

THE INTERPRETATION OF A MONASTIC RULE [1]

THE GENERAL CHAPTER of 1967, during its twenty-sixth session, affirmed that the Rule of St Benedict remains the basis of our Cistercian legislation [1] . The same General Chapter also approved a certain number of experiments or adaptations, some of which constitute a departure from a literal observance of the Rule. This raises the question of fidelity to the Rule, a question which concerns every facet of our monastic life. All its dimensions must be studied.

The attitudes which individuals or groups take with regard to this problem often stem from more fundamental, oftentimes quite vague propensities. These attitudes concern the relationship of the Rule to Scripture, to the monastic tradition as a whole, and to contemporary man. And the fundamental problem in every case is one of hermeneutics.

It is this problem of the hermeneutics, or of the interpretation of the Rule that I wish to deal with in this paper. I do not pretend to offer a solution. I simply wish to state the problem in terms as exact as possible, and indicate what might lead to a solution. Nor am I forgetting that solutions to this sort of problem ought first to be worked out in real life, before they can be conceptualized in a satisfactory manner.

Preliminary Notions: the Task of Hermeneutics

The empirical method has gradually taken over in all the sciences, theology included. As Fr Bernard. Lonergan sj explained at the Theology Congress at Toronto in August 1967, theology has become empirical in the sense that Scripture and tradition no longer offer it premises from which it may draw conclusions, but rather data to interpret [2] . Consequently, the most crucial and fundamental problems which present themselves to man today, in every domain of learning, are problems of interpretation, that is, problems of hermeneutics. That is why, in what concerns the sacred sciences, the methods of hermeneutics which have been established for biblical exegesis are being rethought more and more, with a view to using them for the study of tradition.

We can distinguish two forms of interpretation with regard to documents considered as part of tradition: historic and dynamic [3] . Historical interpretation consists in discovering the precise meaning of a text in itself, what the author really wanted to say. The

instruments used in this sort of interpretation are textual, historical, and literary criticism. This kind of interpretation, while remaining on the historical level, can become systematic if, over and above the use of these methods of criticism, superior norms of interpretation are introduced which bring to light the doctrinal, philosophical and theological presuppositions underlying the text.

But it is also possible to surpass this level of historical interpretation and arrive at an interpretation which is dynamic. That is to say, one may use the interpreted text as a starting point for arriving at a deeper understanding of the reality which the text expresses. This method is extremely important for interpreting texts of the Church's magisterium, especially conciliar documents.

The magisterium. texts deal with realities which can not be reduced to formulas, and which are infinitely greater than any conceptual expression that one might give them. Even dogmatic definitions, infallible and irrevocable as they may be, never express perfectly and completely the reality to which they refer. Further, although the living magisterium is the immediate norm for faith, the ultimate and fundamental norm is Holy Scripture. Therefore, even if the task of the magisterium is to interpret Scripture, any given text of tradition or of the Fathers of the Church can only be interpreted correctly if it is viewed in the light of Scripture and the whole of the tradition of the Church: these two constitute its integral context.

Everything which I have explained here about interpretation of texts holds good for the facts of Church History, for tradition manifests itself through these facts also.

Now if we apply these methodological principles to an interpretation of the Rule, we find ourselves in the following position. In order to understand the Rule, we should first work out an interpretation which is critical and historical; that is to say, by using methods of textual, literary and historical criticism we should be able to determine the exact meaning of each part of the Rule, of each of its phrases. In other words, we should be able to discover what the author of the Rule really wanted to say. At this stage of research, it still is not a question of providing a commentary on the Rule. This is rather a scientific explanation on which any ulterior commentary would need to be based. Excellent works have already been produced in this line of critical and historical interpretation of the Rule. This work should be followed up. But the results of this historical interpretation cannot aid us in a direct manner to determine the orientation which monastic renewal should take. They have to be completed by a dynamic interpretation.

What is this dynamic interpretation of the Rule? I hope that this will become clearer as we continue with our study. But for the moment, let me say that such an interpretation will consist of a reevaluation of the Rule as a whole, and of each of its elements in the light of Holy Scripture and the whole of tradition.

Before speaking specifically of our own attitude toward the Rule, we have to ascertain its relationship with Scripture and tradition – that is to say, the tradition of the Church in general as well as monastic tradition. The plan of this study then appears as follows:

The Rule and the Gospel

The Rule and Tradition

The Rule and Monastic History

The Rule and Ourselves.

The Rule and the Gospel

The Gospel, the fundamental and irreplaceable norm of the Christian life, remains the first Rule for the monk. Hence it is necessary to point out the relationship between the Rule and Scripture. And this, of course, should be done by starting with a notion of Holy Scripture which is theologically exact.

Thanks to developments in the field of the theology of history, we are now accustomed to viewing revelation as something dynamic rather than static. Revelation is the personal entrance of God into human history, and the Christian life is man's response to this personal and completely gratuitous intervention by God. It is this intervention which is the supreme norm of every type of Christian life. Holy Scripture is precisely the objectification in writing-by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but in human language-of the divine fact of revelation. Because it is coextensive with the factual reality, this first written objectification has a primary normative value for the whole life of the People of God in the ages following the Incarnation of Christ.

It is enough to read and meditate on the Rule of St Benedict to appreciate its completely evangelical character. It paints a beautiful picture of the Gospel-life lived in its fullness. Does this mean that

it is a "digest of the Gospel" as is sometimes said? Actually, such an expression is extremely ambiguous. People who use it all too easily lead one to believe that the Rule gathers everything together from the Gospel which would be useful for monks, so that they need not bother going directly to Scripture. It would be wrong to say that. The Rule is not meant to replace the Gospel, but to lead the monk to it and help him to understand what the Gospel requires of him.

The Rule is an interpretation of the evangelical doctrine on the perfect Christian life. As such, it helps us to understand the Gospel message. But it should be reinterpreted continually, in the light of Scripture and the tradition of the Church. So we must also situate the Rule in its relationship to tradition.

The Rule and Tradition

Tradition is an extremely important human phenomenon. The philosophers who have studied it have been careful to distinguish it from history, and to show its relationship to history. While history is the "becoming" which preserves the past, tradition is precisely that which is durable; it stands firm during all the mutations of this "becoming." [4] From the ontological point of view, tradition is that which makes it possible for being to be permanent; [5] from the point of view of hermeneutics, it is the element which makes knowledge of the past possible [6] . Actually, I cannot interpret and understand (verstehen) a text or a fact of the past unless I have a certain anterior knowledge (Vorverstandnis) of the ontological reality of which this fact is the incarnation, or of which this text is the objectification.

This pre-intellection is made possible by a type of vital communication with this reality, and this vital communication is assured by tradition.

Now, from the strictly theological point of view, tradition is the objective permanence of revelation, in the historical "becoming" of the Church. Tradition and historicity (which means mutation) are correlative realities. The whole work of interpretation consists in discovering the revealed truth which is veiled by various historical and contingent forms of objectification.

As with every other element in the tradition of the Church, the Rule of St Benedict is the objectification of a transcendent and permanent reality (the evangelical doctrine on the perfect Christian life) in contingent and changing historical forms. The interpretation of the

Rule will consist, first of all, in distinguishing what in it is tradition and what is historicity. This can be accomplished if the method of dynamic interpretation about which we were just speaking is applied.

Before going further, we ought to clarify one point. So far, we have been considering the Rule as a spiritual document which transmits to us the message of the Gospel on the perfect Christian life. From this point of view, it is one of the elements in the tradition of the Church, and has as much importance for Christians in general and for theologians as it has for monks and nuns. But it interprets this Gospel message in a specific manner. It bears witness to a certain type of spiritual attitude which characterizes those persons whom history calls monks and nuns. Thus it transmits the monastic tradition.

Monasticism is, in fact, an historical reality. And so within the confines of this reality we must once again distinguish between tradition and historicity. Christian monasticism is characterized above all by a spiritual attitude before God, before men, and before the reality of the world. It is this spiritual attitude, abiding despite the ebb and flow of evolving monastic observances throughout history, which properly speaking constitutes the monastic tradition.

If we are to distinguish in the Rule of St Benedict what is monastic tradition and what are its historical and contingent modalities of objectification (and that is the task of dynamic interpretation), we will first have to determine at what moment the Rule entered the ebb and flow of monastic history as an historical fact. Then we will have to see how monks interpreted St Benedict's Rule in the centuries which followed.

The Rule in Monastic History

a) The Rule as an Historical Fact

The Rule of St Benedict which for many centuries has dominated practically all of western monasticism is, without doubt, a document of great value and one which expresses the "monastic tradition" in a very excellent way. Should we conclude from this, as some people are perhaps a little too quick to do, that it is a "synthesis" of the whole monastic tradition? This would certainly be an exaggeration and quite incorrect. First of all, monastic history did not end with St Benedict, nor did St Benedict draw up his Rule in the manner of a theoretician. With him, there was no question of studying the whole

tradition which had gone before so that he could select and retain what was best in it. The Rule of St Benedict is situated at a certain moment in the historical evolution of monasticism.

The ancient East had known two great monastic traditions: the cenobitic and the anchoritic. Within each of these traditions, different currents could be distinguished [7] . The cenobitic tradition came into being just about everywhere at about the same time, especially in the Judeo-Christian Churches. It had its origin in those groups of ascetics who had been living within the local Churches from the early days of Christianity. We find this cenobitic tradition, expressed with varying differences, amongst the Sons of the Covenant in Persia and Syria, in Pachomian monasticism in the Thebaid and in Basilian monasticism in Cappadocia. Alongside of this cenobitic tradition, the anchoritic tradition gradually developed. It seems that the influence of the Egyptian anchorites was largely responsible for the spread of this type of life. It is the semianchoritic tradition of Lower Egypt which St Benedict knew, receiving it through Cassian and the Master. So Benedict was situated in a very definite current in the evolution of the great monastic tradition, and to a great extent, he knew nothing of the other currents. In his day, he could not possibly have known them all. The fact that he stresses or fails to stress certain particular elements of monastic tradition could mean that he had made a choice after a long personal deliberation, but it could also be simply the result of accidental historical factors.

Benedict did not receive the monastic tradition in a fully developed form. Rather, he received it wrapped in a contingent form of objectification. No element of the Rule can be properly evaluated unless it is examined and weighed in the light of the whole monastic tradition. A healthy and honest interpretation ought to be able to recognize both the strength and weakness of the Rule of St Benedict as well as the strength and weakness of the monastic current in which the Rule is situated.

b) Interpretation of the Rule in History

Thus far we have seen that the Rule is, first of all, one of the bearers of Church tradition. It is a witness to the Gospel teaching about the perfect Christian life. Further, it is a link in the chain of monastic tradition, handing down to us this "spiritual attitude" of openness to the Spirit, of total abandonment to God, and of poverty-which is the essence of the monastic life. This spiritual attitude does not exist in an abstract state. It has to be expressed in an incarnate form, and the Rule incarnates it in customs, observances and

in the setting of a daily life which is arranged with great detail. From this point of view, the Rule is also a juridical code which prescribes the organization of a monastic community in a specific historical context, for the purpose of assuring the development of this spiritual attitude.

During the course of monastic history since St Benedict we can distinguish two trends of attitude toward the Rule. One sees it primarily as a spiritual document which gives witness to the fundamental values of the monastic life and which ought to inspire the monks of the generations to come in their living of the monastic life. The other trend sees it rather as a juridical code which describes right down to the last detail what the monastic or Benedictine life ought to be.

This same sort of dialectic had already marked Eastern monasticism to a certain extent. It does not seem that the first groups of ascetics which existed within the local Christian communities knew of any other rules than the canonical ones which applied to all Christians. However, as the communities became more organized and their structures became more complicated, the organization of the common life on the practical level became the object of a number of prescriptions. In Cappadocia problems came up when the "fraternities" of St Basil became more organized, and in his attempts to solve them, he went straight to the Gospel. His answers to these practical questions were put together as a sort of "collection," and thus arose his "Rules" which have nothing at all about them which resembles a systematically elaborated juridical code.

To respond to the various material and spiritual needs of his monasteries, and also to assure the smooth running of the common life, St Pachomius was obliged to draw up a certain number of prescriptions for his monks which also were assembled as "collections," even during his lifetime. But Pachomius took care to concentrate the ascetical efforts of his monks on "the prescriptions of the Gospel," and to orient their attention towards the fundamental spiritual reality of fraternal communion. After his death, his two successors, Horsiesius and Theodore, in their attempts to maintain unity in the Congregation, put much too much emphasis on fidelity to the precepts which Pachomius had drawn up for the monks, The juridical element replaced the charismatic, and this was the cause of a rapid decline in the Pachomian congregation.

Generally speaking, in the East all the ancient rules are considered as a treasure common to the whole of monasticism. They are spiritual documents which one finds in all the monasteries. By their contact with these various rules, the young monks develop "a monk's heart."

They do not look to them for directives about the organization of their monasteries on the level of practical detail. Doing that is rather the role of the typicon which, ideally at least, should be proper to each monastery.

Even Cassian, great theorizer about the monastic life though he was, does not seem to have written a Rule. He simply presented to the Western monks, by means of his Institutions and Conferences, the customs and spiritual teachings of the Eastern monks. But more elaborate rules were drawn up in the West. One of them, the Rule of the Master which was probably put together by a Roman cleric, served as base for the Rule of St Benedict. The author of this Rule, the Benedictus vir of Monte Cassino, presented to his monks the traditional monastic teaching and he did it with rather unusual wisdom and great discretion. At the same time, he drew up a picture of how they should live this traditional teaching in the concrete circumstances of life in an Italian monastery during the sixth century.

For the next few centuries, the attitude in the West toward monastic rules was similar to that which existed in the East. Little by little, the Rule of St Benedict found its way into almost all the monasteries in the West. This, however, does not mean that the other rules were discarded. Rather, in any given monastery, the monks might have been using several rules simultaneously for their spiritual orientation. No one even thought about conforming the details of daily monastic life to the prescriptions of one or another of these rules [8] .

Charlemagne, who wished to rule the Church as well as serve it, imposed the Rule of St Benedict on all the monasteries of his realm. It would seem that, in the circumstances in which monasticism found itself at that time, the only way of reestablishing a certain "rectitude of life" (precisely that honestas morum about which St Benedict speaks in Chapter Seventy-three of the Rule) was to impose a uniform Rule on the monasteries. Benedict of Aniane, supported by Louis the Pious, put himself to this task with great energy. A Capitulare monasticum-which constituted actually an adaptation of the Rule of St Benedict-was established at Aix-la-Chapelle in 817, and the emperor designated inspectors who were responsible for putting the new decrees into effect. One abbey, Inde, was even set up as a "model" monastery. This organization was an ephemeral thing and did not last far beyond Benedict of Aniane's lifetime. During the ninth century, monasticism again fell into a period of decadence. It became evident that a mere reform of institutions, even one based on an excellent Rule, would never be enough if the Spirit was lacking.

But the Spirit was going to inspire a great spiritual renewal about a

century after the Synod of Aix-la-Chapelle: the reform of Cluny. Working within the juridical framework established by Benedict of Aniane, this reform was to be a return to the fundamental monastic observances: silence, work, stability, prayer. It is true that Cluny developed a liturgical cult which was exaggerated, but the criticisms directed at Cluny on this score are often exaggerated, too. The monasteries of the Cluny Federation were real centers of prayer and union with God existing in the midst of a world marked more than ever by violence, immorality, and injustice. And they remained centers of intense prayer for a very long time.

Obviously, the Rule of St Benedict was the basis of the Cluniac reform, for it was the basis of all western monasticism at that time. But it was interpreted with discretion and wisdom by the Abbot of Cluny who was the superior of all the monks of the "Congregation." Cluny's centralization had drawbacks, of course, as any kind of centralization does. It also had advantages. Besides freeing the individual monasteries from feudal domination, it permitted the first abbots of Cluny (who were great spiritual masters and nearly all of whom were abbots for a very long time) to exercise a direct spiritual influence on thousands of monks, and thus to maintain a very high degree of spiritual life in several hundred monasteries (more than a thousand, when Hugh died in 1109).

The wave of reform which manifested itself in monasticism toward the middle of the eleventh century cannot be taken as an indication that Cluny was in a state of decadence. On the contrary, it bears witness to the success of the Cluniac reform and to the vitality of a type of monasticism which had attained a sufficient degree of maturity to give rise within itself to a new need for something better, for a reform which would be more profound and more radical. just about everywhere, and at the same time, there appeared a strong desire and movement toward a monastic life which would be poorer, more simple and more solitary than the life in the huge Cluniac monasteries, although these abbeys had played an admirable role during their period of history. From this current which, as a whole, wanted to be faithful to the Rule of St Benedict (that is to be authentically monastic), there arose the foundations of Camaldoli, Vallombrosa, Grandmont, Fontevrault, Chartreuse, Molesme, Cîteaux. They all drew their life from the same movement of the Spirit. They did not look for a new interpretation of the Rule of St Benedict. They simply wanted to live, in an authentic way, each one according to his own manner and with great spontaneity, what everyone recognized as the life intended by St Benedict: a life that was simple and poor, a life of solitude.

The original attitude of the founders of Cîteaux was marked by this spontaneity and this simplicity. Soon, however, the needs of self-

justification brought on by their polemics with the Benedictine monks obliged them to explain why they had abandoned the traditional customs which for so long had been taken to be an official interpretation of the Rule in the West. They had opted for a stricter observance of the Rule, a literal observance even. It is important to make a clear distinction between the charism and initial spiritual aspirations of the founders of Cîteaux, and their self-justifying rationalizations.

As long as the first founders were alive, and even during the next generation, the vitality of the initial charism was strong enough to counterbalance any excessive rigidity or strictness occasioned by the principle of literal observance of all the prescriptions of the Rule to the exclusion of all the monastic customs which had developed after the Rule was written. St Bernard, even though he inclined to absolute principles such as those he puts forth in the *De praecepto et dispensatione*, also knew how to exercise common sense, reasoning and charity on the practical level. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to transmit the charism of discretion than it is to transmit absolute principles.

The growth of Cîteaux was rapid and prolific. We have a right to be proud of it. But the historian who is going to be honest cannot conceal the fact that this Golden Age was very brief (much shorter than that of Cluny, for example). Very soon we see that a number of practices directly opposed to the original intentions of the founders were introduced. The Cistercian monasteries became just as rich as those of Cluny. After having rejected the Customs of Cluny as so many unjustifiable additions to the Rule, the Cistercians found that their Customs were more numerous and complex than those of Cluny! They so forgot about the simplicity of their predecessors and the sharp criticisms of St Bernard, that the Cistercian Abbots, a few centuries later, sought to obtain, and in fact did obtain, the pontifical insignia. The lay brothers were often exploited, and the monks, counting on them for their material subsistence, often fell into an idleness which was not at all akin to mystical otium.

What were the causes of this rapid diminution of the primitive ideal? The principal reason usually given is that the growth, both in the number of monks and of monasteries, was too rapid. But we must look for a deeper reason, and I am inclined to believe that it is rather the legalism which resulted from pushing the principle of literal fidelity to the Rule too far. The fundamental obligations of the monastic life: poverty, solitude, prayer, make demands on the monk which are almost unlimited. When the monk applies himself to listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit, he is led by him into an ever-deepening understanding of these demands, and also to a more authentic monastic life on the practical level. But when he establishes himself

in a static position by a literal observance of a text that has been written once and for all, he is no longer sensitive to the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit. He no longer obeys the law which is "written in his heart", but is satisfied with conforming his actions to some exterior law. And God knows how fertile the human imagination is when it comes to devising a harmony between the text of a rule and certain things which are most opposed to its spiritual dynamism.

This legalism was a great hindrance to the flowering of charisms. The great Cistercian authors such as William of St Thierry, Guerric of Igny, Amadeus of Lausanne, Aelred of Rievaulx, Isaac of Stella and Adam of Perseigne, practically all belonged to the same generation. Most of them had received their formation before they came to a Cistercian monastery. Even though their spiritual works are very often of great value, only a relatively small number of these works have a character which is specifically monastic.

The Charter of Charity, which had as its goal the union of monasteries in the bond of charity, had seen uniformity of observances as a means of maintaining this union of charity. But as the order spread throughout Europe, the General Chapters were continually harassed by this question of observances. They continually had to be giving reminders about them, or modifying them, or mitigating them. The Rule itself is very rarely mentioned in the Acts of the General Chapters.

By the fifteenth century, the Order had become a vast organism without sufficient life-breath to permit a reform which would have revived the whole. At that moment God raised up certain charismatic men who reformed their own monasteries, and around their own monasteries grouped other houses of monks. This was how several of the Congregations began. The duration of their prosperity depended on whether they clung to and kept alive the original charism of the founder, or whether they simply went about observing the rules he had established. This was the criterion that determined whether they lasted for a longer or shorter time.

A charism, of course, because of its very nature can not be "institutionalized." But all the same, adequate institutions are needed to maintain life in the dynamism which has been set in motion. This passage from charism to institution is always an extremely delicate matter. Unfortunately it is often a passage to legalism. That is clearly what happened in the case of the Pachomian congregation, under Horsiesius and Theodore. I feel that at Cîteaux, also, a too-literal attachment to the customs established by the founders led—after a marvelous but brief period of development—to a certain drying-up of Cistercian spirituality.

This phenomenon is common enough. We can find it outside of monasticism, outside of Christianity even, in Islam for example. And it appears with a strange sort of similarity. With regard to Islam, Jacques Jomier has written: "At Medina, during the lifetime of Mohammed, Islam was a veritable theocracy. At any moment, new oracles might announce new orders from above to the people. It was God, the faithful believed, who guided his people, shepherded by their leader. After the death of Mohammed it is difficult to speak of pure and simple theocracy. The Koran became the supreme law, and numerous points which had been passed over in silence were gradually made the object of legislation. Thus a whole body of legislation came into being. At the time the Arabic empire broke up, Islam had become, according to the expression of Louis Gardet, a 'Nomocracy'." [9]

The following remark by the same author with reference to Islam, might be applied to more than one phase of monastic history: "As a religion of law, Islam permits the majority of her faithful to settle down with a good conscience once they have accomplished all the prescribed observances. This results in a state of satisfaction and serenity, except in the case of certain mystics who thirst for the absolute." [10]

Conclusion: the Rule and Ourselves

The fundamental obligation of contemporary monasticism, and that of each individual monk, is to hearken to the life-giving Spirit, in an attitude of openness and docility. The Spirit speaks in a million ways, and one of the special channels through which he reaches us is, of course, the Rule. But to discover the message of the Spirit in the Rule, we must know how to interpret it. In order to do this, we must consider it from three different points of view.

As a document of the great Church tradition, the Rule transmits to us the evangelical doctrine on the perfect Christian life. From this point of view, it has just as much value for the Christian in general as it has for the monk himself. It is one of many documents in which and by which the Church has objectified, during the course of the ages, its understanding of the Gospel. Obviously, it is not meant to replace the Gospel—a misunderstanding which might result from clumsy usage of the expression: "The Rule: digest of the Gospel." Rather, its goal is to help us better understand the requirements of the Gospel.

As a document of the monastic tradition, the Rule teaches monks of all eras and all persuasions the fundamental spiritual attitude which makes the monk. The first obligation of the monk with respect to the

Rule is, therefore, to meditate on it unceasingly, to let himself be penetrated with it, and to let it create in him the spiritual attitude which will make him a real monk. And it is through his personal and vital experience, much more than through abstract formulas, that he will arrive at expressing what this state of soul is—this attitude toward God, toward man, toward created things, which characterizes the monk. One might describe this attitude in general terms this way: the monk is a man who has abandoned, as far as is humanly possible, everything which men are wont to consider helpful for organizing their life on this earth. He has put himself in an impossible situation; that is to say, in a situation where he must count on God for everything, where he can no longer count on anyone or anything but him. That is the significance of his solitude, his poverty, and his celibacy.

The Rule presents this spiritual attitude to him, not in an abstract form, but incarnated in customs and practices, in a type of daily life intimately linked to a specific historical context. Thus it takes the form of a juridical code.

As a document of Church tradition, the Rule of St Benedict has an unquestionable value for all Christians and its interpretation is subject to the same rules as any other document of the Church. As a witness of the monastic tradition, it has a value for all monks, but particularly for those who belong to the great cenobitic tradition which the Rule has handed down to our day. As a juridical code describing the concrete realization of this spiritual attitude in a detailed way and in a setting of daily life, the Rule had an immediate value as norm only for the monks for whom it was first written, those living in the time of St Benedict, although even from this secondary point of view it continues to give inspiration to monks through the centuries.

The task of the monastic orders, and the task of each individual monk, then, is to try earnestly to arrive at a comprehension ever new and ever deeper of what the Gospel requires of man, and to continue the renewal of their spiritual orientation and the dynamism which characterizes monastic life. Under the guidance of the Spirit they must unceasingly seek for the most authentic and true concrete realization of this spiritual attitude, in forms of life adapted to our living contemporary context. Take an example: evangelical poverty. The Rule, drawn up in a sociological context completely different from ours, cannot teach us how we should practice poverty today. But it should create in our hearts a spirit of poverty. And if we are really poor in spirit, we will certainly practice a poverty which is authentic. If, on the other hand, we are just concerned with observing the Rule's precepts telling us what we should do with our earthly

goods, we may easily justify, in the name of fidelity to the Rule, all sorts of situations which, in our contemporary context, are frowned upon by the consensus Ecclesiae as being contrary to evangelical poverty.

Another example: prayer. The exigencies of the Gospel with regard to prayer are, quite clearly, the same for all Christians. The Rule simply reminds us of them. But it is normal that the monk, who lives in the presence of God and for him alone, should consecrate a greater part of his time to prayer, and especially if he is a cenobite to a public expression of his prayer in union with his brethren. The Rule teaches him how to establish an organic unity between private and communal prayer. It also teaches him how to integrate times of communal prayer into the general framework of community life. This is the fundamental cenobitic attitude which the Rule teaches us, and we will never be able fully to sound its depths.

In addition to all this, St Benedict describes the structure which these times of communal prayer should have, and he does this by means of a detailed juridical code. What he prescribed was based on the Roman liturgical customs of his day, and, obviously, he took into consideration the spiritual needs of his monks, their cultural level, and the rhythm of daily life in the Italian countryside during the sixth century. We can see that fidelity to the Rule of St Benedict cannot consist in slavishly copying these structures which are so closely bound to an historical context of the past. It consists, rather, in taking its spirit so that we can, in our turn, express our common experience of the Mystery of Christ through our worship, taking into consideration the theological mentality and the liturgical tradition of our twentieth-century Church. It will mean also taking into consideration our own particular spiritual needs as influenced by our sociological and psychological context, and thus arrive at the rhythm of life of an authentic contemporary monasticism.

The task of reinterpretation of the Rule and of monastic renewal which has the contours I have just described cannot be the work of theorists. It ought to spring from the spiritual experience of the monastic orders and communities themselves. And to pursue such a work what we need above all is persons of spiritual greatness, charismatic men and women who know how to breathe a new dynamism into the monastic orders. Structural reforms are often necessary, sometimes to favor the flowering of charisms, sometimes for preserving the fruits of these charism. But the monastic history shows us that a juridical reform remains fruitless unless it receives its lifebreath from the Holy Spirit.

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[1] published in : The Cistercian Spirit. A Symposium in Memory of Thomas Merton, edited by M. Basil Pennington, Spencer 1970, pp. 48-65.

[1] Minutes of the Sessions of the Sixtieth General Chapter: Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Dubuque, Iowa: Regional Conference, U.S.A., 1967), p. 102.

[2] . B. Lonergan, "Theology in its new context" in Theology of Renewal, Vol. I (Montreal, 1968), pp. 37f.

[3] Here I have used as my basis M. Löhrer, "Überlegungen zur Interpretation lehramtlicher Aussagen als Frage des ökumenischen Gesprächs" in Gott in Welt (Freiburg-Basel-Vienna, 1964), pp. 499-523.

[4] Cf. G. Krüger, Freiheit und Weltverantwortung (Freiburg, 1958).

[5] Cf. M. Heidegger, Sein und Zeit (Berlin, 1926).

[6] Cf. H. G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode (Tübingen, 1960).

[7] I explained this in detail in my article "The Abbatial Office in Cenobitic Life" in Monastic Studies, no. 6 (1968), pp. 3-45.

[8] . See J. Hourlier, "La Règle de St Benoît, source du droit monastique" in Etudes d'histoire du Droit Canonique (Paris. Aubier,

Document extrait du [site de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont](#), qui se trouve sur le territoire de Forges, à sept kilomètres au sud de la ville de Chimay, en Belgique. Notre-Dame de Scourmont est une abbaye de l'Ordre Cistercien de la Stricte Observance.

1967), pp. 157-168.

[9] . J. Jomier, Introduction à l'Islam actuel (Paris, 1964), pp. 29f.

[10] Ibid., p. 194.