ARE WE CONTEMPLATIVES? WHAT IS OUR FUTURE?

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The Proceedings of the American Benedictine Academy, August, 1990 (The A.B.A., 1991)

The title of this presentation, was intended to set our collective teeth on edge. Few terms from the great treasury of Christian mystical tradition have been so badly abused as "contemplation" and "the contemplative life". These precious concepts - part of our deepest heritage as monastics - have become a cause of division and even scandal in modern times. Words which point to Christ's gift of intimacy and union with the Father have in the recent past been twisted into weapons of war: war between members of rival orders, each claiming a higher place in the estimation of the Church or God; war between rival members of the same order struggling to claim a sort of spiritual "high ground"; and finally, and perhaps most tragically, a "cold" war of ongoing separation between members of religious institutes on the one hand and the laity on the other.

What then do Christians - or should they - mean when they use the terms "contemplation" or "contemplative life"?

Preliminary Definitions

The Latin word *contemplatio* is a translation of the Greek *theoria*. In the Christian Scriptures *theoria* and its verb form *theorein* are not part of a specifically mystical vocabulary. They generally refer to "seeing" or "vision" in the ordinary sense.[1] In the writings of Plato, however, *theoria* often refers to a more exalted kind of seeing - an experience of "beholding" the truer world of the Forms which lies beyond the limited, material world. *Theoria* is an act of "gazing", "beholding", which is also a participation in the reality which is seen. *Theoria* connotes communion with "The One" who lies beyond even the realm of the Forms. The notion of life devoted principally or exclusively to *theoria* is found also in Aristotle, who extolled the contemplative life (*bios theoretikos*) as the highest life possible for human beings.[2]

The Alexandrian Christians, especially Clement of Alexandria and Origen, adopted Plato's categories[3] and extolled contemplation as an experience of communion with God. In the late fourth century the *vita contemplativa* implied for Augustine and his contemporaries the *otium*, or leisure for philosophical reflection, extolled by pagan poets and philosophers.[4] Much later, during the Aristotelian revival of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, theologians went to great lengths to harmonize Aristotle's concept of contemplative life with developing theories of monastic and religious life.

It must be borne in mind, however, that for Plato contemplation represents a movement beyond - not into - created reality. Even more for the Middle- and Neo-Platonists[5] than for Plato himself, the material world is not a reflection of God's glory to be savored; rather, it is a deceptive mirage to be transcended.[6] The Christian conviction that God's act of creation was an expression of God's love is hard to reconcile with later platonic thought. Even more problematic (from the Platonist's perspective) is the doctrine of the resurrection which implies that the redemption won by Christ will ultimately embrace and transform (not transcend!) the whole material creation.

The use of the terms "contemplative" and "contemplative life" as polemical weapons had already begun in the late medieval period;[7] however in the sixteenth century this trend accelerated. The Carmelite reform of St. Teresa of Avila emphasized both cloister and contemplation. Later interpreters of the writings of both St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross would, in general, use the word "contemplative" in one or both of the following senses:

(1) a strict monastic reform emphasizing separation from "the world";

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[1] The Gospel of John may represent an exception to this generalization, however the question is disputed by biblical scholars - See "Appendix I: Johannine Vocabulary" pp. 501-503 in Brown, R. *The Gospel According to John* (Doubleday, 1966).

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, ch.s 7 & 8.

[3] Plato's original insights had by this time been modified by the Middle Platonists such as Philo, the Neoplatonist "founder" Plotinus, and schools influences by Aristotle, such as the stoics.

[4] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IX, ch.s 3-12

[5] The Jew Philo, as well as Christians such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen who wrote before Plotinus, represent the "Middle Platonist" tradition; the Neo-Platonists are represented by the pagans Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus, as well as those who sought to Christianize their ideas (i.e. Pseudo-Dionysius).

[6] As, for example, in the parable of the caves in Plato's *Republic*

[7] Aquinas implied that the Dominicans represent the highest possible form of religious life, higher even than enclosed monastics, since they are rooted in contemplation and also carry the fruit of their contemplation out to the people of God through preaching (*Summa Theologiae II IIae*, 182:1-3).

(2) a form of wordless, imageless communion with God, regarded as higher or more advanced than liturgical prayer, vocal prayer or "spiritual reading"[8]

The concepts "contemplative" and "strictly enclosed" somehow became synonymous; or at least it was popularly thought that strict enclosure within a monastery was a necessary precondition for contemplation. The fact that such famous masters of the contemplative life as Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bernard (to say nothing of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross!) led lives that were anything but placid and enclosed did not change this facile equation.

Even more problematic than the equation of "contemplative" and "strictly enclosed" was the belief that advance in the spiritual life entails a progressive disappearance of prayer in which images and words play a prominent part. Various forms of imageless, wordless prayer were widely held to be superior to "spiritual reading" or "vocal prayer". Here again, the writings of Saints Augustine, Gregory the Great, Hildegard, Gertrude, and Bernard, seem to have been either forgotten, selectively edited and purged, or largely ignored. For all of these saints liturgical prayer and *lectio divina* are the principal focus of the Christian contemplative. In this older monastic tradition *contemplatio* understood as prayer without words or images is part of the rhythm of both the liturgy and *lectio divina*: but it is not necessarily the goal or even the highest expression of such prayer. For these saints and their successors the liturgy and *lectio divina* remained the mainstay of prayer until death, and were never to be "transcended".[9]

Since the Reformation this problematic use of the Christian mystical vocabulary has proven especially painful for monastics. During the restoration of the English Benedictine Congregation in the seventeenth century Dom Augustine Baker was challenged repeatedly concerning the doctrine on "mental prayer" which he taught to the nuns at Cambrai (later to become the community at Stanbrook). Baker advocated a more gentle, less structured approach to meditation and prayer than was common among (non-monastic) spiritual directors in his day. Additionally, there was controversy over the question whether the monastics of the English Benedictine Congregation even had the right to refer to themselves as "contemplatives": the monks in particular were deemed too actively committed to the English Mission. Baker defended his congregation's right to this appellation in his doctrine on mental prayer.

Unfortunately, monastics, too, fell into the trap of creating or accepting a hierarchy among religious orders defined either by cloister, preferred prayer-method, or both. Thus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Benedictine Missionary Congregation of St. Ottilien struggled for recognition as "monks" as opposed to "oblates" over the objections of members of the Benedictine Confederation who proclaimed loudly that missionaries by their nature cannot be true monastics (the examples of Saints Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface, Wilfrid, Lioba, and others apparently notwithstanding). Similarly, nineteenth-century Benedictine women in America who acquiesced to their local bishops' desires for apostolic Benedictines subsequently found themselves deprived of the title *moniales* and plunged into a crisis of identity.

And in our own day monastics continue to vilify one another by proclaiming each other's congregations "merely apostolic" or "insufficiently contemplative". at Sant' Anselmo, for example, a monk of a European congregation which shall remain nameless recently requested that the assembled Benedictine scholastics of the world acknowledge the "obvious fact" that in contrast to the authentic monastic practice of Europe, there are no true Benedictine monks in North America - merely Benedictine oblates who call themselves monks.

This elitist and divisive use of the terms "contemplation" and "contemplative life" is linked to a theology and spirituality which seeks to exalt and practise the "highest" and "most perfect" form of prayer. This use of superlatives in describing experiences of prayer should probably be used only with great caution, if at all.

However we face today not only an elitist and divisive misuse of the contemplative tradition, but also a tendency in the opposite direction: the language of contemplation is in danger of becoming trivialized and utterly banal. Our contemporary fascination with the mystical and the occult is being answered by cheap, mass-media approaches to "deep prayer". If advertisements are to be believed, one can learn contemplative prayer by listening to the right cassette tapes (with soothing musical accompaniment) or watching the right videos. The question "shall we practice contemplative prayer?" has become for some as frivolous as "shall we do sushi or cappucino?"

A Reappraisal of Contemplation

[8] It is not at all clear that the "spiritual reading" which St. Teresa advises one to set aside as one makes progress in prayer is the same as traditional monastic *lectio divina*.

[9] St. Bede, for example, prepared for death by continuing to dictate his commentary on St. John's Gospel [Cuthbert of Jarrow's *Letter to Cuthwin*; quoted in full in *A History of the English Church & People*, tr. Shirley-Price (Penguin, 1965) pp.18-21]. Similarly, St. Lioba regularly invited her spiritual daughters to assist her in continuing her *lectio divina* even as she napped or prepared for sleep [*The Life of Leoba*, tr. C.H. Talbot in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (Sheed & Ward, 1954) pp. 211 & 215].

It would seem that the language of contemplation is in danger of being emptied of any positive meaning. If it is desired to rediscover what the great monastic tradition has meant by these terms, then it is important to ask first, in light of contemporary misuse, what contemplation is **not**.

First - the term "contemplation" does not refer solely to a form of prayer in which words and images are set aside in order to experience the God who transcends words and images.

Second - contemplation is not a mental or spiritual state to be achieved and maintained; it is not solely or even primarily a means of getting out of or beyond a world characterized by limitation and suffering.

Third - One is not a "contemplative" by virtue of adopting a particular form of monastic enclosure. This needs to be taken a step further: contemplation and community are in no sense mutually exclusive terms. As Benedictines we should not accept the facile (albeit venerable) notion that contemplation is the special craft and occupation of the hermit: one need not inhabit a hermit's cell or live behind a cloister with an electrified fence in order to be a contemplative.

These three negative assertions will provide a background against which to recover an authentic monastic understanding of Christian contemplation. In order to do this we turn now to three literary icons taken from the early monastic tradition.[10]

The Life of Pelagia

A striking image of the balanced monastic contemplative is found in the character of Nonnus the monk-bishop in *The Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot*. The setting for the vignette which follows is an open-air synod of learned bishops in the city of Antioch in the mid-fourth century.

> **(2)** When we were seated the bishops asked my lord Nonnus to speak to them, and at once the holy bishop began to speak words for the edification and salvation of all. Now when we were marvelling at his holy teaching, lo suddenly there came among us the chief actress of Antioch, the first in the chorus of the theatre, sitting on a donkey.
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> She was dressed in the height of fantasy, wearing nothing but gold, pearls, and precious stones, even her bare feet were covered with gold and pearls. With her went a great throng of boys and girls all dressed in cloth of gold with collars of gold on their necks, going before and following her.
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> So great was her beauty that all the ages of mankind could never come to the end of it. So they passed through our company, filling the air with traces of music and the most sweet smell of perfume.[11]

The profession of actor or actress is no longer as emotionally-charged as it was in antiquity. In the ancient world thespians were presumed to be persons of loose morals; and her public display made it clear to all that Pelagia was both a performer and a courtesan. As Peter Brown has recently pointed out, sexual renunciation and virginity had become powerful symbols of the early Christian Church's sense of self-identification.[12] Thus Pelagia represented the very antithesis of conventional Christian morality. In light of this, Nonnus' response to her display is fascinating:

> When the bishops saw her bare-headed and with all her limbs shamelessly exposed with such lavish display, there was not one who did not hide his face in his veil or his scapular, **averting their eyes as if from a very great sin.**
>
> **(3)** But the most blessed Nonnus gazed after her very intently for a long space of time, and after she had gone by he turned round and still gazed after her.

Nonnus did not hide his face as if ashamed for Pelagia. He stared, as we shall see, "with delight" at the beautiful woman whom God had made and whose beauty spoke to him of God. And he was not embarrassed by his response to Pelagia: on the contrary, he challenged his episcopal colleagues concerning their own reactions:

> When he turned towards the bishops sitting round him and said, **"Were you not delighted by such great beauty?"** When they did not reply, he buried his face on his knees over the holy Bible which he held in his hands and all his emotions came out in tears; sighing deeply he said again to the bishops, **"Were you not delighted by her great beauty?"** Still they did not answer, so **"Indeed", he said, "I was very greatly delighted and her beauty pleased me very much.** See, God will place her before his awful and

[10] The concept of a "literary icon" is an important feature of the mystical tradition of the Christian West. Whereas Eastern Christianity came to focus on the spiritual significance of the painted icon, Western mystics have often preferred the medium of words and story. The spiritual exegesis of Scripture - allegorical commentary on The Word - has been the principal medium to describe the interior journey of the Christian in the Latin-speaking West.

[11] "Pelagia, Beauty Riding By" in *Harlots of the Desert*, tr. Sr. Benedicta Ward, *S.L.G.* (Kalamazoo, 1986)

[12] Brown, P., *The Body and Society* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), pp 60. *ff.*

> tremendous judgement seat and he will judge her on her gifts, just as he will judge us on our episcopal calling."

For Nonnus, Pelagia, like any other beautiful part of God's creation, was a reminder of God's glory and of our responsibility as stewards of creation. But Pelagia was not merely a symbol to Nonnus: she was a person who, like all of us, had made choices concerning her talents and gifts. Instead of focusing on the problematic nature of her choices, Nonnus called his brethren's attention to their own spiritual state:

> And he went on to say to the bishops, "What do you think, beloved brothers, how many hours does this woman spend in her chamber giving all her mind and attention to adorning herself for the play., in order to lack nothing in beauty and adornment of the body; she wants to please all those who see her, lest those who are her lovers today find her ugly and do not come back tomorrow.
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> Here we are, who have an almighty Father in heaven offering us heavenly gifts and rewards, our immortal bridegroom, who promises good things to his watchman, things that cannot be valued which eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to know what things God has prepared for those who love him' (I Cor.2.9).
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> What else can I say? when we have such promises, when we are going to see the great and glorious face of our Bridegroom which has a beauty beyond compare, 'upon which the cherubim do not dare to gaze' (I Pet.1.12), why do we not adorn ourselves and wash the dirt from our unhappy souls, why do we let ourselves lie so neglected?"

Nonnus' reaction to Pelagia is a vivid example of what Evagrius of Pontus called *theoria physike*, the contemplation of God in creation. In this mode of experiencing God, images, words, history, the intellect - in Platonic language "The Many" - predominate. It is nourished and sustained by the *pratike*, the ascetical project of seeing clearly who we are in the sight of God, and cooperating with God in the work of being remade in His image. *Theoria physike* itself leads into *theologia*, the experience of God ("The One") "in Himself" beyond words or images. Thus in ancient monastic vocabulary the term "contemplation" embraced both a "beholding" of God which delights in words, images, and story, and an experience of being led into the nuptial embrace of a lover who transcends our ability to describe him.

Using language drawn from the writings of Dionysius the Aereopagite, the Western tradition came to refer to these two aspects of contemplative experience as "illumination" and "union". However, the wisdom of the early monastic tradition, unlike many later authors, knew clearly that these different modes of contemplation are not merely stages in a linear progression: they are, rather, poles of an ongoing rhythm of prayer and communion with God. One does not simply "progress" from the contemplation of God in nature towards the imageless, wordless experience of *theologia*: rather, both experiences nourish and sustain each other. These experiences of contemplation are themselves in turn nourished by and lead back into the ascetical project of the *praktike*. This is clear in the writings of Evagrius[13] as well as in the somewhat deceptive metaphor of the "ladder" used by such masters of the spiritual life as St. Benedict and St. Aelred.[14]

It is probably no accident that Nonnus' opportunity to discourse on Pelagia's natural beauty occurred during his exegesis of the Scriptures. The practice of *lectio divina* - the discovery of God behind the text of the Scriptures - was regarded by Evagrius and Cassian as a central part of the art of *theoria physike*. *Lectio divina* is itself a rhythm of prayer and discovery of God, both in our depths and in the depths of the sacred text. The word "contemplation" was often used by early monastic authors to describe the discovery of the deeper "mystical" meaning of texts of the Scripture or of the liturgy.[15] Thus the term "contemplation" as used by these writers referred not to a single experience or "state", but rather to an ongoing rhythm of prayer in which words and silence, images and darkness, private devotion and liturgical praise, alternately play their part in deepening our sense of relationship with God.

The Prologue to the Rule

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[13] In the *Praktikos* Evagrius does write in places as if one progresses to *apatheia* through the *praktike*, thence in a linear fashion into *theoria physike*, finally achieving *theologia*. However, in his *Chapters on Prayer* he makes it is clear that the inner journey to God is much more complex and rhythmic than a cursory reading of the *Praktikos* might suggest.

[14] Benedict deliberately (it would seem) modified the ladder of humility (*RB* 7) he inherited from the Master and Cassian. He transformed the Master's simple stepwise progression, beginning in fear and ending in love, into a circle or perhaps better, a helix, by inserting love (the goal of the "ladder") at the third step.

At the end of his *Spiritual Friendship* (ch. 127) Aelred spoke of the joy of both spiritual ascent into the embrace of God and descent back into relationship with one's brethren. In both Benedict's and Aelred's "ladders" the inner spiritual journey of the Christian is presented more as an oscillating rhythm than a simple progression from one "state" or "stage" to another

[15] For example: Gregory of Nyssa uses "contemplation" to refer to the allegorical or mystical sense of the Scriptures in the *Life of Moses*; Dionysius the Aereopagite does the same with regard to the Liturgy in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, as does Maximus Confessor in his commentaries on the liturgy.

In the Rule of Benedict and the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great another important element in the monastic understanding of contemplation is introduced, one which tends to be neglected today - the role of community.

There is no chapter of Benedict's Rule which is particularly devoted to the "practice" of contemplation. This subject in all its richness and variety is discussed in detail in *The Rules* of Basil and the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of Cassian, to which Benedict specifically referred his disciples; so perhaps such a discussion in Benedict's Rule would have seemed redundant. But Benedict seems to have gone a step further: he completely avoided the use of the noun *contemplatio* or the verb *contemplare*, words used frequently by sources on which he depended. Thus in Benedict's Rule there is no monastic activity particularly associated with contemplation. This leaves open the possibility that for the Benedictine monastic, the art of contemplation is to be practiced in all aspects of monastic life, especially in most down-to-earth and prosaic experiences of community living. And, in fact, it is in his descriptions of how to deepen in union with God **through** the struggles of community life that Benedict uses imagery and vocabulary reminiscent of the contemplative language of his contemporaries and predecessors.

Following the Master, it is at the end of his chapter on the tools of good works, a chapter which could easily have been titled "the art of living together" that Benedict speaks of the glory "which eye has not seen nor ear heard" (*RB* 4.77). And similarly, the experience of being led "towards God and towards life eternal" occurs not only in the Divine Office and in *lectio divina*, but even more vividly through growth in that good zeal which is precisely the craft of showing God's patience and compassion to each other. (*RB* 72)

But it is in the Prologue that Benedict uses his clearest metaphor of contemplative experience, that of the "expanded heart". This same image was used later by Gregory the Great to describe the mind "enlarged and expanded in God through the vision of [this] light ... absorbed in God"[16] It is essential to note that Benedict uses dynamic language to describe the expanded heart: "As we **progress** ... we shall **run** ... **never swerving**" (*RB* Prol 49-50). And his use of contemplative metaphor is not only dynamic - full of the imagery of motion and change - it is communal. He makes it clear that for the cenobite the contemplative journey is not a solitary one; as Benedictines we journey together towards God: "We intend, therefore, to establish a **school of the Lord's service**... **we** progress ... **our** hearts overflowing ... **we** shall run ... **we** shall share". (*RB* Prol 45-50)

[16] *Dialogues* 35.6: *ipsa luce visionis intimae mentis laxatur sinus, tantumque expanditur in Deo ... in Deo raptus.*

Thus for the Benedictine monastic contemplation is a rhythm of prayer touching and charging with God's presence every aspect of monastic life. It is a journey which we make together in community - a journey which expands the heart. The language of the *Prologue* invites the monastic to see in community life an opportunity for a contemplative growth which is a real participation in the Paschal mystery, touching as it does both the sweetness and joy of our journey together as well as the ability to accept with patience the limitations and pain which community also imposes.

The Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great

Both the role of the community in contemplation and the dangers of equating strict enclosure with "the contemplative life" are effectively depicted in chapters 33 to 35 of the Fourth Book of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, the penultimate chapters on the life of Benedict.

In chapter 35 Benedict is depicted as a model for monastic contemplatives:

> Long before the night office began, the man of God was standing at his window, where he watched and prayed while the rest were still asleep. In the dead of night **he suddenly beheld a flood of light shining down from above more brilliant than the sun, and with it every trace of darkness cleared away.**
>
> Another remarkable sight followed. According to his own description, **the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light.**[17]

In this chapter Benedict is depicted as an archetype of the contemplative.[18] He has beheld all of creation in the light of God. St. Gregory goes on to explain that this vision is a consequence of allowing one's heart and mind to be enlarged, expanded by God:

> [Gregory:] Keep this well in mind, Peter. All creation is bound to appear small to a soul that sees the Creator. Once it beholds a little of His light, it finds all creatures small indeed. **The holy light of contemplation enlarges and expends the mind in God** until it stands above the world. In fact, the soul that sees Him **rises even above itself**, and as **it is drawn**

[17] *Dialogues*, Book 4, 35:2-3. English translation in *St. Gregory the Great: Fathers of the Church* (tr. Odo Zimmerman, O.S.B.; Cath. Univ. of America Press. 1959) Book IV, ch.s 33-35.

[18] Gregory's depiction of Benedict was later used in the Christian East by Gregory Pallamas as a symbol of the inner transformation "beholding the light of Tabor" which is experienced by the Hesychast, the practitioner of ceaseless repetition of the Jesus Prayer.

upward in His light all its inner powers unfold.[19]

Adalbert de Vogue has pointed out that this image of Benedict as monastic contemplative must be appreciated in light of the chapters which immediately precede it. The expanding and illuminating of Benedict's heart is preceded by his encounter with Scholastica, a meeting which definitively puts an end to Benedict's "miracles of power".[20] Scholastica challenged Benedict's insistence on keeping the rule of strict enclosure, demanding instead that they be permitted to continue their *conloquia sacra*; and in God's judgement it was she "who loved more [and] could do more". Hers was the greater love; and it was only after being humbled by his loving sister that Benedict's heart became sufficiently permeable to bear the light of God in the tower at Monte Cassino.

In this literary diptych, displaying Scholastica's loving triumph on one panel and Benedict rapt in vision on the other, contemplation is depicted as an "opening" of the heart to God, an "enlarging" which God accomplishes in us by teaching us (sometimes through our necessary defeat) what it means to love truly.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the vocabulary of Evagrius and the examples of Nonnus and Pelagia we have seen that in the early monastic tradition, the term "contemplation" described both imageless, wordless union with God as well as the experience of seeing God in the beauty of creation. In the Prologue to the Rule and in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great contemplation is depicted as a journey which expands the heart, which we make together in community. It is a journey of deepening in prayer not defined or bound by monastic enclosure, which both begins and ends in our learning to love.

Thus the answer to the first question posed by the title of this presentation is obvious: as Benedictines seeking recover our ancient heritage we are certainly contemplatives. But we are not contemplatives in a narrow, modern sense. Contemplation is not a "state" of prayer to be achieved through technique or environment: it is a rhythm of prayer which should progressively come to include the whole of our monastic *conversatio*, our way of life.

And what of our future? If it is true that the early monastic tradition offers us a deeper and more balanced insight into the language and experience of contemplation than is common in our day, then part of our future task must certainly be to find new ways of sharing this heritage with others. Monastics must find new ways of helping others to discover and deepen in that rhythm of prayer, that gentle oscillation back and forth between the poles of *theologia* and *theoria physike*, which is what we understand contemplation to be. Sharing with others practical aspects of our lifestyles as monastics can be an important place to start.

One element which monastics often take for granted is our tradition of a gentle, alternating rhythm of silence and speech. We overlook the fact that our tradition of a balanced flow back and forth between times of silence and periods of speech provides a useful corrective to much current "pop" spirituality. The popular religious media abound in techniques for achieving exterior and interior silence: usually these practices are couched in the language of "higher" or "deeper" prayer. But very few authors or teachers emphasize methods of carrying the experience of silence back into the world of speech; nor do they speak of how the journey into silence can be undertaken without demeaning the world of speech and activity. Our tradition respects both poles, and our natural movement between them is something we must learn to share with those who wish to learn from us.

Two other areas where the "contemplative rhythm" of monastic life is experienced are the Divine Office and *lectio divina*. We should quite openly discuss with guests and others our reasons for reintroducing the silent pauses between the psalms of the Office. The alternating rhythm of *oratio* and *psalmodia* which Benedict described in chapters 19 and 20 of the Rule is simply the liturgical reflection of a deeper insight into the dynamic, rhythmic nature of our whole spiritual lives. Similarly, the "steps" or "stages" of *lectio divina* are poles of contemplative experience between which we move in our discovery of God in the Scriptures. The Divine Office and *lectio divina* are not merely "aids" or "preparations" for contemplation: for the Benedictine monastic they are precisely the locus and matrix in which the experience of contemplative prayer takes place.

Monastics must not be self-conscious or embarrassed to speak frankly about the seemingly simple or even primitive ways in which the rhythm of prayer at the Office and in *lectio* is prolonged in the workplace. Our *meditatio* as we work may be as simple as the quiet repetition of a text which has particularly struck us; or we may gently recite to ourselves psalms which we have unconsciously committed to memory. These are time-honored practices analogous to the (now quite popular) Hesychastic tradition of the Christian East. We should apply to this ancient practice our contemporary theological language of consecration and the Royal Priesthood: these

[19] *Dialogues*, Book 4, 35:6.

[20] De Vogue, A. "The Meeting of Benedict and Scholastica: An Interpretation" *Cistercian Studies* XVIII:3 (1983), pp. 178 ff.

monologistic prayers are quite literally ways of offering ourselves and our surroundings into the embrace of God; and we should be quite willing to share this experience with others.

Finally, both the Rule and Gregory's depiction of the last days of Benedict remind us of the interpersonal and communal dimensions of our growth in union with God. As it was with Benedict and Scholastica, so it is with us: through *sacra conloquia* in the context of friendship, recreation, even community meetings, our hearts are being opened and prepared for the transforming light of God. In a culture addicted to self-sufficiency and independence, we Benedictines acknowledge our dependence on one another for growth at our deepest and most vulnerable levels - our sense of intimacy with God.

We are contemplatives. Let our future then be what are past has always been: to share with the whole People of God the riches with which God has blessed us.