

COME
TO
THE
MOUNTAIN



Come to the Mountain

**NEW WAYS AND LIVING TRADITIONS IN THE MONASTIC LIFE
ST. BENEDICT'S CISTERCIAN MONASTERY, SNOWMASS, COLORADO**

Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord
To the house of the God of Jacob,
That He may teach us His ways
And that we may walk in His Paths.

Isaias 2:3

Thou wilt bring them in and plant them on Thy own mountain
The place, O Lord, which Thou hast made for Thy abode
The sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands have established.

Exodus 15:17

Come to the Mountain

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INTRODUCTION

It is a custom of contemplative monasteries to issue booklets which will inform visitors and postulants about the life led by the monks. The present pamphlet is something more than a plain "postulant's guide" and more than an apologetic justification of the monastic life. Such books are now quite plentiful, and in any case, the *apologia* for the contemplative life tends to be overworked. It is true that explanations are owed, and therefore must be given. The monastery is so radically different from the "world!" Monasticism seems so much a thing of the past and so alien to technological society. The life of the monk seems on many counts to be pointless. And these objections themselves dictate replies. It is natural to argue that the monk is not so different after all, and to assert that he has a very definite role to play in the modern world, that he is part of the world, and that he is not useless at all.

Frankly, these arguments are often misleading and unsatisfactory. To say that the monks are justified because they "practice scientific agriculture" and because the monastery is a kind of "dynamo of prayer" is often to compromise the real meaning of the monastic life. Actually what matters about the monastery is precisely that it *is* radically different from the world. The apparent "pointlessness" of the monastery in the eyes of the world is exactly what gives it a real reason for existing. In a world of noise, confusion and conflict it is necessary that there be places of silence, inner discipline and peace: not the peace of mere relaxation but the peace of inner clarity and love based on ascetic renunciation. In a world of tension and breakdown it is necessary for there to be men who seek to integrate their inner lives not by avoiding anguish and running away from problems, but by facing them in their naked reality and in their ordinariness! Let no one justify the monastery as a place from which anguish is utterly absent and in which men "have no problems." This is a myth, closely related to the other myth that religion itself disposes of all man's anxieties. Faith itself implies a certain

anguish, and it is a way of confronting inner suffering, not a magic formula for making all problems vanish. It is not by extraordinary spiritual adventures or by dramatic and heroic exploits that the monk comes to terms with life. The monastery teaches men to take their own measure and to accept their ordinariness; in a word, it teaches them that truth about themselves which is known as "humility."

As for the "dynamo of prayer:" it is certainly true that the monks pray for the world, but this particular figure of speech unfortunately suggests a kind of inner busy-ness and spiritual bustle that is quite alien to the monastic spirit. The monk does not offer large quantities of prayers to God and then look out upon the world to count the converts that must result. Monastic life is not "quantitative." What counts is not the number of prayers and good works, not the multitude and variety of ascetic practices, not the ascent of various "degrees of holiness" and "degrees of prayer:" what counts is not to count, and not to be counted.

"Love," says St. Bernard, "seeks no justification outside itself. Love is sufficient to itself, is pleasing in itself and for its own sake. Love is its own merit and its own reward. Love seeks no cause outside itself and no results other than itself. The fruit of love is love." And he adds that the reason for this all-sufficient character of love is that it comes from God as its source and returns to Him as its end because God Himself is Love.

The seemingly fruitless existence of the monk is therefore centered on the ultimate meaning and the highest value: it loves the truth for its own sake, and it gives away everything in order to hear the Word of God and do it.

The monk is valuable to the world precisely in so far as he is not part of it, and hence it is futile to try to make him acceptable by giving him a place of honor in it.

These pages are not written for the sake of argument, nor in order to "sell" the monastic life to anyone. They are simply a meditation on what one may frankly

call the mystery of the monastic life. That is to say that they attempt to penetrate the inner meaning of something that is essentially hidden — a spiritual reality that eludes clear explanation.

Though it is certainly reasonable for men to live as monks, mere reasoning can never account for the monastic life or even fully accept it. Yet for centuries this life has been and continues to be an inescapable religious fact. Certain men find themselves inexplicably drawn to it. Some are able to follow the attractions or the inner urging of conscience, and they become monks. Others attempt to live the life and fail, but when they "return to the world" their lives are henceforth completely changed.

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

Far from being a thing of the past, the monastic tree is full of young life and it is developing in new ways. But the development is not simple. The growth must be paid for by conflict and uncertainty. New problems must be met with new solutions, and before the solutions can be imagined the problems themselves must be clarified. Since the needs of potential monks are obviously the needs of twentieth century men, the monastery has a vital interest in modern man and in his world. Yet he who enters the monastery must leave ordinary society and live in a different life from the men of his time. Inevitably he brings into the monastery the problems, weaknesses and complications of contemporary man, along with his qualities and aspirations. The monastery itself cannot help but be affected by it. The monk of today cannot help but respond to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the spirit of *aggiornamento*.

This booklet is then a meditation on monasticism in its twentieth century context, and in order to give the meditation a concrete form, the air and sky and scene and setting of one particular monastery of Cistercians in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado has been chosen. Each monastery

has a character all its own. The "individuality" of each community is a special manifestation of the mystery of Christ and of the spirit of the Monastic Order. That is why monks consider themselves first of all members of their particular community rather than as members of the Order. It is more proper to modern institutes to put the initials of their Order after their name. This custom has been adopted by the more ancient Orders, and the Cistercian of the Strict Observance can, if he wishes, put the letters O.C.S.O. after his name. Yet the Cistercian will always be first of all a monk of the monastery where he made his stability and he may indeed never see another monastery of the Order as long as he lives. When someone enters St. Benedict's monastery at Snowmass he intends to live and die in this one mountain valley, in this one community with its special graces, advantages, problems and limitations. If he becomes a saint, and surely if he is faithful to his vocation he will be a saint in the broad sense, though not necessarily canonizable, his sanctity will be that of one who has found Christ in this particular community and at this particular moment of history. Hence this is in some sense a booklet for and about St. Benedict's, Snowmass, Colorado. It may perhaps inspire some readers to enter that lonely and small mountain community, providentially designed for those who seek Cistercian and contemplative solitude in its pure and authentic form. But most of the readers of such a book will, naturally, not be able or willing to become monks. It is important, however, to let all share to some extent in the monastic experience. These pages are a witness, however confused, however imperfect, to the reality of that experience.

(Note: Each section begins with a text from the bible or from ancient monastic sources. The pages that follow are supposed to develop, in informal meditation, certain aspects of monastic life suggested by the text chosen.)



St. Basil comments: "Whoever wishes to be taught by God must work his way free from all the ties of this life. This is done by total *anachoresis* (life in solitude) and by forgetting one's former existence. Thus if we do not separate ourselves from our parents according to the flesh and from the society of men, and if we do not pass over as it were into a different world by all our behavior, we cannot attain to the end we have proposed, which is to please God." An English Cistercian, St. Aelred of Rievaulx, says:

"If we wish to enter heaven with Jesus and through Him, we must leave this world in thought and contemplation; we must also, if we can, raise our hearts above the senses of the flesh, and take up the bright armor of obedience. Our obedience must be inspired by disinterested love, so that all that we do is done out of love for God."

This is a seemingly drastic program, and one which is calculated to shock even Christians in the modern world, in which passive conformity to the demands of an affluent society is thought to be a sign of sanity and "adaptation" whereas estrangement from society is viewed with distrust and severely condemned. It is of course true that the monastic vocation is a wager that is often somewhat perilous. Not all those who experience a burning desire "to see God" or to live in His presence are necessarily called by Him to the monastic life. On the contrary, their evasion from the world may indeed be only an experience of sickness and frustration.

The fact remains that there are men truly called as Abraham was to leave their homes, to depart from the cities of men, to renounce even the active Christian life in those cities, and to become henceforth strangers in the world, living apart, consecrated to silent meditation and liturgical praise, to poverty, manual labor, solitude, sacred study and spiritual discipline.

More than this, the full seriousness of the monastic vocation would be missed if we underestimated the sense of urgency that often drives the monk, like Lot, from

the "cities of the plain" into the mountain solitude. It often happens that monks themselves hesitate to speak out about this aspect of their vocation. They do not want to appear too unfriendly to the world because they think it is necessary to recognize the goodness that is in the world and overlook the evil. And there is something to be said for this.

It is a delicate problem. The monk can solve it only by looking upon the world in the light of revelation, not in the light of the world's own evaluation of itself, which is completely deceptive. Yet at the same time the monk cannot accept the superficial piety belonging to the recent past, in which the biblical sense of sin was replaced by a kind of insipid prudery and a genteel susceptibility to pious shock. This regrettable error in spirituality has ended by obscuring the true sense of sin in those who, reacting against prudish formalism, go to the other extreme and accept all the world's claims at their own face value and hence try to baptize the old formula "eat, drink and be merry" as if this had something to do with Christian optimism.

Certainly the legitimate desire to live a decent and civilized life in the world is no sin. God wills for man an ordered and happy life on earth. But the Prophets of the Old Testament, the Gospels and Epistles of the New, constantly remind us that in practice the comfort and pleasure of some is generally paid for by the misery and oppression of others, and the rosy picture of our affluent society has a dark side to it, as experience shows. Hence religious people should not be so concerned with presenting an optimistic image that they forget the reality of evil in our society.

But though the monk must be one whose eyes are fully open to the mystery of evil, they must also be even more ready to contemplate the mercy of God in the mystery of redemption. A life that merely accepts without question all the world's values and looks upon sin with indifference as if God tolerated everything, empties the mystery of redemption of all its seriousness. The monk is then one



who, like Abraham, looks out with misgivings upon the "cities of the plain" which are thoughtlessly calling down destruction upon themselves.

This implies precisely a deep awareness of the good that is truly in the world, God's creation, and in the souls of men, all of whom are made in the image of God and called by Him to the light of truth and to union with Him in love. Abraham, fully aware of the sinfulness of Sodom, and knowing that the cities of the plain were about to be destroyed, entered into a spiritual struggle with the angels of God, striving for the salvation of the cities. He was not asking that God simply tolerate evil or ignore it, but he was putting the value of a few "just men" against the wickedness of many. Here we see the real optimism of the monastic outlook: as opposed to the false optimism of those who simply ignore the existence of evil. This is the outlook of Christian hope which believes that great evil can be overcome by the truth and goodness which may seem "small" but which in fact are not subject to quantitative limit.

But there is a price to be paid. If the monk is to be, like Abraham, a man of faith, he is not permitted simply to establish himself in a new realm and evolve a new kind of society for himself, and there settle down to a placid and self-complacent existence. Peace, order and virtue should always characterize the monastic family life. But there is also sacrifice. Just as God asked of Abraham an obedience that prefigured Christ's obedience unto death

(Phil. 2:8,) so the monk also is asked to crown his renunciation of the world by the far more difficult renunciation of his own self. This may certainly be effected by the monastic vows, and especially by obedience, but the sacrifice of one's own self is also consumed in the secret fire of inner tribulation. This is the real test of the monk, and there is no saying when the demand will come upon him, and the fire be lit under him by God. The testing may not begin, in all its seriousness, until the monk has been many years in the monastery. The sacrifice may not always be understood by the monk himself or by those who live with him. Abraham could not understand why he was required to offer Isaac, and indeed this was not in fact required, and Isaac was spared. The important thing was that Abraham was ready to offer everything, even that which was most dear to him, if God asked him to do so.

This is the true meaning of monastic renunciation. But though the Bible presents it in very dramatic terms, the sacrifice is usually not dramatic at all. In fact, those who insist on making a tragedy out of everything that happens, cannot last long in a monastery. In the monastic life, one may find a peace and a detachment which are experienced neither as blissful nor as bitter. They are quiet, patient and in some senses neutral. For the real peace of monastic renunciation is at once ordinary and beyond the grasp of feeling. It is something that cannot be known until one gives up any attempt to weigh and measure it. It becomes evident only in so far as we forget our own desires and seek to please not ourselves, but God.

II-THE CONTEMPLATIVE COMMUNITY

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

St. Athanasius, Life of St. Anthony of the Desert



Though all monks have a common calling to leave the world, and live apart in a spiritual or physical desert, this solitary life has traditionally expressed itself in various forms.

In the early days of monasticism there were many who simply adopted a wandering life in the desert, without fixed abode. Others lived absolutely alone as hermits. Historically, it was found that some form of social and institutional life was needed to provide security and order. Thus the common or *cenobitic* life was instituted, in which the community itself was located in the wilderness, or at any rate far from any town, and in which the monks themselves preserved a relative personal solitude by means of silence among themselves.

This combination of solitude and community united the advantages of the life apart from the world with those of social life. The monk not only enjoyed silence and freedom from the distracting business of worldly life, but also had the support and encouragement of fraternal charity. He was able to forget himself in the service of others, to work for the common good of the monastic community and to feed the poor. He had the benefit of obedience and spiritual guidance, and the good example of others to aid him. Above all he was able to participate in common liturgical worship in which Christ, the Lord and Savior, was present in the midst of the monastic convocation (*ecclesia*) offering the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in the redemptive mysteries celebrated by the monks.

In this community life the monk not only sought his own salvation and the contemplative purity of his own heart, but the community itself was a sacred meeting place of God and man, a site of awesome encounter like the *locus terribilis* where Jacob has his dream of angels ascending and descending from God in heaven. (Genesis 28:10-22.)

It is above all in the communal worship of the liturgy that the monk acquires the grace and experience of divine mercy and renders thanks to God with his brothers

in Christ. And it is here that he receives the necessary strength to carry on the inner and solitary struggle to which he is called.

The Cistercian monks have been devoted since the 12th century to this contemplative life in community, but the note of solitude has never been lacking in the Cistercian life.

First of all the strict silence of the Cistercian is supposed to help him remain to some extent "solitary" even when he is in community. Also manual labor in the fields has something of a solitary and prayerful character, besides which it enables the monk to be to some extent self-sustaining and thus to be free of multiple contacts with the outside world. The monk rarely leaves his monastery, and does so only for urgent reasons.

Asked why the Cistercians lived in community, Abbot Isaac of Stella (12th century) replied:

"Because we are not yet ready for solitude; and because if one of us falls he will have others to lift him up and thus, brother aiding brother will be built up on high like strong, fortified city; finally, because it is good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity."

The "goodness" and "pleasantness" of fraternal union in the monastic common life is not merely the result of natural sociability, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, a supernatural charism. Therefore it must be seen as quite distinct from the warmth of natural fellowship, which is a good in its own sphere. The charity of the monk depends on an awareness of the end which the entire monastic community has in view: the glory of God and union with God. Therefore in practice, while human values and natural sincerity of affection have an important part in monastic life, the "family life" of the monk should not tend to become a mere substitute for the warmth of natural family love which the monk has renounced.

But in any case the joy of the monastic life comes from generous sharing in a common spiritual task of praise and labor, and a common search for truth. The vocation of the monk is not simply to "find" in the monastery a fully realized monastic ideal which he then makes his own with a minimum of difficulty. Monasticism is something that each new generation of monks is called upon to "build," and perhaps to "rebuild." Thus the ideal is never fully attained, and no one can justifiably feel bitter and cheated just because he does not find it realized in his community.

Each monk owes it to his community to build up or "edify" his brothers by working with them to preserve and maintain the contemplative life which they share and for which they have renounced the world.

The joy of the monastic life is ultimately based on the truth and sincerity with which the life is lived by the monks. Where the truth is alive in the hearts of the monks, the monastic community is fervent and happy. The Cistercian, as St. Bernard taught, must first seek the truth in himself and in his brother before he can find it in God.

The monk finds the truth in himself by a humility which recognizes his own sinfulness and limitations. He finds the truth in his brother not by judging his brother's sin, but by identifying himself with his brother, putting himself in his brother's place, and also respecting the fact that his brother is a different person with different needs and a different task to perform within the one common task of all.

St. Bernard says:

"That soul which has no knowledge of truth cannot be said to be alive, but is still dead in itself; nor can the soul which is without love be said to have any awareness. The life of the soul is truth and the awareness of the soul is love. Hence I cannot say in what way one can be said to be alive,

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III - OBSERVANCE AND CHANGE

"Do not judge the precepts of God as fables, but let your heart be ever solicitous in them. Do not let any adversity of the world turn your soul away from the precepts and commands of God or from that charity which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord; neither be inflated by continuous good fortune, but in both be moderate. Everything which shall be enjoined upon you for sake of religion, take up freely and obey, and even if it should be beyond your strength, do not spurn or avoid it. But honestly tell the reason of your incapacity to him who enjoined it on you, that what was burdensome for you may be lightened by his moderation and you may be free from the vice of contradiction. Do not seek the reward of your patience from men, so that in the future you can receive from the Eternal Lord an eternal reward . . .

Love the Lord, therefore, with your whole strength, that in your every action you may please Him. For, if he who takes a spouse hastens to please his wife, much more ought a monk by every means please Christ. 'He who loves the Lord, keeps His commands.' (I John 2). For God does not wish Himself to be loved by words alone, but by a pure heart and just works. For he who says, 'I love God,' and he does not keep His commands — he is a liar. For a man of this kind deceives himself and is seduced by himself. For God is the Inspector of the heart — not of words, and He loves those who serve Him in simplicity of heart . . .

Let us hasten to Him, therefore, and be united in His Love, and let us love our neighbors as ourselves. He who loves his neighbor is called a son of God; he who,

on the contrary, hates his neighbor, is proclaimed a son of the devil. His heart is in tranquillity who loves his brother, but one hating his brother is surrounded with a great storm . . ."

St. Basil — "Admonition to a Spiritual Son"

The monastic life is essentially *ascetical*. It demands a spirit of sacrifice and of discipline, particularly in the beginner. This sacrifice is first of all a work of faith, because it is Christian faith that gives monastic asceticism its specific character as discipleship. The monk seeks to be above all a perfect disciple of Christ. He has renounced everything not just in order to find interior tranquillity but in order to follow Christ. It is in order to be His disciples that we have left the world, our families, the hope of a career (see Luke 14:26.) It is true that we might have been His disciples while remaining in an active life in the world. But the desire to give God's Word an undivided and perfect attention inspires the monk to renounce the active and busy life of Martha in order to sit at the feet of Jesus like Mary (Luke 10:38-42.) The monk is one who is hungry for the "justice" which is found only in obedience to the will of God (Matthew 5:6.) He wishes to be the friend of Jesus Christ, and hence he seeks to know the will of the Lord in everything so that he may be perfectly obedient (John 14:15, 23-24.) He believes that if he does the will of Christ in all things he will not only be pleasing to God, but he will come to know and experience the intimate and loving presence of Christ in his own heart and in the monastic brotherhood. "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

(John 14:21.)



The Rule of St. Benedict is simply an application of the Gospel counsels and commands of Christ to the monastic way of life. The Observances and Customs of the Cistercians seek to interpret and apply the Rule in greater detail. Hence, though the observances are not to be treated as commandments, they still represent what is pleasing to God and so the faithful disciple will accept and obey them because he believes they will have a life-giving and salutary effect, since it is to this obedience that he has been called by his vocation.

The monastic observances are all instruments for the spiritual formation of the monk, and one of the signs of a valid monastic vocation is the ability of the candidate to submit intelligently and fervently to the discipline of monastic practices which have been found effective for centuries and which have formed many saints.

It cannot be said that external regulations and customs are all trivial and that only interior intentions avail for holiness. Bodily discipline and asceticism are essential to a serious monastic life, because they give expression to the monk's love for God and they are demanded by the fact that man, made up of body and soul, needs to express his devotion to God with his whole being, not only in the secrecy of his heart. The observances have a symbolic character. By carrying them out we make their meaning clear to ourselves and to others and incorporate it into our life by our actions.

Here is where certain ancient and traditional observances sometimes present a problem. If they no longer have a meaning that is accessible to modern man, they become empty gestures without deep formative value. Until the recent renewal of monastic life, it was usually thought enough if one simply accepted incomprehensible observances reverently as "the will of God" and carried them out in a spirit of docility. But it is now realized that something more is required if the monastic life is not to be a mere tissue of gestures and formalities executed blindly and with good will. The reform of monastic observances is aimed at eliminating those which have really ceased to fulfill an educative or sanctifying

function in the life of the monk. On the other hand, the modern monk must not be too impatient with deeply significant practices that often cannot be understood without a certain amount of application and training. This is the function of the novitiate and of the post-novitiate formation period which is now likely to be extended over several years, to make sure that the young monk has really grasped the purpose of the monastic life and the significance of the way things are done in the monastery.

Though the external customs and observances may be what strike the newcomer most forcefully, they are by no means the whole of the monastic life: they are only its outer surface. If they are properly used, they can help the monk to acquire what has been called "monasticity of behavior" and, with this, a radically different outlook from that which he had before he was called to the monastic life.

In primitive monasticism a great deal was left to individual attraction in the ascetic life. Some monks concentrated on long fasts or other special practices such as reclusion, a wandering and homeless life, total silence and so on. As monasticism became organized, the Fathers of Eastern and Western monks were all in essential agreement on the following points:

1) The communal office of prayer should be relatively short and simple. Twelve psalms were considered enough for the normal night vigils with the addition of lessons (readings) and perhaps hymns, antiphons and responsories. The day hours were quite short, and might be chanted at the place of work rather than in the oratory.

2) Manual labor, which should preferably be kept simple enough to be combined with interior prayer, was a most important element in the monk's life. In some monastic traditions intellectual work was combined with manual labor, or even in some cases substituted for it, but this was unusual. In any event the monk must never simply remain idle, even under the pretext of contemplation. He should earn his living by his work. But, as St. Jerome insisted, the monk works with his hands not only to earn



a living, but above all for the good of his soul.

3) Though many of the early Coptic and Syrian monks were illiterate, (St. Anthony, for instance) yet they had to be familiar with the Scriptures before they could seriously undertake the monastic life, since the word of God would be the chief nourishment of their spirit in solitude. So, to make sure that the inner life of the monk would be fruitful, the earliest monastic legislators, like St. Pachomius, either provided for the education of the young monks or presupposed a sufficient education before the candidate was admitted to the monastery. Thus the monk read and studied not for the sake of academic distinction but in order to nourish his heart with the truth revealed by God. This was one of the most important elements in his monastic life. In the light of this truth the monk came to know himself, learned compassion for his fellow man, saw the reasons for humility and self-restraint, gained an appreciation of silence, saw more and more clearly the all-embracing reality of God's love. His reading thus became a form of prayer, and turned spontaneously into meditation, leading in due time to simple, silent and contemplative absorption in God.

4) Monastic discretion in primitive times insisted that these three elements of the monastic life be properly balanced. No single one of them should be allowed to usurp time and energies that rightfully belonged to the others. It can be estimated that in early Benedictine communities some three or four hours a day were devoted to *opus Dei* (liturgical prayer,) three or four more to *lectio divina* (meditative study and reading,) seven or eight to manual labor and the rest to meals, sleep and other necessities.

5) The purpose of this balanced life as a whole was, however, quite definite. The early Fathers believed that moderation and balance would enable the average monk to "pray without ceasing," not in the sense that he would be in perpetual tension, forcing himself to utter formulas of prayer, but rather that in this simple, balanced, healthy and sane life it would not be difficult to remain constantly in the presence of God. Living in a spirit of

faith, love and simplicity the monk could be united to God all through the ordinary incidents and duties of the monastic day.

6) It was vitally necessary for this balanced life of prayer, meditative reading and quiet work to be carried out in an atmosphere of peace and silence. Hence two things were essential: first the monastic community had to be separated from the outside world, either by a formal enclosure, or by sheer distance. Contacts between the monks and outsiders were to be strictly limited. The business of the world must not be allowed to invade the enclosure and disturb the life of the monks, even with apparently "good reasons," and the work of the monks must always remain simple and productive, without becoming a large-scale business venture. Finally the contacts between the monks themselves would have to be restricted by the practice of monastic silence.

7) Since these rules for communal prayer, manual work, study, enclosure and silence would have to be maintained by an authority, some sort of organization was implied, even for groups of hermits. At the head of the monastic brotherhood was an older monk of known experience and sanctity, whom the others obeyed in everything, not so much because he was invested with canonical authority as because they believed obedience itself to be an ascetic charism, which would lead them to holiness, uniting them more closely to Christ in the bond of the Spirit of Love, and liberating them from self-will. As Isaac of Stella said:

"Do you wish to know why both in our work and in our rest we follow the judgement and command of another? Because in this we are without doubt imitators of Christ as most dear sons and we walk in that love by which He had loved us who in all things became obedient for our sakes, not only as a remedy but as an example that we might live as He did in this world. Man is by nature under God: sin has subjected him to his enemy, and reconciliation makes him submit to his brother and fellow servant."



Thus the charism of obedience has an important place in the monastic life: it is a sign of reconciliation, a witness to the Kingdom of God, a pledge of faith in the resurrection of Christ. Without obedience there can be no deep love. Monastic obedience lays the foundation for self-sacrificing charity which is the sign by which all men can recognize Christ's disciples (John 13:35.)

Obedience is also the grace that prepares the soul of the monk for contemplation; for contemplation is received in obedience to the Holy Spirit and one cannot obey Him unless he has first learned to recognize His will manifested through human superiors. So St. Aelred says, "Those to whom Christ gives spiritual nourishment (in the grace of prayer) He first makes truly obedient."

8) As time went on, in order to stabilize the monastic community, formal vows were taken by the monks. At his profession the Cistercian promises obedience, stability and "conversion of manners" according to the Rule of St. Benedict. The vow of conversion of manners is actually a vow to consecrate oneself faithfully and seriously to the essential practices of the monastic life and to make good use of them until death. Among these practices are poverty and chastity, which later in other orders, became the object of separate vows. But the vow of conversion of manners also covers everything that is characteristic of the monk's life of renunciation, solitude and prayer.

These essential principles remain unchanged, no matter how much the circumstances of time and place may vary. Any monastic renewal that is effected in our own time must keep them clearly in view. Otherwise the "reformation" of monastic life will only be its deformation. This should be realized from the start by all those who wish to become monks. When they enter the monastic life they must take note of the basic essentials of that life: its silence, its separation from the world, its spirit of prayer, austerity, sacrifice and solitude, its essential simplicity, humility, hiddenness, in a word — its "contemplative" nature.

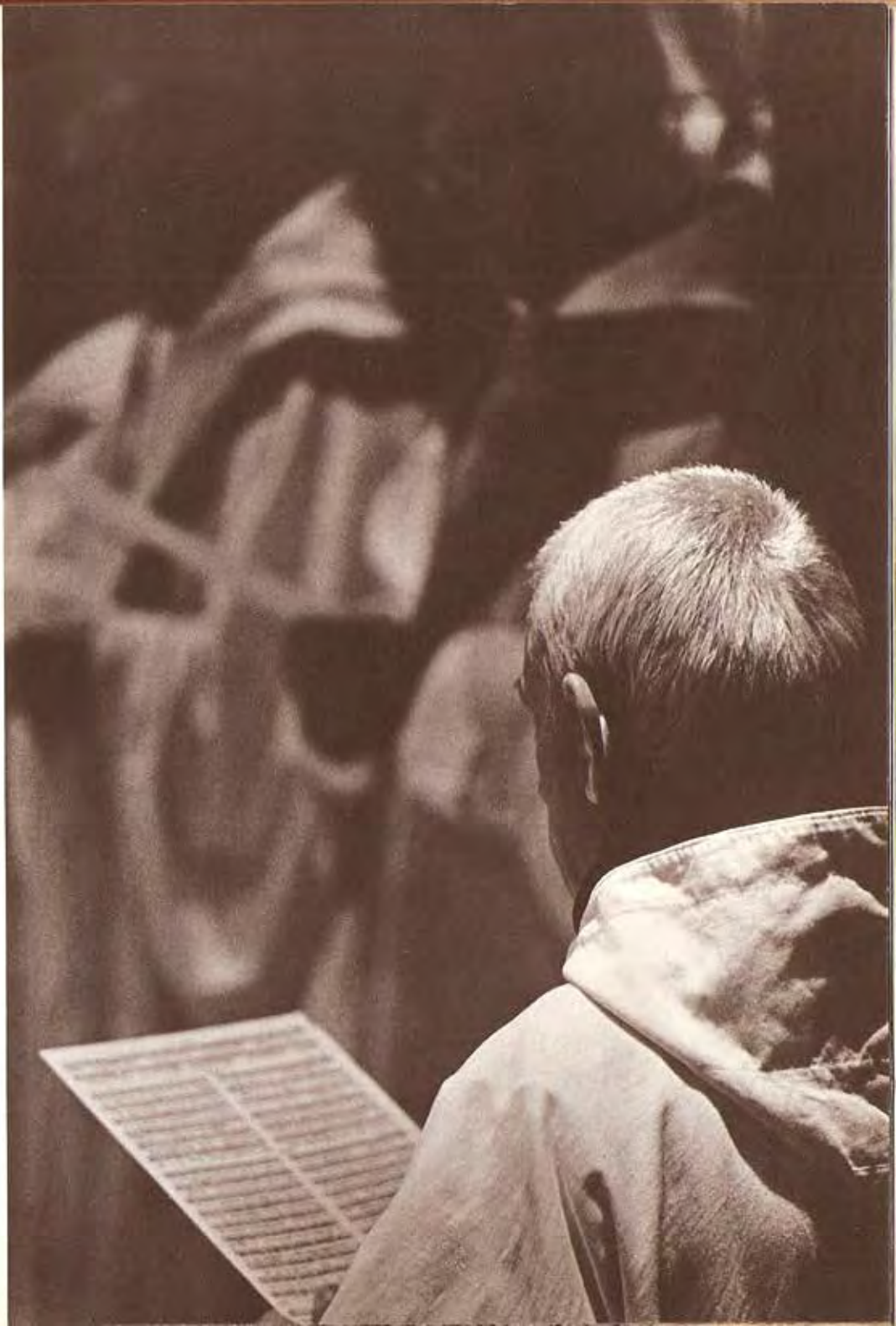
This is very important indeed because in our time there are many who having entered the monastery and made vows in it come to be influenced by ideals that are appropriate

to other forms of religious life. They are convinced that the monk ought to do away with silence and go out to meet the world in order to help active workers face the immense problems of the apostolate in our day.

In other words some monks today have come to consider the renewal and *aggiornamento* of the monastic life in terms that apply only to active orders in the Church. Monastic renewal and *aggiornamento* must be seen in the light of the real nature of monasticism itself. It is only by being true to his own specific vocation to prayer, renunciation and solitude that the monk can contribute to the apostolate of the Church. If the contemplatives are not there to pray and adore God in silence, an essential element in the inner life of the Church will be lacking and the apostolate will suffer gravely. The charism of silent prayer, together with liturgical worship offered by monastic communities, is absolutely necessary to the well-being of the whole Church.

It is certainly true that a special and exceptional apostolate is sometimes possible in the monastic setting. But this apostolate is a departure from the norm and hence it always must be warranted by some very special indication of God's will: it must, in fact, be a charism. But monastic reform cannot be understood in this sense. The most effective contribution the monk can make to the apostolic activity of the Church is to be himself fully what he is intended to be: namely, a man of silence and of prayer. One of the functions of the monastic life is to show, or at least to suggest, something of what all Christian life is aiming at: the ultimate goal of union with God in love.

Experience has shown that unbelievers who may have nothing but scorn and mistrust for the message of active apostles may find themselves strangely moved by the spectacle of a community of silent monks who have turned away from the world, and who show that a human being can be happy and at peace when he lives in more or less complete independence of the world, ignoring its fashions, its ephemeral pleasures, and its superficial concerns, but praying for the deep and often tragic needs which afflict the world without being recognized by it!









IV - THE WAY OF SILENCE

"Silence is the mystery of the world to come.
Speech is the organ of this present world . . .

Many are avidly seeking, but they alone find
who remain in continual silence . . . Every
man who delights in a multitude of words, even
if he says admirable things, is empty within.
Silence will illuminate you in God and deliver
you from the phantoms of ignorance.

• Silence will unite you to God Himself . . .

More than all things love silence: it brings
you a fruit that the tongue cannot describe.
In the beginning we have to force ourselves
to be silent. But then from our very silence is
born something that draws us into deeper
silence. May God give you an experience of this
'something' that is born of silence. If you
practice this, inexpressible light will dawn
upon you."

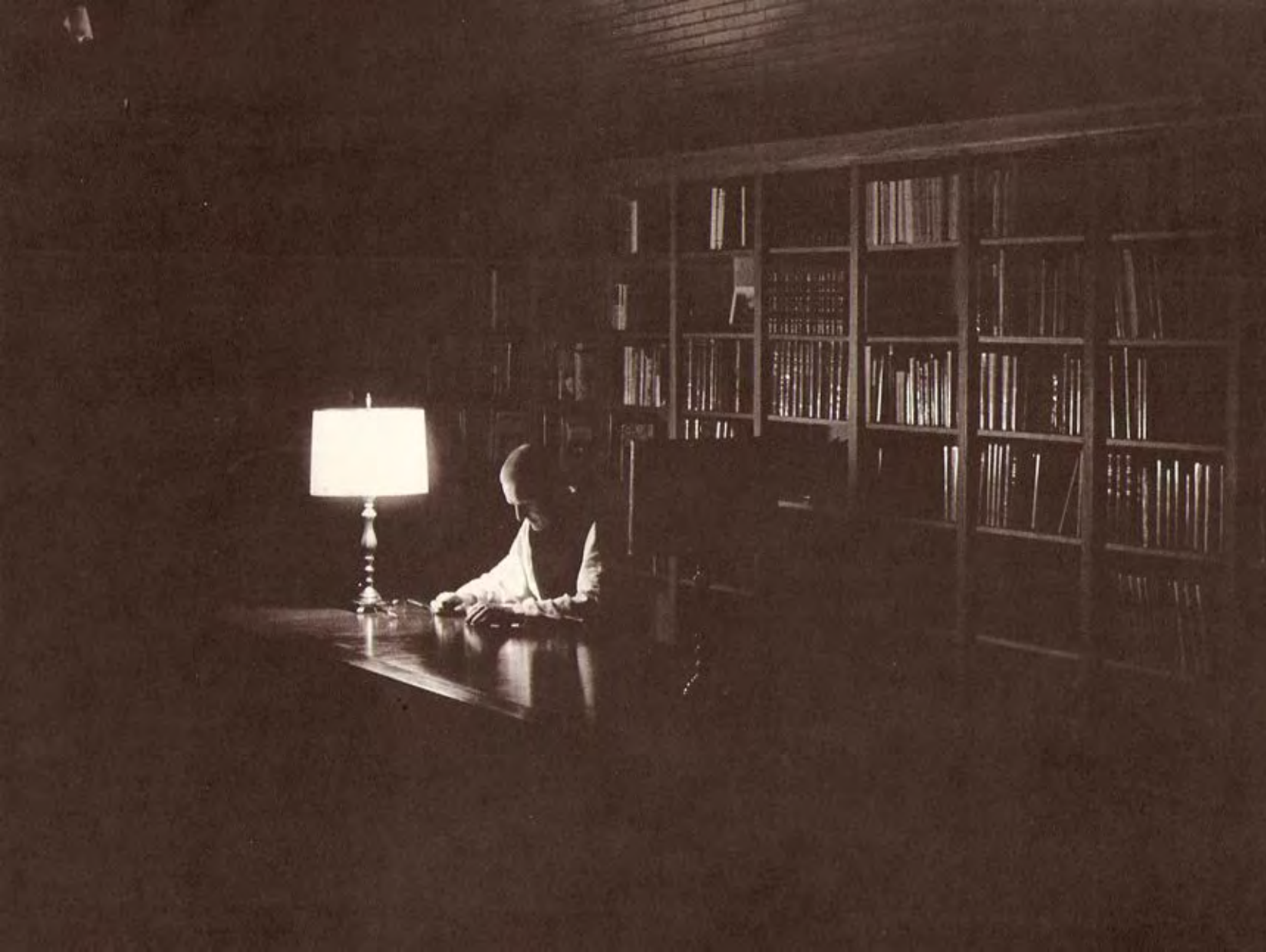
Isaac of Ninive.

It is said that the Temple of Solomon was built of stones quarried and shaped underground so that no sound of hammers and chisels would disturb the sacred silence in which the walls of God's house rose into the sky. Rabbinic commentaries have emphasized the spiritual meaning of this symbolic silence which is "the mystery of the world to come." A modern philosopher, Max Picard has meditated on the tragic lack of silence in twentieth century life. He speaks of the need of a foundation of silence which gives meaning to words. The mere ceaseless flow of words, sounds, images, and plain crude noise which constantly assails the senses of modern man must be regarded as a serious problem. Not only does the volume of noise in the world threaten man's nervous balance and make him ill, but the overproduction of words and concepts is a menace to his spiritual health. That is why it is a mistake to overemphasize the role of words and actions in worship. Participation must indeed become active and intelligent, but liturgy will only suffer if it becomes merely another interval of loquacious gesturing in a day that is surfeited with words without meaning. Hence the importance of rediscovering religious silence, and the Vatican Council has reminded us, in the Constitution on Liturgy, that moments of silence must be kept in the Church's worship. One of the most important features of the liturgical renewal is insistence on *listening* to the Word of God read in the sacred assembly, and then participating in a corporate reply. For this listening to be effective, a certain interior silence is required. This in turn implies the ability to let go of one's congested, habitual thoughts and preoccupations so that one can freely open his heart to the message of the sacred text. Silence is crucially important for spiritual freedom.

Freedom from the importunate demands of the world, the flesh and the more hidden and sinister voice of that evil power that makes us captives of violence and lust. In order that we may be free from these forces, we must learn how to break off our dialogue with them.

Silence has two aspects: not speaking, and not hearing. But experience teaches that the mere negative refusal to communicate is not really effective. It does not really break communication. The person who freezes into a rigid and negative refusal is in fact still communicating with the other. He is saying "I reject you, I condemn you," and more than that he is perhaps seeking attention for this fact. "I want you to know that I am having nothing to do with you." If the other responds with a similar attitude, then the two are communicating their dislike, and as long as they continue to do so, they are not really silent, even though they may not be on "speaking terms." Each time they meet, they communicate dislike and outrage with their whole being. This may end up by being far more exhausting and *distracting* than communication with words.

There is an obvious danger that monastic silence could become little more than a parody of this form of silent communication. But that would not be silence at all. Therefore Paul the Deacon, commenting on the Rule of St. Benedict in the 9th century said: "Silence is born from humility and the fear of the Lord . . . Humility and gravity make a man (externally) perfect. Humility makes him perfect in his composure of body, and gravity perfects him in the practice of silence." Gravity here refers to a deep inner seriousness and thoughtfulness, a reflective quality, a self-possession, an awareness, which all combine







monk made his vows, or the days between the death and burial of a brother, in which all entered more deeply into the mystery of silence and reflected on the last things and the world to come.

The chief function of monastic silence is then to preserve that *memoria Dei* which is much more than just "memory." It is a total consciousness and awareness of God which is impossible without silence, recollection, solitude and a certain withdrawal.

It is true that modern man is not at home in such silence as this. Many feel at first self-conscious, embarrassed, artificial when they have to keep quiet. They imagine that others are looking at them and cannot understand how men can live together without talking. This may be a great difficulty for some monastic vocations, and the most severe test of one's calling is often this trial by silence. Actually, one who is truly able to be silent will relax and be at peace even in the midst of other silent men, and will have a simple spontaneous love for those times when he can be alone and look out at the mountains around the monastery, or walk quietly apart, reading, praying, or meditating, alone with God.

In the last resort, monastic silence is not just a practice, it is a grace, a gift of God. Those who desire this great gift may have to recognize their natural incapacity to gain it by any effort of their own, and must humbly pray for it. They must also learn to be worthy of the gift by suffering trial in silence for long periods. It is by suffering in silence that we come to know the deep inner joy that silence alone can open up to the heart that seeks God.



183h

V-VOCATION

"Thus says the Lord:

The people that escaped the sword
have found favor in the desert.

As Israel comes forward to be given his rest,
the Lord appears to him from afar:

With age-old love I have loved you;
so I have kept my mercy toward you."

"They departed in tears,
but I will console them and guide them;

I will lead them to brooks of water,
on a level road, so that none shall stumble."

"The Lord shall ransom Jacob,
he shall redeem him from the hand of his
conqueror.

Shouting, they shall mount the heights of Sion,
they shall come streaming to the Lord's blessings:

To grain, the wine, and the oil,
the sheep and the oxen;

They themselves shall be like watered gardens,
never again shall they languish."

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evil-doing and remember their sin no more."

Jeremias 31:2-3; 9; 11-12; 33-34

"Come, let us bow down in worship;
Let us kneel before the Lord who made us.

For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds,
the flock he guides."

Psalms 94:6-7.

"And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come; and he who wishes, let him receive the water of life freely."

Apocalypse 22:17.

Jesus compared Himself to a Shepherd and said that His sheep would know the sound of His voice, just as He would know His own. "He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep . . . the sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:2-3.) One of the basic truths of Christian faith is expressed in this idea of the divine call and the answer of man. The whole of Christian life is outlined in this vocation and response. This is repeatedly illustrated by the Gospel narrative.





19 dh

Every Christian is one who has heard the call of Christ and responded to it personally. Therefore it is not correct to think that only those in monasteries, convents, seminaries and presbyteries have "vocations." Every Christian has a vocation to be a disciple of Christ and to follow Christ. Some follow Him in the married state which, though it is not an imitation of His life on earth, is nevertheless a participation in the mystery of His presence in the world (Ephesians 5:25-31.) Others follow Him in lives of chastity, poverty, obedience and in their duty to serve others in love. The monk does not have two vocations, one as a Christian and another on top of that as a monk. His monastic vocation is simply a development of his Christian vocation, a further step along the road chosen for him by Christ. Happy is the man who hears the voice of Christ calling him to silence, solitude, prayer, meditation, and the study of His word.

This call to live with Christ apart from men, "on the mountain alone" (John 6:15) is a rare and special one, particularly in our day. But it is also very important for the Church, and for this reason those who believe they see indications of this vocation in themselves or in others must take the fact seriously and, in a spirit of prayer and prudence, seek to do something about it.

The peace of monastic silence and solitude has a natural appeal for many people, and it is not strange that in our time large numbers of candidates have presented themselves in the strictest monasteries, seeking precisely the hard and dedicated life of those Orders which have most explicitly renounced the world. An attraction to silence and prayer, a generous desire to embrace discipline and offer one's mature years in sacrifice to God may perhaps be a sign of genuine vocation. But the attraction is not enough by itself. Nor is the absence of attraction a guarantee that vocation is lacking.

An extraordinary life of piety is not necessarily an indication that a person belongs in the contemplative life.

Often there are people who can live piously in the world but who, having entered the cloister, become too introspective and self-conscious, and their piety becomes artificial, excessive and strained. A monk must be a well-balanced person, and his piety must be sincere and deep. He must as St. Benedict says sincerely seek God, and he must be able to live sociably, simply and charitably with others, and he must have a solid foundation of virtues, an ability to serve cheerfully and generously, to be humble and kind, and above all willing to change and to learn. A person who is seemingly established in pious ways and who apparently knows all about the interior life may do quite badly in the cloister because of an inability to change and to learn new paths of the spirit.

Sometimes those who are oppressed by a burden of inordinate work in the active life turn to the contemplative cloister looking for peace and rest: but this is not necessarily the solution to their problems, though there are always a few members in monastic communities who have made a very good adjustment after beginning in the active life.

The call to monastic life is a matter of free choice, but we must always remember that it is a choice that is first made by God (John 15:16.) Yet God's choice may be manifested in obscure and strange ways. It is often hard to say clearly just what constitutes a vocation. This question has to be answered not in the abstract but in each concrete case, on the basis of prudence and experience, by those who are qualified to help the candidate make his response to what seems to be God's call.

Speaking of the Cistercian vocation St. Aelred says: "You are called by Christ, called to suffer together with Christ, to the end that you may reign together with Christ. And we are called in three ways: by exterior admonition, by example, and by secret inspiration."



20 ch





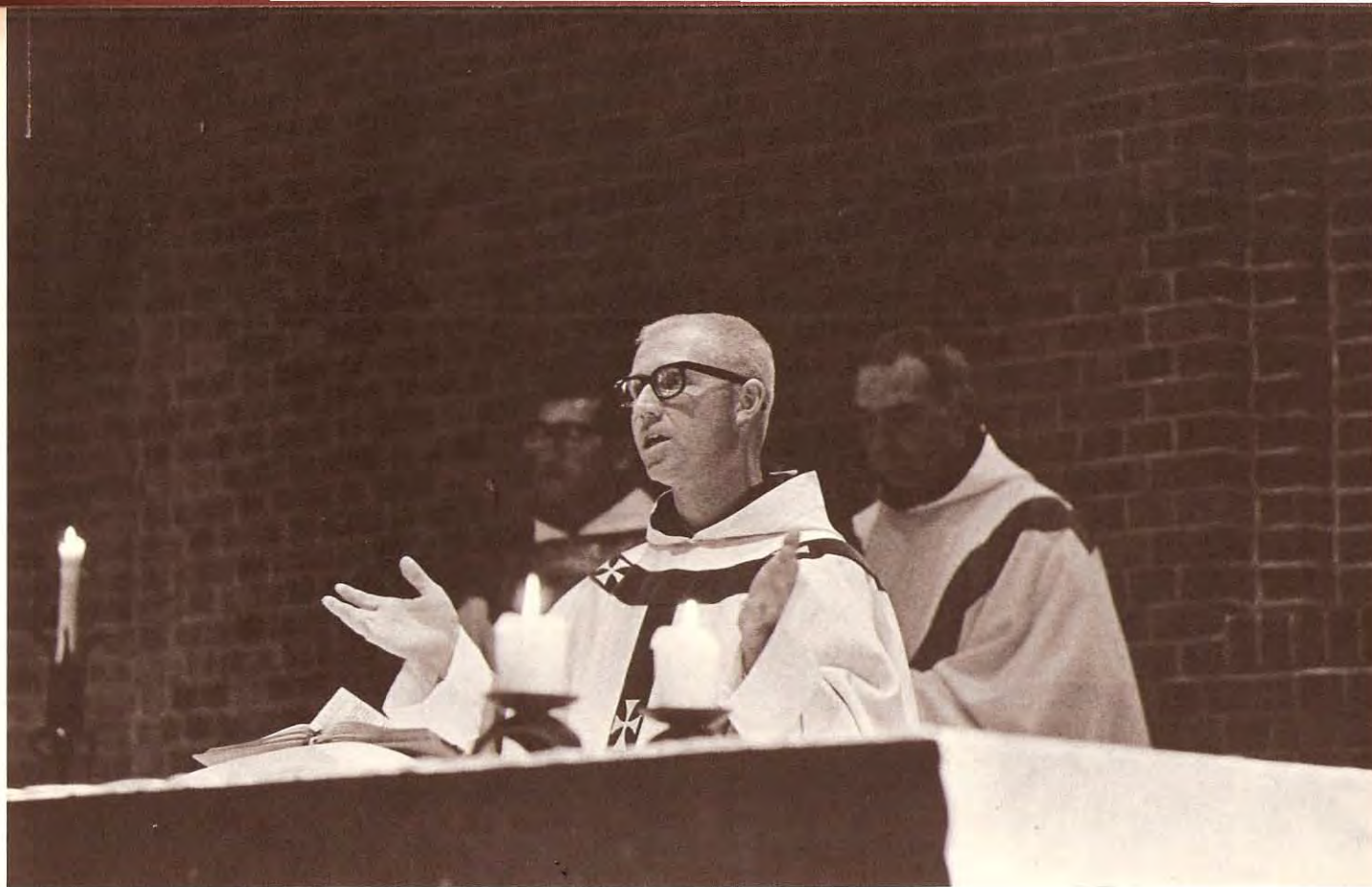
Sometimes the idea of the monastic life is awakened by a word of advice, by the suggestion of a priest or a good spiritual friend, even by a chance remark. Sometimes too, the example of another who has left the world to become a contemplative may lead us to think seriously of doing the same.

Sometimes a man is led to the monastic life by a deep, persistent and long-standing attraction, with a gradually dawning inner conviction that this is what he should do. This may involve a great deal of uncertainty and inner conflict. Relatively few vocations are decided without struggle. But any Catholic man who sincerely seeks to give his life to God in the monastery, who understands what the monastic life is all about, and who is willing to accept the life as it actually is, may apply for admission.

However, the candidate must have certain essential qualities of body, mind and spirit. He must first of all be mature (most Cistercian monasteries ask somewhat more than the minimum age tolerated by canon law: eighteen or twenty is in practice the minimum age considered by vocation directors in our Order). He must have sufficient health to be able to live the rule, with its fasts, manual labor, vigils, common dormitory and so on.

At least a high school education is required, and in many cases those interviewing the candidate may decide that he ought to go to college before entering. As to moral qualities, it is obviously not expected that everyone who applies for admission should be already a model of perfection, but he must really mean business and he must have some guarantee, from experience, that he is able to keep the obligations imposed by the vows. A sudden conversion from a disordered life is not necessarily a sign that one also has a vocation to the monastic life. On the contrary, in





23 dh

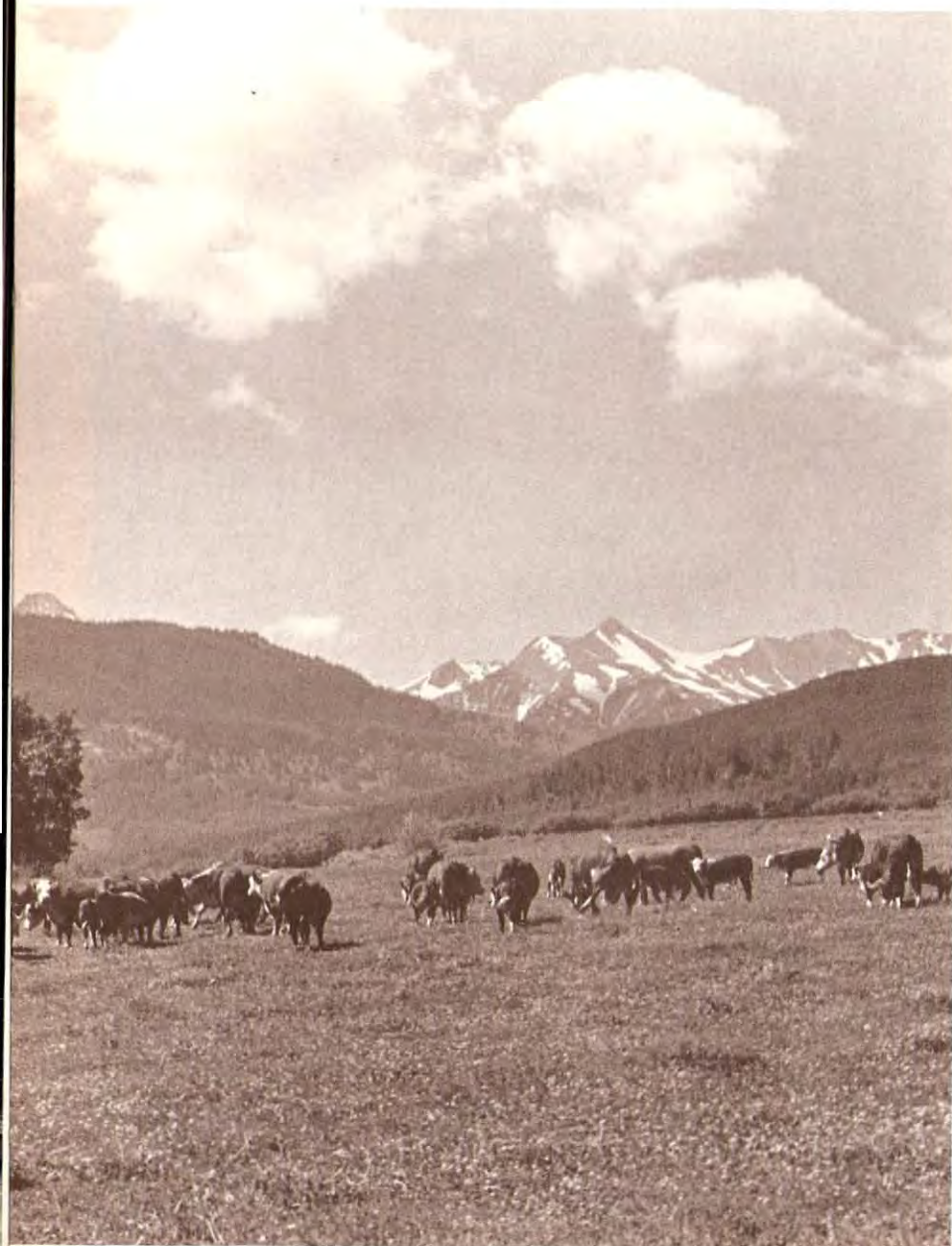
such cases prudence requires a period of waiting and testing which may extend over several years.

For the rest, those who interview the postulant in the monastery itself will have to judge his case in the light of their own experience and of the grace of state given them by God. He should accept their judgement in a spirit of faith.

If an applicant has been favorably received and if he is admitted to the monastery, then his vocation, though not yet certain becomes very probable and he is obliged at least to respond seriously, with humble prayer for the

strength that will be needed if he is to succeed.

It is good to begin well in the monastic life, to abandon oneself in faith to the merciful care of God. He who did not abandon us when we were far from Him will certainly give us all the grace we need when we try to follow His will. If He seems to be hidden from us, and if in the monastery there are times when we feel that we are going backwards instead of progressing, this we must understand as part of His plan for us. It is a test of our faith.



The important thing in the monastic life is to persevere. The monastery does not exist as a temporary retreat from which one can simply return to the world and take up where he left off. A monastic vocation is for life, and he who enters the monastery should not do so merely to "see how hard it is" or, for that matter, how easy. It is not the relative easiness of hardness of the monastic life that counts, but the fidelity with which one embraces the life as God's will and continues to follow every indication of that holy will until death. The real beauty of the monastic vocation is in its imitation of Abraham's journey into exile at the call of God. It was not a tour of a few weeks in the desert, but a life long exile, *peregrinatio*, in search of a land promised by God Himself.

He who hears the voice of God must recognize that he is called to an adventure whose ending he cannot foresee because it is in the hands of God. That is the risk and the challenge of the monastic calling: we surrender our lives into the hands of God and never take them back.

As to the joys, the hopes, the fears, the needs and the fulfillments that will come to us — we do not plan on them and we do not evade them. Our business is to seek first the Kingdom of God in solitude and in prayer. The rest will be taken care of.

Needless to say, a warm and filial devotion to Our Lady will tend to lighten many burdens and will give our dedication a more loving generosity.



IMPRIMATUR:

† Urban J. Vehr
Archbishop of Denver
November 29, 1964

Cum permissu Superiorum

Text by Thomas Merton

For further information write to:
Father Superior
St. Benedict's Monastery
Snowmass, Colorado 81654

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