Exordium

UNIT TEN

COMMUNION

Communion

This unit attempts to survey the hidden dynamics of the Cistercian reform: the desire for greater conformity with Christ, expressed in the pursuit of contemplation and the practice of affective community.

Objectives

a) To investigate the theme of the imitation of Christ and its effect on early Cistercian philosophy..

b) To appreciate the contemplative orientation of the first Cistercians and its subsequent development: the monastery as *schola contemplationis.*

To explore the communitarian values expressed in fraternity and in the practice of hospitality: the monastery as *schola dilectionis*.

COMMUNION

The first Cistercians were well-known for their distinctiveness of lifestyle and the separateness involved in living "far from human habitation". Beneath this surface insistence on particular external forms, however, was a hidden pursuit of radical discipleship of Christ and fidelity to the Gospel. In the light of this, it is important to recognise the priority given to spiritual — as distinct from organisational — goals: seeking union with God, unity in the community, unanimity within the Order, communion with the universal Church and a sense of being at-one with the All.

1. Imitation of Christ

Following Christ by responding to his call and imitating his example are important themes in the New Testament presentation of Christian discipleship. In the early patristic period, the themes became linked as the central component of the process of divinisation. The divine potential present in each human being, created in God's image, is brought to reality by an increasingly close associated with the incarnate Word. Various stages of this dynamic continuum can be artificially distinguished thus:

1. **Following:** = Implementing Christ's teaching, *doing what Christ says*.
2. **Imitation:** = Being inspired by Christ's example: *doing what Christ does*.
3. **Likeness:** = Active conformity to Christ, assuming a Christlike identity: *being what Christ is*.
4. **Participation:** Sharing in Christ's subjectivity through transforming grace: *being in Christ*.

Within the theme of the imitation of Christ, different accents are discernible. The Greek Fathers commonly spoke about imitating Christ's divinity, and eastern monasticism placed special emphasis on renunciation, asceticism and transcendence of the merely human. In the west, there more attention was paid to the earthly mysteries of Jesus, progressely a Christocentric devotion developed and benedictine monasticism was characterised by a certain *humanitas*.

A Double Imitation

[For Augustine] monks and nuns were seen in particular as followers of Christ's humanity and the example of His earthly life, but they also modelled themselves on other exemplars [the saints]. For Basil, monks imitated on earth the hymns of the angels and their life was often described as angelic.

G. Constable, *Three Studies*, p. 175.

The theme of imitation of Christ, as it occurs in the Rule of Benedict, seems dependent on the spirituality of martyrdom. References to this idea occur mainly in the context of renunciation and other negative aspects of monastic living. The Prologue provides the theological framing of the life of the *coenobium* and gives it a strong Christological cast, that is less explicit in the practical sections of the Rule. In the Prologue Benedict sees Christ seeking us, calling us, and showing us the way (12-20); we

are told that the Lord waits for us (35) and works in us (29-30, see also 7.70, 28.5). The words of the Gospel are frequently quoted for our guidance — especially in difficult situations (7.42). Overt references to the theme of imitation occur at regular intervals.

Prol 50 By **participating** in the passion of Christ by patience we may be worthy to be sharers in his kingdom.

2.2 The abbot is to act as a **stand-in** (*vices*) for Christ.

4.10 To deny oneself to oneself to **follow** Christ — followed by a series of practical implementations of this principle.

5.10 **Imitating** the Lord's saying: "I did not come to do my own will but that of him who sent me."

7.32 **Imitating** through deeds that saying of the Lord: "I did not come to do my own will but that of him who sent me."

7.34 **Imitating** the Lord's obedience.

27.8 The abbot is to **imitate** the loving example of the good Shepherd in his care for errant brothers.

64.4 The abbot is to act as a **stand-in** (*vices*) for Christ

By the eleventh century, personal devotion to the humanity of Christ became passionate and the earthly career of Jesus was held up for the meditation of all as a source of guidance in living a holy life that led towards God. Peter Damian, the monastic reformer clearly spelled out the principle:"Clearly the life our Saviour led in the flesh, not less than the proclamation of the Gospel, is proposed to us as a line of the discipline to be observed" (Ep 4.9). Our monastic life is meant to be a re-embodiment of the life of Jesus — especially in its poverty and separation from secular gratifications. "**We ought to be poor, following the poor Christ**: *pauperem Christi pauperes sequi debemus*" (PL 145, 179-180), a phrase modelled on the traditional axiom perhaps deriving from Jerome's Ep. 52.5: *Nudus nudum Christum sequi* (Naked to follow the naked Christ). See DSp 11, col. 509-513. Moreover, the devotedness inherent in identification with Christ was considered more important than the virtue that is imitated.

Christ in Us

It is a great thing to leave everything,
but it is greater to follow Christ.

Our life here will be like a vigil for the final resurrection,
the true Passover,
on condition that we

- bridle the onrush of the flesh,
- drive depraved thoughts from the heart,
- take up the cross after Jesus by self-affliction,
- try to spare those who offend us,
- come to the help of those in need,
- speak the truth from our mouth,
- maintain genuine love in the heart,
- not give ourselves to long conversations,
- not pay attention to idle words,
- not desire earthly realities,
- not become involved in worldly affairs, but
- strive to offer pure prayers to God every day and
- always delight to hear God's word with all the feeling of our hearts, so that
  - Christ may be heard in our speaking,
  - Christ may be seen in our lives,
  - Christ may be in our hearts, and
  - Christ may be in our words.

Peter Damian, Sermon 9: For the Vigil of St Benedict, PL 144: 549,548

It is in the context of the *imitatio Christi* that the reform movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries must be located. There was, certainly, an element of disgust at the high level of ecclesiastical indiscipline and self-indulgence, but the inner dynamism of the drive for renewal was less external probity than spiritual revival. The rhetoric was directed to visible abuses, but the inward passion was for spiritual experience. The purpose of the negative observances is the extinction of selfishness so that the level of our inconsistency with Christ may be progressively reduced and we may anticipate somewhat our eschatological state when Christ will be all in all.

Hugh of Lyon attributed to the Founders the title of honour adopted by many of the reform movements of the eleventh century: *pauperes Christi* — "the poor of Christ" (EP 12.8, EC 2.8). The self-description given by the first-generation Cistercians echoes this: "the new soldiers of Christ, **poor with the poor Christ**" (EP 15.9, EC 1.9) and the New Monastery itself was described as the *schola Christi* (EP 17.2), where many eventually arrived to submit themselves "to the sweet yoke of Christ" (EP 17.12). The *Exordium Cistercii* interprets the initial difficulties of the foundation as typical of "all who wish to live in Christ" (EC 1.8). Ordericus Vitalis attributes to Robert the words, "Let us sweat to run fervently after Christ, following the footsteps of the Fathers"

Christ who was rich became poor for our sake and gave us the command of voluntary poverty. He deigned to give us in himself a model of this poverty William of St Thierry, *Golden Epistle*, 160.

There seems little evidence to doubt that the first Cistercians were hoping, by this closer identification with Christ through renunciation, to lay the foundations for a more intense spiritual life. "They chose to be occupied with heavenly pursuits rather than to be entangled in earthly affairs" (EC 1.4). As William of Malmsbury notes, the lifestyle at Molesme, with its accumulation of resources and excessive food had a stifling effect on spiritual energies, even when such abuses were resisted. Bernard claims the more austere life as a necessary medicine for sick souls, not the boastful self-promotion of the strong. "I am an unspiritual man, sold under sin. I knew that my soul was so weak as to require a stronger medicine" (Apo 7).[1] Changes in observance were not mere matters of principle or politics, they were considered to be means at the service of a more fervent monastic life, a fuller discipleship and closer union with God. The imitation of Christ is not sought for its own sake, but as a means "to light the fire of love for the Bridegroom". (John of Forde, SC 100.2) The same thought occurs to the Carthusian, Guigo II. "Imitation proceeds from love. We all wish to imitate one whom we love. If you do not love Christ you will not imitate him, that is, you will not follow him." (*Meditation* 10. 100-102)

Heavenly Father, keep before us the wisdom and love you have revealed in your Son; help us to be like him in word and deed. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.
Seventh Sunday of the Year

2. The New Consciousness

The search for poverty and non-involvement in secular cares, typical of reformist monasticism in the eleventh and twelfth century was not driven simply by disgust at conventional monasteries. It was also the result of a general change in consciousness in which a higher value was placed on selfhood, subjectivity and personal experience. Many prospective monks were no longer attracted merely by the prospect of living a legitimate life in an established monastery, rendering objective service acceptable to God. They wanted to feel something. In a sense, in seeking God they hoped also to find themselves. "Self-knowledge was one of the dominant themes of the age. .. Equally widespread was the desire for self-expression. We hear the authentic voice of the individual, speaking of his own desires and

[1] Ordericus has the monks of Molesme reply, "A wise physician treats a sick man with a mild medicine, for fear that if he goads him with the pain of too drastic a remedy he may kill instead of curing him."

experiences" (Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200*, pp. 65-67). This sensitivity to subjective issues was not the same as contemporary "individualism", nor was it purchased at the price of sensitivity to others. Twelfth-century self-assertion remained in a corporate context; it was not tinged with alienation and rejection of social demands.

At Cluny suspicion of introspection and personal experience led to a pious collectivism that left no room for individual autonomy. In reaction to this excess, anarchic anchorites multiplied. Orders such as the Camaldolese, Grandmontines and Carthusians attempted an institutional form of eremitism. The Cistercians were less extreme. They continued with communal life, but in restoring what they perceived as the lost benedictine balance, they created a form of life that was attractive to their contemporaries. As recruits multiplied and persevered, their aspirations began to shape the lifestyle, giving more explicit emphasis to what had hitherto been implicit. Cistercian *conversatio* began to be marked by a more conscious contemplative orientation, on the one hand, and a greater attention to affectivity, on the other. It was a potent formula. Maybe it was not envisaged thus at the earliest stages of the reform, but there is no evidence of internal conflict or controversy. The basic elements of this "modern" approach are strongly discernible within the lifetime of Stephen — for example in the colloquies of Bernard and William of St Thierry on the Song of Songs, and in the content of style of the letters and treatise written by Bernard in the early 1120's .To infer continuity with the goals of the Founders is not beyond the limits of fair probability.

Imitation and Identification

Twelfth-century nuns or monks, canons or wandering preachers, defined themselves as imitators of Christ and the Apostles. And Christ was not, of course, a model of personal uniqueness. Christ was imitated not in that which makes him particular (e.g. his maleness) but in what is generalizable. The twelfth-century person affiliated with a group, converted to a Christian life, by adopting a model that simultaneously shaped both "outer man" (behavior) and "inner man" (soul). A pattern of behavior that was the same for all in the group defined the Christian life; to evangelize was to offer that pattern to others. The twelfth-century discovery of self or asssertion of the individual is therefore not our twentieth-century awareness of personality nor the modern assumption of a great gulf between role/model/exterior behavior and an inner core of the individual. The twelfth-century person did not "find himself' by casting off inhibiting patterns, but by adopting appropriate ones."

Adapted from Bynum, pp. 89-90

The achievement of the first generation of Cistercians had an effect far beyond their own ranks. This body of talented writers made explicit for their own century the spirituality inherent in traditional benedictine *conversatio*. Although many of the discussions and controversies seem concerned with details of outward observance, the real dynamism of the Cistercian movement was to be found in their exploration of the **inner face** of monasticism — how the living of the Rule was experienced by real monks and nuns, and its interface with their deepest aspirations. The Cistercians rode the wave of a growing interest in affectivity and relationship — both with God and with other human beings. The

"success" of the Cistercian enterprise was not a matter of superior dialectical skills and legalistic argument about the *minutiae* of living the Rule. It was about corresponding with the exigencies of an emergent self-consciousness. For potential recruits of the twelfth century, it was no longer sufficient to live, they wanted experience. The Cistercians revamped the daily routines of their monasteries to facilitate this experience of grace. And so their numbers increased.

> Given that the maturation into a stable experiential relationship with God as loving and lovable and the parallel reordering of relations with the neighbor is proposed by Bernard as the goal of spiritual progress . . . and that this goal is attained through ongoing experience of God, **the creation of optimum conditions for such experiences will obviously be a matter of great importance**. (B. Bonowitz, pp. 324-325; emphasis added.)

3. The Pursuit of Contemplation

The flowering of mystical teaching among the Cistercians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is an evident fact. The main features of the Cistercian school appear consistently in writers of the period, although there is also evidence of a development of doctrine. To what extent did Robert, Alberic and Stephen intend the New Monastery as a contemplative foundation, and if this were so what the means were proposed to assure the realisation of this ideal. Were the Founders limited to merely upgrading observance as an end in itself, or did they perceive benedictine *conversatio* as a step towards the realisation of a loftier spiritual goal?

A sound testimony to the way in which Cîteaux was perceived comes from a papal Bull addressed to Stephen and his successors by Innocent II on Wednesday 10 February 1132, dealing with various aspects of exemption. A week later a similar document was addressed to Clairvaux. The reason for the exemption from various ecclesiastical assemblies is forthright:

> **So that you may more freely attend to the divine services and, with the power of your mind purified, you may more sincerely give yourselves (*vacare*) to contemplation.**

The Bull was issued at Cluny and its contents were doubtlessly suggested by Stephen and Bernard. The reason they alleged for reduced involvement in the tittle-tattle of Church politics was the demands of the liturgical and contemplative life.

The *Vita* of Saint Peter of Jully (d. 1136), Stephen's companion on the journey to Rome and lifelong friend, refers to the foundation of Cîteaux in these words.

> At the same time, that blessed Peter had been sent by the abbot to stay at one of the cells that belonged to the abbey, it happened that the new plantation of Cîteaux, **which fled the tumult of the peoples and the whirlwind of the world and strove in the solitude to be free for God alone**, *soli Deo vacare*, was bereaved of its pastor. (PL 185, 1260a)

This late text remarks on two aspects of the Cistercian reform as it was viewed from within monasticism. Outwardly it was characterised by separation from the world; inwardly it was the pursuit of the contemplative life. The monks were struggling to be free only for God. The phrase *soli Deo*

vacare is reserved for those actively involved in striving for contemplation. A variant is used of Stephen, for example, after his resignation. (Herbert, *De Miraculis* 2,23) In the eyes of Peter's biographer the purpose of the Founders' withdrawal from Molesme into deeper solitude was the more effective living of the contemplative life,

Soli Deo Vacare

It is a matter of being in the presence of God alone, and consequently of two living together (*vivre à deux*): the soul and God. Saint Bernard says of the spouse, "She lives only for herself and for the Spouse whom she loves". This solitude is fullness. It is not a void or an absence. It consists in liberating the soul from all that attaches it to the world and so the soul is able to maintain this solitude even in a crowd. This teaching confirms that it is possible to reconcile the two meanings of the word "monk": to remain a solitary within community life. It s also possible in this life with God, alone with the Alone, to practise a universal love, since in God we are united with all that God knows, love and wishes to save.

J. Leclercq, *Études sur le vocabulaire monastique*, p. 30.

The connection between contemplative freedom and separation from the world referred to in both the above texts was frequently emphasised. Associated with this is the theme of *quies*. Jean Leclercq traces the development of the idea of "quietude" through profane and biblical sources to culminate in its use in the context of contemplation. In the twelfth century three related uses occur in the literature:

- Quies claustri = Separation from the world, appropriate observances and mutual service.
- Quies mentis = Silence, control of passions and inner peace.
- Quies contemplationis The effort to become still, contemplative repose and the anticipation of eternity

Much of our knowledge of Cistercian life in the twelfth century relates to high-profile abbots and the monks and laybrothers who were frequently out of the monastery for economic reasons or on ecclesiastical business. Important as was the work of these *officiales fratres*, we ought not to regard their busy lifestyles as typical of the vast majority of monks who remained in the monastery, the *claustrales*, of whose manner of daily existence we know relatively little.

Even while asserting that the fundamental orientation of primitive Cîteaux was contemplative, we ought to remember that the Cluniacs used to taunt the White monks with having assumed the role of Martha, who had left aside the "better part" of Mary in favour of manual work. Bernard himself refers to this idea in Apo 12. The Cluniacs claimed that labour an appropriate response to weakness in those who were "pusillanimous and defective in contemplation" (*Nouvelle réponse*, pp. 79-80). It was not appropriate for solid monks. The Cluniac in Idung of Prüfening's *Dialogue between a Cluniac and a*

Cistercian states this clearly. "As yours is an active order because you have chosen to do manual work with Martha, so ours is contemplative because we chose holy leisure with Mary" (1.5).

> If bodily works are to be preferred to spiritual exercises, then in no way would Mary have chosen to sit at the Lord's feet and ceaselessly to have listened to him while being unengaged in other works, nor would she have allowed her sister to minister alone, nor would the Lord have said that she had chosen the best part. Therefore if the soul's energies are occupied with prayer, reading, psalmody, the fulfilling of religious obligations and any other sort of good activity like this, surely we may say that the Rule is being fully kept. It can be verified that the monk thus engaged is not idle but appropriately busy in doing all these things.(Peter the Venerable, Ep 28.8)

There is not much truth in this polemical jibe, nor in the claim that there is no appropriate work available (Ep. 111, 10). The *Statutes* issued by Peter in 1146 seem to indicate that the absence of work did not lead to a more contemplative life.

> Within the cloisters or outside them, apart from a few who read and fewer who write, they sleep, leaning against the walls of the cloister. From the rising of the sun to its setting, indeed almost until the midnight, they waste their time in vain and idle words and what is worse, in detraction. And they escape unpunished. (Statute 39)

For the Cistercians the challenge remained to ensure that work did not displace prayer as the primary focus of the monastic day. Arnold of Bohéries exhorted monks to maintain mindfulness as they labour. (*Mirror of Monks*, 6)

> Going with others to work, one should be more concerned with why one has come to it than with what one does at it. When hands rest, mind should labour at prayer and meditation which, in any case, one should be doing during the work itself.

Work is an integral element of the contemplative life, and not a means of escaping its exigencies. Monastic work is not necessarily a distraction; it is intended to **contribute** to inner peace and community well-being in such a way that the ground is prepared for the advent of the *quies contemplationis*.

When you go to work, do what has to be done in such a way that your concern for the task at hand will not divert your mind from the things of God. (*Mirror of Novices* 11)

It has to be admitted that we do not find many references to the contemplative life in the primitive documents and in the writings of Stephen. The Founders seem more concerned with making into a reality their dream of a renewed monasticism. In most foundations it is the same. The material and economic demands immediate attention. As the community consolidates more leisure is possible and an explicitly contemplative spirituality develops.

There is, however, one significant indicator in the texts. The theme of *quies* occurs several times in the *Exordium Parvum*. Most of the occurrences are in documents issued by those outside the Order, as if it were plain to them that what the monks of the New Monastery were seeking was a peaceful ambience, far removed from controversy, so that they might develop a spirit of inner tranquillity

so as to find God in a life of prayer.

• 2.4: That you may serve the Lord more advantageously and more quietly.	**Letter of Legate Hugh**
• 6.6: That those who love the solitude may live there in quiet.	**Letter of Pope Urban**
• 10.2: That the church [of Cîteaux} may be forever quiet and safe from the pressure of all person.	**Concerning the Roman Privilege**
• 11.4: Concerning the quiet and stability of their monastic observance.	**Letter of the Cardinal Legates**
• 13.5 A safeguard of their quiet.	**Letter of Bishop Walter of Chalon Roman Privilege**
• 14.5: The place you have chosen to dwell for the sake of monastic quiet.	**Roman Privilege**
• 14.9: Free from the tumults and delights of the world.	

Perhaps we shall never be able to determine how and when the Cistercian Order was first to develop an interest in mysticism that was to last well into the thirteenth century. The fact of multiple attestation makes it certain that concern with the contemplative life was not limited to a select few. Not only was zeal for the contemplative life widespread, as witnessed by diffusion of manuscripts and contents of libraries, it was also egalitarian — many Cistercian writers being concerned to demonstrate the contemplative potential inherent in ordinary monastic asceticism and observance. And the anecdotal literature happily portrayed the lofty heights attained by the simplest.

4. The School of Love

In concert with the vertical communion realised in contemplation, horizontal communion was also sought. The *Exordium Parvum* expected Cistercians to be lovers of the Rule, of the monastery, of the way of life but, most of all, they were called to become *amatores fratrum* after the example of Alberic. “He who is zealous for solitude does not refuse the service of fraternal charity” (John of Forde, SC 100.3.).

Monastic Love

Adult recruitment as practised by the new orders fostered the development of two new categories of writing. One of these is made up of treatises dealing with the formation of novices. . . The second new group of writings is that on monastic love. Such literature already existed, but it became

more abundant and profuse with the expansion of the new orders. Without this literature, traditional monasticism would not have survived. Nor would have paved the way for the twelfth-century renewal. . . . In the circles of knighthood and nobility, love literature had begun to flourish, and Bernard could hardly fail to determine to create a corresponding love literature, which he did with steady continuity. And it is these writings which are his specific contribution to monastic spiritual culture.

J. Leclercq, *Monks and Love*, pp.15-22

The primitive documents are very insistent on the **cohesiveness** of the founding group.

- The foundation was a joint — even collegial — action and not the work of a single leader. This is especially evident in EC 1.7. "Twenty one monks together with the father of the monastery itself [Note the order: monks first, then the abbot], that is to say Robert of blessed memory, having departed
    - by common counsel
    - by common assent
    - strive [plural verb]
    - to bring about what they conceived [plural verb]
    - in a single spirit."

- The prefaces of Abbot Stephen claim for the various elements of liturgical reform the involvement of the whole group. The texts are given in Unit 2.
    - The *Monitum* to the Bible has first person plural throughout. This could be interpreted as a "royal plural" except that, at the end, Stephen speaks of "God's authority and that of our community".
    - The Preface to the hymnal has: "By the common advice and consent of our brothers, we have decided..."

- The theme of "unanimity" over and above organisational "uniformity" bespeaks an identification with the Jerusalem Community in the Acts of the Apostles and points beyond a cool conventual cohabitation in the direction of effective and affective union that is both human and spiritual. (See Unit 5; "Unanimity").

Dom Thomas of Vina gives a representative sampling of texts from our twelfth-century authors describing the length and breadth, the height and depth of their notion of fraternal communion. His conclusion is that "for a personality to advance in seeking and mystical union with God, it needs to grow, mature, return to itself through participation in a visible community, embodying evangelical *communio*. (Cistercian *Communio*, p.300.)

There can be no real doubt that community was important to the early Cistercians. Baldwin of Forde saw it in lofty theological terms: it was an earthly imitation of the inner life of the Trinity, and that of the angelic hosts. It was the special work of the Holy Spirit, witnessed not so much by high mystical gifts as the capacity to remain united in love amid all the challenges and demands of ordinary community life. (*Spiritual Tractates* 15; p. 171.)

> Since they have one heart and one soul and all things in common, there is concord and unanimity throughout, and they always put the general profit and the common good before their own

> individual convenience. They so far renounce themselves and what is theirs that none of them, if indeed he is [truly] one of them, whether in [making] decisions or in [giving] advice, presumes to make a stubborn defence of his own opinion, nor to strive hard after his own will and the desires of his own heart, nor to have the least thing that could be called his own. Instead as servants of God, they humble themselves under the hand of one of their fellow-servants, and in him all power is vested. . . Thus they are not permitted to want what they want, nor to be able [to do] what they are able [to do], nor to feel what they feel, nor to be what they are, nor to live by their own spirit, but by the Spirit of God. It is [the Spirit] who leads them to be sons of God and who is their love, their bond and their communion. The greater their love, the stronger is their bond and the more perfect is their communion: and conversely, the greater their communion, the stronger their bond and the more perfect their love.

The monastic *ecclesia* is not simply a gathering of human beings who desire a community life or who happen to like one another enough to want to cohabit. It is a local expression of the Church, called together by God's word to live corporatively the life of Christ. The specific **morality** of monastic community flows from its essential holiness; it is more than a special instance of social ethics. Bernard remarks on this.

> This community is made up not of the wicked but of saints, religious men, those who are full of grace and worthy of a blessing. You come together to hear the word of God, you gather to sing praise, to pray, to offer adoration. **This is a consecrated assembly**, pleasing to God and familiar with the angels. Therefore, brothers, stand fast in reverence, stand with care and devotion of mind, especially in the place of prayer and in this school of Christ where the Spirit is heard, *in auditorio spirituali*. My dear friends, pay no attention to things that are visible and belong to time, but look to what is unseen and eternal. Make your judgments according to faith and not appearances. Awesome and fearful is this place where we believe that as many angels are present as human beings. Here without doubt the gate of heaven is open, here a ladder is raised whereon angels ascend and descend on the Son of Man. (JBap 1)

There is more to a monastic community than meets the eye. Its primary reality is spiritual and pertains to the sphere of divine grace and mystery. When we speak of "communion" there is more involved than a mere melange of civility, lack of conflict, cooperativeness and practical consensus regarding major issues. The common likeness with which all have been endowed by their assent to vocation demands more than organisational smoothness. This common grace imparts to a community the germ of a deep union of heart and spirit. To live in a state of disunity or even indifference is a radical falsification of the gift of a Cistercian vocation. We are called to more than the avoidance of acts of "uncharity"; our response to grace is flaccid if we do not actively pursue a greater measure of unity with all brothers or sisters in our community. Nor can we be said to be living a common grace if we submit to a sense of alienation that moves us inexorably towards a marginal life.

> You are mistaken, O holy Thomas, you are mistaken, if you hope to see the Lord apart from the college of the Apostles. Truth does not like corners; private places do not please hm. He stands in the midst: discipline, the common life, the common pursuits — these are the things that please him. (Bernard, Asc 6.13.)

Commenting on the procession customary for the feast of the Purification, Bernard condemns the individualism that seeks to pursue a solitary path.

> Rightly then does the procession go two by two. Thus the holy Gospels attest that the disciples were sent by the Saviour in order to encourage fraternal charity and the social life. The one who is concerned to walk alone (*solitarius*) disturbs the procession; he not only harms himself but he is a nuisance to others. Those who segregate themselves are animals. They do not have the spirit. They are not zealous to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Just as it is not good for the human being to be alone, so it is forbidden to appear empty-handed before the Lord. (Purif 2.2)

Gilbert of Swineshead strikes the same admonitory note,

> Brothers, see that there is not in your hearts the evil of *singularitas* which makes you withdraw from fellowship with your brothers and from the protection of the spiritual father. See that none of you who have made profession of a common life follow the [Prodigal Son's] example of separation and selfishness (*proprietas*). (Bodleian 87 Sermon, 19.)

The grace of communion is realised only at the price of great renunciation: living a community life quickly spotlights many hidden zones of selfishness and demands remedial action. Above all, the vocation to love demands that we be quit of our self-centred inertia and become proactive in doing good for the benefit of others.

> Love is born when you give food and drink to your enemy. . . Love grows if you come to the help of one suffering hardship, if you give to one wishing to borrow, and if you open your soul to a friend. Love is maintained if you grant your friend's wishes by what you say and manifest, even beyond what seems necessary. Love is also maintained and increased by a friendly face, a pleasant work and a cheerful deed. In this way kind and cheerful behaviour confirms what is conveyed by facial expression and words, since love is proved and manifested by deeds.(Bernard, Div 121: *De Schola Dilectionis*.)

There is a work to be done by all — to render visible in the details of daily existence the grace of communion given to all at the level of the Spirit. This is often made difficult by those in the community who have lost the way.

> You may see in an assembly and community of saints one exalting himself, puffed up with fleshly wisdom, boasting vainly, inwardly and outwardly irascible and cantankerous, fretful in emptiness and idleness — for idleness breeds acedia. . . Nothing is more empty than idleness, nothing more fretful than acedia, nothing more cantankerous than irascibility. . . Where there is acedia, there is irascibility. Where there is cantankerousness, there is nothing gentle, nothing composed, nothing orderly, but everything bristles. Someone with such a character is devoid of tact, without affection, full of hostility and disaffection. . . Such a one is not of God's household, not a fellow-citizen, not even a resident alien or a guest, and therefore no devotion, no grace pays a visit. (Gilbert of Swineshead SC 29.7.)

> This means that for communion to be maintained there must be an abundance of tolerance and

mutual forgiveness. There are many texts that deal with this. At the same time, the negative aspects of community life should not be exaggerated. We need to remember that for the early Cistercians the monastery was like heaven, *paradisus claustralis*. Its characteristic feature was joy, deriving from the fact that community life which provides by openness to God for the expansion of the human spirit is the most complete fulfilment of the potentiality inherent in those formed in the image of God and progressively conformed to the divine likeness.

> In short, the only love which in the twelfth century was able to overcome, though not always perfectly nor without difficulty, social barriers, is the one taught, learned, and practised in the cloisters, each one of which was supposed to be a *schola caritatis*, a school of love.
>
> J. Leclercq, *Monks and Love*, p. 23.

5. The Wider Church

The early Cistercian monasteries were not totally isolated from people. They retained a capacity for outreach. This is evidenced in the provision that before a foundation is begun, all that is necessary for an integral monastic life must be in place, "so that they can immediately serve God and live in accordance with the Rule. Not only the necessities of liturgy and conventual living but also, accommodation for guests and a porter's lodge for welcoming visitors: *cella hospitum et portarii* (EC-SCC 8.4).

To review the evidence concerning the involvement of the early Cistercians with the affairs of the Church as well as their dealings with neighbours and business associates is beyond the scope of the present program. The topic of communion may be closed simply by referring to the role played by monasteries not only in promoting reform of the Church and in the deepening of spiritual doctrine, but also in being centres of hope and confidence in the mercy of God. As Ordericus says, "Many who were parched with thirst have drunk from their stream". Nor can we conclude that the salvation of all was foreign to the concerns of twelfth-century Cistercians. Aelred's advice to an anchoress is applicable to all contemplatives.

> What is more useful than prayer? Give generously of this. What is more human than love (*pietas*)?This also give. Enclose the whole world in the embrace of your love. There attend to the good and rejoice with them and look upon the evil and grieve. See those who are troubled and oppressed and have compassion. To your soul's outreach let the misery of the poor come running, the crying of orphans, the bereavement of widows, the vows of virgins, the dangers of those at sea, the temptations of monks, the cares of superiors and the labours of those at war. Open the bosom of your heart to all of these, for them let your tears flow, for them pour out your prayers. (Aelred, *Inst Incl*, 28.)

The goal of monastic life is love — for which "communion" is merely a more glamorous term. Love is indivisible. One who loves is enamoured of all that is good, and perceptive enough to find goodness easily. One without love has eyes only for what is wrong, although hatred for what is near is often disguised as an enthusiastic love for what is distant. Progress in the Cistercian grace involves an intensifying communion with God, with other members of the community, with all humanity and the whole cosmos. Such expansion may be slow, and there may sometimes be disjointedness in its distribution. But the test is ultimately whether radical renunciation truly leads to a universal solidarity. For

our Cistercian forbears also, the genuine monk — or nun — was someone who separated themselves from all to find communion with the All.

Exordium

Unit 10:
Communion

Additional Reading 1: Bernard of Clairvaux

SC 29.4

Therefore, dear brothers, be at peace among yourselves and avoid hurting one another whether by word or deed or in any way whatever. Let none of you be put in the position of having to appeal to God in a state of pain and oppression, against those who hurt him or cause him sadness. Thus, discouraged in spirit by the storm, breaking forth in grave accusation saying, "The sons of my own mother have fought against me."

The fact is that when you sin against your own brother you sin against Christ for he said, "What you do to one of my least brothers you do to me." It is not enough to safeguard oneself from serious offences, for instance, from total rejection or cursing. We must also avoid the poisonous whisper that circulates in secret. I go further and say this. It is not sufficient to keep our mouths pure of this kind of thing, the slightest offence against our brothers must be avoided — if it is possible to consider any offence against our brothers "slight".

At the divine judgement you will have to answer even for being angry with your brother. What you consider to be of no importance, and permit yourself to become a party to without much thought, will often be of considerable importance to the other person involved. Human beings see only what is on the surface and make their judgements accordingly; they are ready to see a splinter as a beam and a spark as a furnace. Not everyone has that love that remains loyal in all circumstances. Human perception and understanding are often more ready to detect evil than to have faith in the presence of goodness.

This is especially so where the discipline of silence prevents you who are the cause of the trouble from offering some explanation; nor does it permit him to lance the wound that he inwardly sustains: to make known his suspicion so that it may be healed. So he develops a fever due to this death-dealing wound, given so thoughtlessly. He groans inwardly and is wholly taken up with anger and negative feelings. It is impossible for him to do anything else except silently to go over and over again in his mind the injury he has received. He cannot pray or read. He is unable to reflect on anything holy or spiritual. Cut off from the source of spiritual vitality and deprived of nourishment, this soul for whom Christ died, goes to his death. And you are the cause of this. What is happening to your spiritual life meanwhile? What spiritual delight can follow prayer or any other work you undertake? Christ himself is crying out against you from the heart of the brother whom you have saddened. "The sons of my own mother have fought against me," he cries, "and my friend who shared my meal has filled me with bitterness."

SC 29.5

It is difficult to avoid being hurt sometimes in these communities. When this happens you should not do as people in the world do: rush in to repay the offence with a sharp retort. But you must also

avoid piercing with a sharp and inflammatory word a soul for whom Christ was pleased to die, under the pretext of constructive criticism. Nor may you rebuke with a grimace, nor by mumbling words under your breath. You may not belittle him by mockery with snorts and laughing. There must be no scowling reproaches and threats. Instead, let your disturbance remain where it began. Because it is a vehicle of death it must not, under penalty of death, be allowed out. Thus you can say with the prophet: "I was upset, and yet I did not speak."

Exordium

Unit 10:
Communion

Questions for Reflection and Dialogue

1. How do you view the second and third Cistercian generations? Do they

1) continue the work of the Founders?
2) develop the work of the Founders?
3) corrupt the work of the Founders?

Support your opinion with texts.

2. How important was the **contemplative life** in the Founders' vision of a renewed monasticism? Did they wish to establish the monastery as a "school of contemplation"? Support your opinion with texts.

3. How important was the **fraternal life** in the Founders' vision? Did they wish to establish the monastery as a "school of love"? Support your opinion with texts.

4. How attractive do you consider the **twin ideals of contemplation and love** (or mysticism and affectivity) to our contemporaries? How strongly do they shape the reality of our community life? What are the consequences of such ideals for formation?

5. It has been remarked that in the past the "**contemplative life**" was defined chiefly in terms of non-activity. Whether or not you believe this to be true, how would you expressive the contemplative component of Cistercian *conversatio*?

6. What practical suggestions can you make for increasing the level of **communion** within and among our communities? What are its chief obstacles?

7. Note down three specific **challenges** for your own life and for your community, of which you became aware in reflecting on the issues discussed in this Unit.

Exordium

Unit 10:
Communion

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