *The Life*, p. 156.

20. "The Work of God" is St. Benedict's preferred expression for the communal prayer of the monastery. This prayer consisted mostly of Psalms and readings from Scripture and the early fathers of the church. This form of prayer is still the "official" prayer of Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and other Christian denominations.

21. It is often asserted that St. Augustine's rule for religious encourages obedience primarily for the sake of good order (*Præc.* 7.1 and 4). While good order is a blessing not to be belittled, as the primary purpose of obedience, it seems more suited to the life of a soldier than that of a

monk who is truly seeking God.

22. The dichotomy between Gospel and law was scarcely the issue in early Christian monasticism that it later became at the time of the Protestant Reformation. K. Goldammer and F.K. Schuman in their article on obedience ("Gehorsam," in: *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 11 [Tübingen, 1958], col. 1263-1265) present the rather typical Protestant view of past years that monastic obedience is essentially a kind of spiritual childhood shown by the religious to their superiors, or that of a pupil to teacher, and which has parallels in other religious bodies such as the Islamic Dervish order. But a more thorough investigation of Christian monasticism, which at any rate predates Islam, reveals deeper and genuinely Christian motives for monasticism's "preferential option" for obedience that go well beyond the parent/child or teacher/pupil models and emphasize instead the obedience of Christ to his heavenly Father.

23. The monastic custom of not eating the flesh of animals was not merely an ascetic practice or much less a matter of promoting better health or the like. It was, at least in some instances, meant to be a reminder of the supposed harmony of creation in its original state, as yet untainted by sin. Meat and wine are consumed only after the great flood. Cf. Basil, *Hom. de ieiunio* 1.3-5; Jerome, *Adv. Iovin.* II. 15.

24. For an interesting and insightful treatment of the problem of obedience in today's culture, especially in America, cf. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 30ff. Nouwen notes with poignant accuracy more than 20 years ago that "We are facing a generation which has parents but no fathers."

25. Cf. A. de Vogüé, *The Rule*, p. 121. Charity or love in much of the monastic tradition was "the virtue marking the end, not the beginning or intermediate progress.... Of charity they had a very high idea—too high perhaps—like the one modern people even yet usually have of the mystical life," (*ibid.*)

26. Cf. *RB* 1980, p. 186, fn. to *RB* 5.1 and p. 193, fn. to *RB* 7.10.

27. The British monk Pelagius (born c. A.D. 354), denied Original Sin and taught that no divine grace is needed to do good works. He was excommunicated in A.D. 417. However, the belief that grace is needed to perform good works but not to will to do good works, i.e., "semi-Pelagianism," was still being debated in Benedict's day. It may be that some semi-Pelagian influence underlies *RB* Prol. 4: "First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection." Cf. *RB* 1980, p. 158, fn.

28. Throughout the chapter on humility, St. Benedict makes abundant use of scriptural quotations, but mostly from the Old Testament and especially from the Psalms. Nevertheless, given the early church's prevailing interpretation of the Psalms as generally prophetic and messianic, Benedict expects his monks to see and imitate Christ in these passages as well. Thus, for example, we read in *RB* 7.51-52: "The seventh step of humility is that a man not only admits with his tongue but is also convinced in his heart that he is inferior to all and of less value, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet: I am truly a worm, not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people" (Ps. 22:7). In our modern age with its technological and accompanying psychological complexities, humility as a conviction in one's heart of one's inferiority may be rejected out of hand. Clearly, monastic life is not for every personality type, especially if one is prone to an inferiority complex to begin with. In defense of this degree of humility, it should be noted that it is presented as a goal for one who has already ascended half of the ladder of humility. But more importantly, it is presented as a way of conforming one's whole life to the life of Christ, who, according to Mark 15:34 and Matt. 27:46, intoned this Psalm from the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

29. The monastic asceticism we are considering here is not derived from the eastern denial of the world. Instead it is founded in the asceticism that Christianity inherited from its Jewish roots and which was developed in the catechumenate (course of instructions and practices for con-

verts). "As such, it can be seen as the elaboration of the simple moral catechesis of the 'two ways' of the *Didache* (1.1-2.7) and *Pseudo-Barnabas* (18.1-20.2)." Cf. T.R. O'Connor, *Asceticism*, in: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 1967, p. 937. With the passing of "the age of martyrs" and the adult catechumenate, monastic life became the idealized way of continuing the fervor and faith that were associated with conversion and martyrdom. For a more thorough treatment of this matter, cf *RB* 1980, pp. 3-64 and 437-66.

30. Cf. A. de Vogüé, *The Rule*, p. 114.

31. Benedict does not invoke the concept of divine Providence at this point. However, the monastic tradition that he drew upon, namely St. Augustine and the *RM*, are quite explicit on the matter of union of hearts and dependence on Providence. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 210-11 and 218-19.

32. Cf. A. de Vogüé, *The Rule*, p. 232.

33. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 233-34.

34. Though the modern Waldensian-Methodist accord and spirituality are rooted in a religious tradition only remotely related to Benedictine monasticism, there is clearly a similarity of spirit in several outstanding points as can be seen in the words of Pastor Giorgio Bouchard, Italy, 1986: "To be bearers of Waldensian identity, Protestant progressive-democratic culture, and the tradition of freedom is not enough. Christ is our identity! We aim to live out biblical culture! With our freedom we must stand up for the irrevocable demands of 'hungering and thirsting after justice!'" Cf. Giorgio Tourn and Associates, *You Are My Witnesses, The Waldensians Across 800 Years*, Claudiana Editrice, 1989, p. 271.