

Holding the Place of Christ:
Leadership in the Divine Household

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
School of Theology of the University of the South
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

May, 2012

Sewanee, Tennessee

Approved:

Date:

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Introduction

“The superior of a monastery of Benedictines will be a Christ figure, simple, unassuming, immersed in God, loving of the marginal, doer of the Gospel, beacon to the strong.” –Joan Chittister¹

As we seek to be disciples Jesus Christ, the faith communities we inhabit shape our spiritual journeys. Our level of fidelity to any particular community affects our growth in the spiritual life. Each community has a distinct character and history, and to be fully alive they must each seek to be firmly grounded in the Gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The vitality of any intentional community can be measured by the fruit it produces in individual members and in the community as a whole. But whether the community is intentional or not, its vitality in most cases is largely dependent on the nature of the leadership model that oversees and shapes its common life. Matthew Kelty, a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, reflects on the nature leadership in the religious community in a homily titled, “The Call of Wild Geese.” Considering wild geese attempting to construct their V formation in the sky over the Abbey, he offers:

No community gets anywhere without leadership and without fellowship which is consensus in action. Fellowship without fellowship is fraternity-house theology, not Christianity. And fellowship without leadership is a kindergarten for there is no communion of action. If the birds are not flying with all they have, the pattern falls apart.²

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of St. Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 36.

² Matthew Kelty, *The Call of Wild Geese*, ed. William O. Paulsell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 11.

As the Church struggles to keep pace with the many ideological shifts involved in the transfer from a modern to a postmodern culture, it must rethink its leadership models. This transfer is creating greater urgency because the quickly ascending Millennial generation's understandings of leadership differ significantly from that of the Baby Boomer generation. Among the piles of current books on the nature of the so-called "Emerging/Emergent Church," there are usually chapters prescribing how leadership must change to evangelize and include a generation of unchurched seekers. For instance, in *The Leadership Jump: Building Partnerships Between Existing and Emerging Church Leaders*, Jimmy Long rightly points out the cultural shift from heroic to post-heroic leadership.

The thesis of this paper is that the Benedictine monastic tradition provides an appropriate foundation and prescription for leadership in the parish church. More specifically, this study will look at how leadership centered on the Rule of St. Benedict can shape and strengthen Christian discipleship. St. Benedict's Rule offers wise principles for leadership and community structure that can well serve this period of cultural transition.

Chapter One

The Rule of St Benedict:

Shaping and Leading the Religious Community from the Inside Out

While Christian communities take many shapes and have different ways of organizing their common life, the monastic community has historically been, and continues to be, one of the most concentrated settings for the pursuit of God. The intensity of life in a monastic community can be a crucible for deepening the spiritual journey and for the growth of one's discipleship with others. Although foundationally different, both monastery and parish are organized for the proclamation and work of the Gospel and seek to provide a gracious place where Christians may center their life's journey in God.

Benedict writes in his Prologue, "We intend to establish a school for the Lord's service." (RB Prologue: 45)³ The Rule provides a sturdy template for the organization and functioning of this school of prayer and work in service of the Gospel, and it has been continually employed, in varying degrees, to structure the life of many intentional Christian communities. How this school forms and nurtures Christian disciples and communities in the spiritual journey is an organizing concern of my own leadership within the parish church.

When I was newly ordained, I heard Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, speaking to the clergy of the Diocese of Upper South Carolina, remark that he often conceived of

³ Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), Subsequent quotations are from this edition of the Rule.

his role as a “pastor of systems.” That conception has stuck with me as I endeavor to exercise leadership in the parish. However, it is only through greater familiarity with the Rule of St. Benedict that I have begun to understand the fullness of what a “pastor of systems” might be. Whatever Bishop Griswold means by the phrase, it is, on its own, a rather dry and abstract conception, especially when applied to a spiritual community. However, Benedict’s emphasis on the role of the abbot and the instructions guiding his care of the community has great potential for breathing spiritual vitality into this understanding of a “pastor of systems.”

Over the years, in those moments when I am bogged down and frustrated by a host of administrative responsibilities, I try to remind myself of Esther de Waal’s observation, in *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, that “The good ordering of temporal affairs has always been a hallmark of the Benedictine life, and in practice it involves the abbot in a vast amount of organization.”⁴ More recently, I have been encouraged by Julia Gatta’s Benedictine understanding of management in her book, *The Nearness of God: Parish Ministry as Spiritual Practice*, that “the work of administration, when conscientiously engaged, is a truly pastoral vocation of careful, wise, judicious oversight and a gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁵ Indeed, Benedict’s prescriptions for the monastery’s abbot can offer valuable guidance for the spiritual and pastoral leadership of the parish church.

⁴ Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), 135.

⁵ Julia Gatta, *The Nearness of God: Parish Ministry as Spiritual Practice* (New York: Morehouse, 2010), 90.

This comparison between abbot and rector is apt precisely because the rector is elected by the parish and empowered by the bishop to exercise her ministry in a manner not wholly inconsistent with the election of an abbot. Many of Benedict's injunctions for the abbot can be directly applied by pastors attempting to exercise leadership in the Church. Of course, parts of the abbatial regime are distinct to monastic life and are only, in most cases, ideals to be prayed for and approximated in the life of a parish community.

Joan Chittister writes that the monastery "is to be a light to remind all of us how beautiful the world would be if we shaped our own lives out of the same values."⁶ It is, therefore, part of the abbot's leadership to challenge the community to strive continually, through its prayer and work, to be this light. More specifically, he is charged by the Rule to create the environment in which this challenge may be devotedly taken up by mature and obedient disciples who seek the journey to God through an ever deepening relationship with Christ.

In order to make leadership parallels and applications it is essential to attempt an understanding of what kind of rule or regime Benedict intended for the abbacy. Describing the qualities necessary for the abbot, Benedict makes clear right at the beginning of his Rule that "[The abbot] is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery" (RB 2:2). His life and teaching ministry must, therefore, be deeply grounded in the Gospel of Christ. This means that the abbot follows the Christic pattern of the one who loves God by loving and serving his brothers. The abbot's own journey begins as a novice in the community he is called to serve and guide. Benedict's design for the

⁶ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 164.

monastery should then provide for and shape the kind of leadership required. Chittister is clear that “The monastery is not a royal court, a military barracks, or a detention home.” Therefore, she continues, “The role of leadership is not to make lackeys or foot soldiers or broken children out of adult Christians.”⁷ While the entire functioning of the monastic community orbits the abbot and the gravitational pull of his direction, he is not a king, a feudal lord, or a governor.

Often misconstrued as such, partly because of the title “father,” the abbot is also not the roman *paterfamilias* of Benedict’s time. In his work, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of St. Benedict*, Adalbert De Vogüé, takes quite a bit of time to correct this secularly conceived notion. The problem with the secular model of the *paterfamilias* is that it is a high-handed authority that is not to be questioned by the members of the family. De Vogüé rightly points out that Benedict, following the Rule of the Master, strictly adheres to biblical themes and images, and not secular models, to buttress his design of the abbacy. De Vogüé writes, “The two rules have taken everything from the Bible contemplated in the light of the Church’s tradition. There is not the slightest hint of the roman family.”⁸ De Vogüé does point out that in the Rule of the Master the cenobium is explicitly compared to a family. However, for both the Master’s and Benedict’s understanding of the abbot’s role in the monastic family, “The abbot is only a subordinate chief, a vice agens of the father of the family, who is the Lord himself.”⁹

⁷ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 38.

⁸ Adalbert De Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

The abbot would not refer to the monastery as his own the way many rectors often refer to the parish they have been called to serve as “my church.” While some rectors may certainly be implying a sense of belonging with this possessive pronoun, for others there can develop a sense of ruling ownership. And even though we speak of a person’s call to ordained ministry as something raised up and affirmed by the community, the “calling community” is a much broader and loosely connected one. Once ordained, the priest usually ministers to a community other than the one that sent him to seminary. By contrast, the abbot is raised up to be an example and guide of the rule of life that a community of committed brothers has vowed to follow.

The helpful connection that De Vogüé makes in showing how the family imagery is, in fact, useful when he points out that “Churches and monasteries belong to the same category, the divine households.”¹⁰ The abbot and rector are, in this way, comparable as stewards or vicars of the true father who is Christ. The rector is, perhaps, somewhat less so since he is under the direct apostolic authority of his bishop, but nevertheless, he is called to be the one who represents Christ to the community.

A fundamental problem in rightly understanding the nature of authority in either of these divine households begins with the mistake of looking to the form of the institution, whether diocese and parish or order and monastery, rather than to the foundational purpose for which the form was initially constructed. Distant from individual parishes and an infrequent presence, most bishops are increasingly unable to effectively incarnate a primary apostolic calling to oversee the flock by interpreting the

¹⁰ De Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict*, 101.

Gospel through the example of their life and teaching. The Church is rife with confusion about the role and the purpose of the diocesan bishop. And the rector, in far too many quarters, is thought of as a person the parish employs mostly to provide Sunday worship and the other pastoral offices of the institution. This can lead to seeing the minister as a hireling rather than a shepherd sharing in the ministry of Christ. Looking to Benedict's stress on the abbot's role as teacher and guide at the center of the community has the potential to reorder some of the distortions of the bishop's and the rector's primary ministries. These primary roles are also central to the ordination rites in the Book of Common Prayer.

Benedict's wisdom about the purpose of the abbatial regime lies in his intention to establish the monastery "as a school for the Lord's service." This language immediately and accurately describes the monastery's common mission to provide the environment for a life-long pursuit of learning how to travel the path to God in humble and obedient relationship with brothers or sisters in Christ. It is the abbot, along with the other leaders he utilizes, who is responsible for the creation of this environment. De Vogüé claims that "All the collective organization of the pachomian 'Congregation' has no other end than to procure for everyone the benefit of the direction of the man of God."¹¹

De Vogüé's analysis of the foundations of monastic life is a helpful corrective to our misunderstandings of hierarchy in the Church. The role of the abbot cannot accurately be grasped by viewing the abbacy as an institutional office of a monastic community. Such a view places the abbot at the end of the community's formation. The

¹¹ De Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict*, 108.

abbot is not the end, but the beginning of the community. The basic unit of the monastic life is the purely spiritual need of a person for a guide to God. This is not, of course, a presumption shared by most of Protestantism.

Intent solely on seeking God, individuals fled to the desert to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. They were soon followed by others seeking the trailhead that opened onto a deepened and more committed spiritual journey. Solitary contemplatives became wise guides. “In its simplest form [spiritual direction] is realized in the association of a master and his disciples living together in solitude.”¹²

Therefore, De Vogüé points out that Pachomian monasticism was the final result of an increased number of disciples around a single master. He writes that “Without the [abbot] the cenobitic society is not even conceivable, because it is he who engenders and assembles it. He is not just a solution . . . to the problem of monastic government; he is the *raison d’être* of this society. In other words, it would be wrong to think first of the monastery and then of the abbot. The abbot, the man of God invested with the charismatic mission of teaching and governing souls, comes first.”¹³

Benedict’s school requires that a teacher exist at its center. It might be argued that De Vogüé overstates the historical primacy of the master and disciple relationship, as monks most surely learn and are formed by their relationships with others in community, but the abbot is still the one who regulates and enables the community’s vitality. To accomplish this regulation in the community, Benedict instructs that the one elected abbot “should be discerning and moderate,” because it is his responsibility to “arrange

¹² De Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict*, 107.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

everything so that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from” (RB 64:17-19).

In our contemporary business leadership lingo, we might ask, “What is the necessary “skill set” required to be the abbot or the rector?” If we persist with a line of analysis drawn from business management, we will certainly find ourselves far wide of the mark. It is a sad commentary on the state of the Church that so many search processes for rectors and bishops place administrative skills at the top of the list of qualifications. This kind of MBA emphasis might make Benedict’s requirements for the person qualified to be elected abbot appear quaint. Benedictine wisdom might also challenge the criteria of discernment for holy orders, especially in this time of decreased emphasis on the formational value of the three year residency in a seminary. Can receiving the oft evoked “Anglican glaze” through a year of seminary and other less community based schemes actually hope to provide the necessary preparation and formation for a life in holy orders?

Benedict’s concise list of principles guiding the choice of the abbot fills only one short chapter. The principles given by Benedict in chapter sixty-four are in order of priority with each quality enhancing the others. Very simply put, the first principle of discernment is that “Goodness of life and wisdom in teaching must be the criteria for choosing the abbot, even if he is the last in community rank” (RB 64:2). How might the candidate come by this goodness of life and wisdom? In the school that is the monastery, the persons qualified to serve as abbot will be those who are good students in the Way. Benedict astutely writes, “He ought, therefore, to be learned in divine law, so that he has

a treasury from which he can *bring out what is new and what is old* (Matt 13:52). He must be chaste, temperate, and merciful” (RB 64:9). This wisdom should be apparent in the candidate who exhibits good judgment in his dealings with his brothers and the affairs of the monastery. “He should be discerning and moderate” (RB 64:17). Benedict knows that these will be the qualities of the monk whose discipleship in Christ is consistently guided by the Rule in loving God and his brothers. These injunctions of Benedict’s call the rector to be recognized as a theological and spiritual resource of the community before prizing her gifts as an effective branch manager.

Benedict rounds out this chapter on the qualities of a model abbot by listing some of the characteristics that he should not possess: “Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous, or oversuspicious he must not be. Such a man is never at rest” (RB 64:16). So it is that in the sixth century, with two sentences, Benedict grasped the leadership psychology at the heart of Edwin Friedman’s teaching that the pastor must strive to be a “nonanxious presence.”

The elected abbot is to be both the embodiment of the Benedictine Rule and the one who ensures that the monastic environment is structured so that others can strive to embody it. Both ideals can only be achieved in concert with each other. As Joan Chittister writes, “If a leader gives way to moodiness or institutional paranoia, if a leader is not emotionally balanced and spiritually grounded, a whole climate is poisoned. What we cannot model, we cannot expect.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 166.

In a parish I formerly served, I arranged for a priest colleague and mentor of mine, who follows a Benedictine rule of life, to lead our vestry retreat. Addressing a whole range of concerns and complaints, he stung the group, remarking first that they could not expect the parish to be any more committed or prayerfully engaged than they themselves were willing to be. He went on to tell them that they could not give away what they did not have. I have kept that advice in front of me as I challenge our Cathedral Chapter to embody the vision for mission that we proclaim.

In the Prologue of his Rule, Benedict invites people into an obedient form of life on a path to God guided by the Gospel. As the abbot holds the place of Christ, he is the primary guide for those who seek to follow in the way of the cross. As the shepherd of the flock, the abbot “must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words” (RB 2:11).

After describing the qualities that the abbot must embody, Benedict is able to say even more about the abbacy by focusing on the way the abbot is called to minister to the souls in his charge. Benedict uses the image of the shepherd, mirroring Christ as the Good Shepherd, to speak of the abbot’s care: “The abbot must show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits” (RB 2:22).

In her chapter on the role of the abbot, Esther de Waal focuses on the pastoral nature of abbatial authority. She centers the abbot’s calling in the care that he extends to his brothers. She is right to point out that throughout the Rule, wherever the abbot is called to instruct or reprove his brothers, he is to do so always with the utmost love and care. He is not the hireling who is careless with the sheep. He is the shepherd who

knows the names of each. As de Waal writes, “Caring involves healing, and the mark of the abbot is also that of the physician, the skillful doctor.”¹⁵ Here, again, the pastoral and catechetical ministries of the abbot precede those that involve managing the institution.

The leadership parallel for the rector is clear. Sheep are not driven. Instead they follow the voice of the shepherd who cares for them. When describing “The Abbot’s Concern for the Excommunicated” in Chapter 27, Benedict reminds the abbot that “He should realize that he has undertaken care of the sick, not tyranny over the healthy” (RB 27:6). Here St. Benedict is describing the abbot as a pastor of souls, not a despotic ruler of subjects. It is sometimes much easier and more concrete to guide committees, define direction, and shape vision than it is to be attentive in the difficult pastoral work of listening and praying with people in the midst of their particular circumstances.

De Waal’s insight is that with the Rule, Benedict is setting up a pastorally attentive community that can provide “a blue print for any caring community.”¹⁶ De Waal is right to illuminate this aspect of abbatial oversight, as it pervades Benedict’s descriptions of how the abbot relates to the souls in his care. This is another mark of the wisdom of Benedict’s Rule. As he sets up and defines the nature of abbatial authority and how this authority structures the common life of the community, he everywhere infuses it with a sense of authority rooted in a compassionate servanthood that models Christ’s own ministry. In the chapter on the abbot’s qualities, Benedict emphasizes attention to the varying needs of community members as a vital aspect in the abbot’s pastoral care: “He must vary with circumstances, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern

¹⁵ De Waal, *Seeking God*, 132.

¹⁶ De Waal, *Seeking God*, 132.

as the taskmaster, devoted and as tender as a father can be.” And “he must accommodate and adapt himself to each one’s character and intelligence” (RB 2:24-32). Christopher Bryan describes this type of Christ-centered leadership as a “disciplined calmness.” He goes on to say that the character of this form of leadership is “both of gentleness and of a firmness that remains polite—a calm, disciplined strength. Such strength can exercise clemency and even rebuke with courtesy, precisely because it is the mark of those who know who they are and whose they are.”¹⁷

This caring service to the individual monk characterizes all positions of leadership in the monastic community. A single example of the pervasiveness of this care of souls in Benedict’s Rule can be found in his direction for the care of “sick brothers.” Here he instructs, “The abbot must take the greatest care that cellarers and those who care for the sick do not neglect them, for the shortcomings of disciples are his responsibility” (RB 36:10). The two words “greatest care” should be stressed. Although this section is on those who are physically ill, there is a way in which the abbot might interpret this as applying to the way brothers treat each other. It is easy to look the other way and forget the needs of my brother. Benedict wants the abbot to insure that no one is neglecting his weaker brothers.

The structure and regulation of interpersonal relationships is certainly an overarching theme for the Benedictine community. Obedient discipleship to God and to my brothers and sisters in Christ is necessary for the vitality of the monastic community as well as the parish community. Life in community is hard work. I remarked above

¹⁷ Christopher Bryan, *And God Spoke: The Authority of the Bible for the Church Today* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2002), 126-27.

that some of the distinct characteristics of monastic life are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in the parish community. This monastic character is, again, perhaps only an ideal to be prayed for and approximated in the life of the parish church. The simplest reason for this is that someone who joins a monastic community is seeking a deeper level of intentional commitment to Christ through vows to God, his abbot, and the community of his brothers in Christ.

This Gospel call is not fundamentally dissimilar for those who seek to join a parish family, but the intention and the execution are often much different. Commenting on Benedict's prologue, Joan Chittister writes, "The spiritual life takes discipline. It is something to be learned, to be internalized. It's a way of life, an attitude of mind, an orientation of the soul. And it is gotten to by being schooled until no rules are necessary."¹⁸ At a preaching workshop I attended some years ago, Walter Brueggemann made the observation that people come to church with a deep ambivalence. He explained that people come to church seeking God, but are not really sure how close they want to get. It might be argued that it is this ambivalence that makes holy listening and committed discipleship a more difficult commodity to come by in the parish community.

The abbot must be obedient to The Rule and he must have the obedience of those he leads. Surely this is why Benedict opens his Rule with the invitation, "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice" (RB 1:1). Listening obedience is at the heart of the student's relationship with

¹⁸ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 29-30.

those who seek to guide him. Chittister characterizes this relationship writing that “Abbots and prioresses are to teach, to proclaim, but the community’s responsibility is to listen and to respond. Being in a family does not relieve a child of the responsibility to grow up.”¹⁹

In a previous parish where I served, there was an unfortunate incident in which some older children had damaged parish property. The offending children were identified and I contacted their parents. Instead of responding with an appropriate level of responsibility, the parents immediately defended their children. They neither asked their children to apologize nor made any attempt at financial restitution for the damage. Benedict’s instruction in matters such as these is clear. In chapter 46 regarding “Faults Committed in Other Matters” he teaches, “If someone commits a fault while at any work . . . either by breaking or losing something or failing in any other way in any other place, he must at once come before the abbot and community and of his own accord admit his fault and make satisfaction” (RB 46:1-3).

The listening that Benedict invites is an obedience that is attentive to the prosperity of the community not because there are a rules to be obeyed, but because of devotion to Christ by serving and caring for my brothers and sisters. This mutual obedience is what Benedict requires for the kind of community stability in which the individual pilgrim can travel an unobstructed road to God. Ministering in a consumer culture where people church shop as soon as they dislike some aspect of the church community they attend, makes mutual obedience and stability much different

¹⁹ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 38.

propositions. The willingness to learn from a spiritual parent and from my brothers and sisters in Christ is not a virtue that is easily compatible with a self-guided approach to spiritual growth. Chittister writes, “Stability says that we stay with a thing in order to grow, not in order not to grow.”²⁰ Certainly the abbot’s leadership is not made in any way easier simply because of his brothers’ commitment to stay and work it out with each other, but it does open the door for guidance in the Gospel life.

If they are stable and rooted in the Gospel, both abbot and rector have the ability to call those under their care and instruction into a healing life of prayer with each other. Benedict calls the abbot, or rector, as a spiritual father, to be “a catalyst for the spiritual and psychological growth of the individual monastic. The prioress and abbot provide an environment that confronts the monastic with the presence of God, that shows them the Way.”²¹

If it is the abbot’s responsibility to shape the environment of the divine household, then the community must embrace a mutual, listening obedience as one of its grounding principals. Further, if mutual obedience is a central component to Chittister’s understanding of the “orientation of the soul,” then it is necessary to explore how individuals and communities have achieved and continue to cultivate mutual obedience.

When Thomas Merton taught the novices under his charge at Gethsemani about the virtue of obedience, he wanted to make clear to them that obedience was more than a mere framework for going about things. In a lecture titled “Religious Obedience as

²⁰ Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 152.

²¹ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 37.

Freedom,” he stressed that “Obedience is a characteristic act of a child of God. . . . It is a response that is tied up with the nature of commitment. . . . Religious obedience is always a response. . . . A response means that something within goes out to meet the other person.”²² To be even clearer about the nature of responding as a going out to the other, Merton claimed,

It should be a response to Christ; a going out to meet Christ in his will. And this, of course, is the thing that supernaturalizes obedience. . . . Obedience always has to go beyond the mere externals. . . . If it is going to be a response to Christ, it means that it goes beyond the visible element of the thing, and therefore it is most certainly an act of faith.²³

Merton’s emphasis on the role of obedience in the spiritual life as an act of faith has profound implications for divine households, whether they are monasteries or parishes. If my response is motivated by some kind of duty, then it can become a resented burden. I may feel impinged upon and refuse to see it as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Casting it as a personal affront, I might back away from making an obedient response. This happened when the parents of the children who had vandalized parish property made no apology or restitution.

As Merton moves to the end of this particular lecture, he laments that “The reason why our obedience is not as good as it might be is because it lacks faith. There’s the whole trouble.”²⁴ By linking obedience to faith, Merton shows how obedience can deepen our union with God: “That’s why Saint Benedict calls obedience a good. . . . It’s

²² Thomas Merton, “Religious Obedience as Freedom”(lecture to the Gethsemani Novitiate, Merton Archive Tape #115, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, April 15, 1964).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

a good in the sense that a sacrament is a good. . . . Your obedience is a communion. . . . It is in proportion to our faith that we can make obedience a communion like that.”²⁵

Those members who share the intentional life of a divine household must understand and learn the obedience that is meant to shape their lives with God and others. Learning in any group implies a teacher at the center. As De Vogüé emphasized, it is the abbot, or teacher, who must initiate and nurture this listening. Correspondingly, the student must be the one who desires to develop a listening obedience both for his own good and for the good of others. We remember that the first two words of the Rule are “Listen carefully.” And we bear in mind De Vogüé’s caution that “it would be wrong to think first of the monastery and then of the abbot. The abbot, the man of God invested with the charismatic mission of teaching and governing souls, comes first.”²⁶

The seed bed of monastic life began with individual seekers going out into the desert to find a master or teacher around whom they might gather and learn. The living out and passing on of an intentional religious life has been, and continues to be, the goal of all divine households patterned on the Rule. This setting of mutual obedience becomes more critical when we appreciate that the abbot himself is shaped within the community that calls him to be the shepherd. The abbot is an inheritor, as all monks are, of the community’s accumulated teachings and traditions that he is called to guard and pass forward.

In *Mystics*, William Harmless presents Thomas Merton as an example of how the spiritual journey is nurtured in the midst of the community. As he explains, “Merton may

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ De Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict*, 107.

be well known for his writings on contemplation, but he spent much time and much energy training Cistercian novices and scholastics in the basics of Cistercian life.”²⁷ Throughout his study of such mystics as Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Bonaventure, Eckhart, and Evagrius, Harmless highlights the obvious but significantly overlooked reality that most mystics were not loners, but rather people who spent long years of apprenticeship living within a religious community. He writes that “Their ordinary lives and their extraordinary mystical teachings were nurtured by and cultivated within the religious orders to which they belonged.”²⁸

Describing this cultivating environment, William Harmless coins the term “mystical community,” defining it as “a religious community that self-consciously commits its members and its communal resources to religious perfection, however it may define that perfection.”²⁹ He goes on to claim that members of truly mystical communities are religious elites. In this claim, Harmless is quick to clarify that this pursuit of perfection does not make them arrogant elitists.

Mystical communities are elites in a quite narrow and quite specific sociological sense: they are professionals. They profess to commit themselves to living out their religious commitments at a radical level. That does not mean they always, or even often, succeed at it. It does mean that they invest the best resources of their individual and corporate lives—intellectual, emotional, physical, economic, ritual—to living out their commitments.³⁰

While many parishes may not be living out their religious commitments at such a “radical level,” investing an ever-increasing share of their individual and corporate lives

²⁷ William Harmless, S.J., *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 243.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

must be the goal for any community seeking to be a divine household of Gospel mission. However any community defines its understanding of Gospel mission, Harmless makes clear that mystical communities pursue it “with intense focus and great personal and corporate energy.”³¹ This energetic environment is one that members of an intentional community should desire and one that the abbot should endeavor to create. Otherwise, the gathering will more closely resemble a club rather than a divine household.

³¹ Ibid.

Chapter Two

Transmission of the Lamp

Thomas Merton as the Inheritor and Teacher of Monastic Wisdom

At the 1973 Orthodox-Cistercian Conference at Oxford, John Eudes Bamberger, the former abbot of the Cistercian monastery in Genesee, New York, gave a lecture on “Thomas Merton and the Christian East.” He focused on the influence of the Desert Tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy on Merton’s own spiritual journey. Bamberger began by noting that among the few items found in Merton’s possession at the time of his tragic death in Thailand was a small Orthodox icon he kept in his breviary. This is significant because, traveling light, Merton might have had only the breviary and perhaps, along with it, some other small image from his Roman Catholic tradition. Instead, he had an icon that testified to the importance the theology of the Patristic East and the spiritual wisdom of hermits of the Egyptian desert held for him. Bamberger, now in possession of this small icon, described the back on which Merton had written a Greek text from the *Philokalia*. The text spoke of the spiritual journey as presenting one’s spirit “naked to God.” This was the work of the desert.

Bamberger, a novice under Merton at Gethsemani, claims Merton’s own journey and immersion into the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and the theologians of the Christian East was evident early on in his study, prayer, and teaching: “Once he had entered into

the Greek tradition Merton would never get very far away from it.”³² Matthew Kelty, also one of Merton’s early novices, would later pick up this desert theme of being naked before God. In a sermon titled, “The Poor Monk,” he explains that “To be poor means to know what one really is before God, to stand alone, naked, wretchedly poor before the Lord. . . . It is not hard to do. I mean you have only to live here and let the place happen to you.”³³ Bamberger and his fellow novices were, therefore, the direct beneficiaries of Merton’s deep interest in this Eastern tradition of pursuing spiritual nakedness before God.

While Bamberger remembered Merton’s comment that “these men of the Egyptian desert have more reality for me than the people living in Louisville,”³⁴ he was quick to point out that Merton did not jump back over his own tradition to discover this kinship. The bloodlines of this spirituality are, of course, square in the Benedictine tradition. In Chapter 42 of the Rule, Benedict recommends the reading of John Cassian’s *Conferences* along with the lives of the early Fathers of the Church. As the spirituality of the Desert Fathers is known through John Cassian, Merton taught his novices that he was the ideal author for monks. However, instead of taking Benedict’s Rule as a place from which to move forward, Merton wisely saw Cassian’s influence on Benedict as the trailhead leading back to the foundations laid by the Early Eastern Fathers and the Desert monks. For ten years, beginning in 1955, Thomas Merton was the master of novices at

³² John Eudes Bamberger, “Thomas Merton and the Christian East,” *Theology and Prayer: Essays on Monastic Themes presented at the Orthodox-Cistercian Conference, Oxford, 1973*, ed. A.M. Allchin (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 72.

³³ Matthew Kelty, *Sermons in a Monastery: Chapter Talks by Matthew Kelty*, ed. William O. Paulsell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

the Abbey of Gethsemani. This period of direction and teaching ended when Merton moved to a hermitage full time. He would spend the last three years of his life living out the ascetic pattern of the Desert Fathers. In 1973, following the trail blazed by Merton, Matthew Kelty received permission from the abbot to live as a hermit for ten years in Papua New Guinea. Longing for home, he returned to the community of Gethsemani to live among his brothers until his death in 2011.

As the Eastern tradition was significant in shaping his own spiritual life, Merton produced a detailed series of lectures on the history of monastic life. He began with Cassian's *Conferences* on the Desert Fathers as a way of introducing and grounding novices in their monastic journey. Merton wrote, "I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me and in which I live: the tradition and spirituality that is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy."³⁵

In 2005, Cistercian Publications, whose first volume of the Studies Series in the mid-sixties was Thomas Merton's *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, launched the new Monastic Wisdom Series. The first volume, selected from Merton's lectures as Gethsemani's master of novices, is titled, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*. These conferences along with four other recently published volumes—*Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*; *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*; *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*; and *Monastic Observances*:

³⁵ Ibid., 69.

Initiation into the Monastic Tradition—trace the history of monasticism, not with an eye to history, but rather with an eye towards how the tradition informs and nourishes contemporary monks as they embark and live out their own monastic journeys in community with other monks. In his Introduction to *Cassian and the Fathers*, Patrick F. O’Connell writes, “These conference notes allow us to see what Thomas Merton considered the essential foundation of a balanced and healthy monastic life.”³⁶

What was the shape of this foundation that Merton sought to trace? In his lecture at Oxford Bamberger stressed that, for Merton, the base of this foundation was found in the tradition of the Eastern Fathers of the Church and the Fathers of the Egyptian desert. He emphasized that early in his monastic life the *Apophthegmata* was among Merton’s preferred reading. “But,” Bamberger asserted, “it was through his study of the early Cistercians that Merton was to be led to further contact with some of the great Greek theologians and mystics. Very probably when reading E. Gilson’s ‘The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard’ he began to recognize the importance of the Greek tradition for the Cistercian Fathers.”³⁷ In his lectures to novices, Merton often refers to Gilson’s work.

Bamberger expanded the account of this Eastern influence, quoting from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where Merton wrote of “the admirable doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa, which undoubtedly had its influence on St. Bernard through Maximus.”³⁸ Bamberger also pointed out that the first chapter of Merton’s book on the

³⁶ Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Cistercian Publications, 2005), xvii.

³⁷ Bamberger, “*Thomas Merton and the Christian East*,” 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

teachings of John of the Cross was an exposition of the mystical theology of Gregory of Nyssa. In his lectures to the novitiate, Merton often emphasized the significance of Gregory for the Cistercian tradition. In one place he connects Gregory with William of St. Thierry, one of the Cistercian Fathers. Merton explained, “The influence of St. Gregory of Nyssa is considerable in the West, and especially on the Cistercian William of St. Thierry, through whom the theology of Gregory of Nyssa became part of the Cistercian heritage—hence his importance for us.”³⁹

Merton’s intuitive sense that he and the novices he was charged with shaping had much to learn from the Desert Tradition and Orthodoxy was more than an academic one. Merton felt that the authentic core of the monastic vocation could be found in the radical witness of these early desert monks. And Bamberger, who knew Merton throughout his life as a monk, reminded the conference of the vocational yearning for the solitude of the hermitage that Merton possessed throughout his monastic life.

At the same Oxford-Cistercian Conference, Rowan Williams presented a paper titled, “Bread in the Wilderness: The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov.” Like Bamberger, Williams also followed a thread of the Eastern influence on Merton by pointing to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. In this work, Merton discusses his attraction to the radical witness of desert monasticism in the thought of Paul Evdokimov. Williams connects Evdokimov’s understanding of the rise of desert monasticism with Merton’s desire for increased solitude and the eremitic life throughout his own monastic vocation. Evdokimov explained that after the Church became

³⁹ Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*, 54.

complicit with the State, the witness of the early Christian martyrs passed on to the monks.

Merton's resonance with this radical monastic witness is evidenced in the lectures at Gethsemani where, in the *Prologue to Cassian*, he offered the novices a small section on the history of monasticism in Mesopotamia and Syria. There he discussed the tradition of the column-sitting Stylites. He asked the novices what should be made of this type of extreme asceticism. He answered the question for them stating that this type of sanctity was a "witness to the divine transcendency, and to the superiority of the spirit. Precisely its uselessness was what made this witness powerful . . . It was a protest against the worldly preoccupation with politics, and politico-theological struggles, with earthly and ecclesiastical ambition."⁴⁰

Following Evdokimov's *The Struggle with God*, Williams made two significant arguments about the Desert Tradition that bear on Merton's own interest and development. First, he stated, "What the monk is doing is witnessing to a radical eschatological folly in the midst of a church which has learnt to sit lightly to the apocalyptic violence of the gospel."⁴¹ And second, "Monasticism is a provisional phenomenon existing for as long as the Church exists as a function of the city, the state, until the city is truly baptized."⁴² Leaving the waywardness of the city, as the early Desert Fathers and Mothers did, and as Merton did in leaving New York for Gethsemani, was the radical first step in such a witness.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*, 70.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, "Bread in the Wilderness: The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov," *Theology and Prayer: Essays on Monastic Themes presented at the Orthodox-Cistercian Conference, Oxford, 1973*, ed. A.M. Allchin (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 80.

⁴² Ibid.

The monk sought the desert not merely to witness against the corrupt culture from which he had retreated, but more significantly to seek a place where he could authentically pursue, through instruction and experience, the transforming power of constant prayer and devotion to God alone. Williams claimed that this radical pursuit of authenticity is one whereby “the monk recoils in horror, anguish, and nausea from the possibilities of ‘bad faith’ which life in the city presents to him and other men. The monk is called to face the threat of nothingness, . . . without any of the anodynes provided by life in society.”⁴³

Williams connected this radical witness with Merton’s own journey, asserting that “the preoccupation with authenticity is, I think, one of the most consistent unifying themes traceable in Merton’s work.”⁴⁴ Authenticity was sought through a process of shedding the false selves that we and the world construct. There is, then, implicit in this process a therapeutic and integrative function for the monk. In his lecture, Williams linked Merton’s own search for the authentic spiritual life with the theme of authenticity found in Evdokimov’s *The Struggle with God*. For Evdokimov, this psychological and spiritual struggle is a process whereby “one goes into the desert to vomit up the interior phantom, the doubter, the double.”⁴⁵ Williams reads in Merton’s biography “a kind of tormented scrupulosity” that makes him “fundamentally concerned with a crisis of ‘integrity.’”⁴⁶ Therefore, in his lectures to novices, one can hear Merton’s connecting them to his own personal struggles of discernment and vocation.

⁴³ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 81.

Merton struggled with his fame as an author and, consequently, with the weight of so many people's projections and expectations. The work of his prayer life and his desire for an increasing amount of solitude reflected the ongoing effort to shed the double or the false self. Williams points to one of clearest and revealing spiritual expressions of this in the oft-quoted remark from *The Sign of Jonas*: "They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis—he's half dead too."⁴⁷ For Merton, and indeed, in Evdokimov, there is "an implicit recognition that the monastic vocation demands a real encounter with one's own 'nothingness,' with the false and illusory persona created by one's betrayal of the true self, the image of God, in a concordat with a false and illusory society."⁴⁸

The goal of any monastic community, especially those structured by the Rule, is the cultivation of a physical and spiritual environment in which one can travel the way to true personhood as a child of God. This goal should be the aspiration all divine households. Participation in the divine life, as the Eastern Church would express it, was the goal of the Desert Fathers as passed down in Cassian's *Conferences* and, through Cassian, into Benedict's own Rule for cenobitic life. The structured pattern of this journey to find both peace in God and harmony with others was what Merton sought to pass on to the novices in his charge. Rowan Williams concluded his paper by pointing out that, while Merton's spirituality was fundamentally grounded in the Cistercian tradition, "it would not be what it is without his devoted and careful study of Greek patristic thought and the Desert Fathers."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 78.

Even in his maturity, Merton was certainly teaching out of his own early experiences and ongoing personal struggles in the monastic community. In the introduction to the first volume, *Cassian and the Fathers*, Patrick O’Connell asserts, “In learning about Cassian and the Fathers from Merton, one learns as well about Merton as monk, as heir to the great monastic teachers, and as teacher of a new generation of monks.”⁵⁰ Reading these lectures to the novitiate, the reader can observe over and over how Merton uses these lessons from the desert monastic tradition of the East, as viewed through John Cassian’s *Conferences* and *Institutes*, to instruct and guide new vocations. As he came to see Cassian as “the great monastic writer,” Merton was convinced “that every monk should know him thoroughly.”⁵¹

In a letter to his friend Jean Leclercq, written shortly after taking up his role as novice master, Merton wrote, “Meanwhile for my part I am happily lecturing on Cassian. What could be better material in my situation? Although I cannot live like Abbot Isaac, Nesteros, or Piamon, I feel they are my fathers and my friends.”⁵²

Throughout these lectures, Merton used Cassian’s teaching to emphasize the necessity for balance in the monastic life. Like Cassian, he did not simply lay out the extreme practices of Desert Fathers without commenting throughout on the need to temper their example. Bamberger reported Merton’s cautious teaching of John Cassian, emphasizing to young students that “the sayings of the Fathers are not to be taken as hard and fast rules which apply in the same way in every situation: they are applications of

⁵⁰ Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*, xlvii.

⁵¹ Ibid., 99.

⁵² Ibid., xx.

broad general principles.”⁵³ Of course, Benedict had distilled this balanced monastic pattern that has served the Cistercians and so many other monastic communities as a template for their common life.

Merton’s significant contribution to monastic studies is his detailed look at Cassian as the primary source for ferreting out the essential lessons of the Desert Fathers for teaching the Cistercian monks in his care. Beginning the lectures on Cassian, Merton explained that “It is for us to catch from him something of the undying inspiration of the Desert Fathers.”⁵⁴ For Merton, the essentials gravitated towards those teachings that stressed balance and moderation in the spiritual journey. In one lecture, in which Merton teaches on prayer and purity of heart, he stated, “We must wisely preserve a healthy alteration between bodily and spiritual works. . . . This is the secret of Benedictine balance and sobriety, which we should always try to preserve at all costs because without it perpetual prayer is really impossible.”⁵⁵

Merton taught that contemporary monastic communities must continually discriminate and adapt their use of Cassian and the teachings of the Desert Fathers as Benedict did when producing his Rule. This was the role of discernment. As he attempted to draw the novice into this kind of reasoned reflection on Cassian’s commendation of the Desert Father’s teachings and examples, Merton openly asked, “But—in what sense are they to be imitated? Not in all their exterior action—impossible for us—not at all suited to our situation; they were extremists. They are to be followed in

⁵³ Bamberger, “Thomas Merton and the Christian East,” 75.

⁵⁴ Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*, 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

their faith, their love of Christ, their zeal for the monastic state and their spirit of prayer and sacrifice.”⁵⁶ This is the zealous corporate energy that William Harmless attributes to “mystical communities.”

In keeping with the Desert tradition, and the monastic tradition in general, Merton understood spiritual discernment to go on under the direction of a superior or guide. One did not make the journey alone. The pilgrim entrusted herself to one who had experience in the way. This entrusting involves both vulnerability and humility. Without a director who has substantial experience in the way and an understanding of the tradition, the monk is open to waywardness in prayer and discernment.

For this purpose, Merton follows Cassian’s designation, in Conference 18, of the three kinds of monks as cenobites, anchorites, and sarabaites. It is the sarabaites that is to be avoided at all costs because these posers are monks in appearance only. Following Cassian, Merton explained, “The essence of the [sarabaites] spirit is the fact that we follow our own will rather than the will of God.”⁵⁷ The sarabaites, following his own preferences rather than the wisdom of the monastic community, descends into ever deeper error as he resists the direction of a superior or a guide. The sarabaites “thinks holiness consists in following what pleases his own fancy and his own attractions, rather than the will of the superior and the traditions of the ancients.”⁵⁸ Merton concludes this warning on the sarabaites spirit, explaining that the root of this prideful spirit is “lack of trust in God, lack of belief in God’s promises to those who leave all and follow him.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*, 101.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

We remember Merton's teaching that obedience is an act of faith whereby we are able to move beyond externals. Therefore in the lectures, Merton used the Desert tradition, mediated through Cassian, as a way of grounding and connecting the monastic vocation with its sources. As novice master, Merton was concerned that monks might be led astray by various distractions that could eventually derail their vocation. Following their own selfish impulses, they would refuse to be governed by the wisdom and traditions of community under obedience to its abbot. With the reality of this sarabaitic spirit in mind, Merton explained that some vocations, "after a fervent beginning in the monastery, they retire to solitude to avoid the trials of common life, and to retain the appearance of virtue without giving up self—and without having to be tried by others. Instead of growing in virtue they hide their vices in solitude."⁶⁰ It might be argued that there is something of this sarabaitic spirit in the ambivalent and casual approach to life in community that characterizes so much of contemporary Christian practice.

The pervasive intention in Merton's lectures was to provide the novice access to the life-giving resources of his chosen vocation. Equipped with the tradition and boundaries of the community, there was no need for the monk to blaze new trails, but he did need guides. Cassian and the Desert Fathers provided a durable resource for guidance in the prayer life. Merton's use of this resource for direction was not, however, a romanticized one. Concerning the humility involved in spiritual direction, Merton wrote,

The Desert Fathers were not necessarily magic directors, wizard gurus, who had a series of infallible answers on all points. They were humble and sagacious men,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 121.

of few words, whom the Holy Ghost used for His purposes. We must know how to take advantage of direction in this sense. If we seek our director as a kind of oracle, he will always fail us. If we are prepared to listen to him in simplicity and accept, with faith, some ordinary observation of his as coming from God, then he will be able to help us. This faith requires not absolute blindness of the reason and common sense: it requires a certain trust and response on our part, an awareness that this is fitting for our case, which faith intensifies and enables us to see in an entirely supernatural light.⁶¹

Like Cassian, Merton knew that distraction was the perennial problem that fueled this sarabaitic spirit. Distraction and boredom in the monastic life could quickly lead the monk into dangerous self-serving ways that ran to the dangers of acedia. Defining acedia for the monks, Merton appropriately turned to John Climacus, who called it a “slackness of the soul, a weakening of the mind, a neglect of asceticism, hatred of the vows.”⁶² Ongoing discernment under a spiritual guide was an indispensable antidote for avoiding acedia. In his first Conference, Cassian writes, “For a mind which lacks an abiding sense of direction veers hither and yon by the hour, and by the minute is prey to outside influences and is endlessly the prisoner of whatever strikes it first.”⁶³

In the second conference on discernment, Cassian tells of the teaching of the Abba Moses on spiritual direction: “True discernment is obtained only when one is really humble. The first evidence of this humility is when everything done or thought of is submitted to the scrutiny of our elders . . . Someone who lives not by his own decisions but by the example of the ancients will never be deceived.”⁶⁴ Cassian then wrote that this teaching of Moses’s shows how “We will most easily come to a precise knowledge of

⁶¹ Ibid., 75-76.

⁶² Ibid., 185.

⁶³ John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibhied (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 41.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 67.

true discernment if we follow the paths of our elders, if we do nothing novel, and if we do not presume to decide anything on the basis of our own private judgment.”⁶⁵ By contrast, in consumer-driven and disposable societies, there is a craving for increased novelty.

Throughout these lectures Merton’s priority for the novices was to help them use Cassian’s teachings on the monastic virtues to seek balance in the spiritual life. Vigilant discernment is a guard against excess in the ascetical life. Near the end of his conference on discernment, Cassian writes, “life must be lived with due measure and, with discernment for a guide, the road must be traveled between the two kinds of excess so that in the end we may not allow ourselves to be diverted from the pathway of restraint which has been laid down for us nor fall through dangerous carelessness into the urging of gluttony and self-indulgence.”⁶⁶ Discernment enables the person to bear the greater fruits of the prayer life.

Developing a purity of heart through unceasing prayer is the ultimate end of the monk. This is the purpose of the monastic cell or hermitage. In his lectures, Merton explained that the ninth and tenth conferences on prayer form the core of Cassian’s spirituality. In the *Conferences* and the *Institutes*, Cassian intends to assist people, especially those who had chosen life within the monastic community, in making progress in the prayer life. Throughout, Cassian focuses on how the monk goes about purifying his heart. By reflection and prayer on the Scriptures, the heart becomes more and more centered in Christ and thereby is moved, in all its actions, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Maintaining a humble focus is the challenge.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 76.

In the narrative of the *Conferences*, Cassian has his companion and fellow seeker, Germanus, question Abba Isaac about a formula or a way of prayer that will make it possible to hold God in our thoughts and prayers without being constantly distracted. Germanus then succinctly describes the classic trouble in the life of prayer. He says to Isaac, “So it happens that the mind . . . is forever wandering and is tossed in all directions, like a drunk. If by chance—and not because of any effort of its own—it comes into direct encounter with something spiritual, it is powerless to hold on to it firmly and for a long time. One thought follows another, arriving, coming to being, ending and going away—all without the mind noticing.”⁶⁷

In the history of Christian devotion, Cassian was among the first to prescribe a practice of repetition of a specific small prayer, like the Jesus Prayer, as a way of maintaining focus and awareness. He chose verse two from Psalm 69. Abba Isaac directs Cassian and Germanus, “To keep the thought of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: ‘Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to help me.’”⁶⁸ This is, of course, part of the opening prayers of the Church’s Daily Office. For Cassian this small verse contains the heart of humility that is always necessary for progress in the spiritual life. This verse recognizes that the invoked power of the Holy Spirit can to deliver us from the thoughts and actions which pull us away from our love of Christ and our discipleship in him. Cassian teaches the monk that by continually praying this verse as he goes about his labor he will become the “Lord’s mendicant” of Psalm 39. Extolling the virtues of this verse as way to cultivate unceasing prayer, he

⁶⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 132.

writes, “This short verse is an indomitable wall . . . an impenetrable breastplate and sturdiest of shields . . . this verse is a warning to us not to grow proud, not to get puffed up at being in a good condition which . . . cannot be retained without the protection of God for whose continuous and speedy help it prays.”⁶⁹

Short prayers, like verses from the Psalter, help the monk to move between work and worship, all the while maintaining the purity of heart that is his goal within the monastic community. Like Benedict, Merton believed that Cassian’s teachings and accounts from the Desert tradition should be poured over and digested by new monks. Cassian was certain that humble, unceasing prayer combined with the reading and reflection on Scripture would gradually transform the awareness of the monk. In the beginning of the *Conferences*, his emphasis is on this transformation. He writes, “Now the regular reading and the continuous meditation on Scripture are undertaken so that a spiritual turn be given to our memory.”⁷⁰ The daily cycle of corporate prayer was one of the means by which the monastic community ensured this spiritual turn in the memory of the monk. The cycle of prayer and work was meant to purge the distractions pursued by the false self.

Merton was concerned about the novice’s temptation to turn back after a profitable beginning. He found in Cassian’s teachings the best descriptions of this process. Also, in the first conference, Cassian is sure that “Every hour and every moment working over the earth of our heart with the plough of Scripture, that is, the Lord’s cross, we shall manage to destroy the lairs of the wild beasts within us and the hiding places of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

the venomous serpents.”⁷¹ Cassian uses the metaphor of a farmer clearing brambles from a field to describe this process of purifying the heart. The farmer knows that an abundant harvest will only be obtained if the field is cleared of weeds and the other of obstructions which block and choke off the growth of newly planted seeds. Continuing Abba Moses’ teaching in this first conference, Cassian makes it clear that “if we are overcome by . . . carelessness, if we give ourselves over to dangerous and useless chattering, if we are caught up in worldly cares . . . there will follow in effect from this a harvest of tares to serve as a ministry of death to our hearts.”⁷²

And so the monk cannot ignore the work in front of him, but with the goal of clean furrows, embarks in this clearing with single-mindedness. By practicing the virtues, both with others in community and in the solitude of the cell, the monk does the humble weeding of the heart. Cassian is clear that the monk must know the direction in which he is going as he puts his hand to the plough of his vows. Abba Moses taught that “we should be careful what we aim for. The aim of our profession is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. But our point of reference, our objective, is a clean heart, without which it is impossible for anyone to reach our target.”⁷³ Merton’s efforts in instructing the novitiate were always to improve their aim.

Cassian’s *Conferences* were ideal for Merton’s teaching on the monastic life precisely because of their emphasis on creating a harmonious community. The simplicity and humility that characterized much of the tradition of the Desert Fathers, as translated

⁷¹ Ibid., 58.

⁷² Ibid., 52.

⁷³ Ibid., 39.

through Cassian, was what Merton hoped the novices would strive to engender in their lives. He wanted them to achieve what Abba Nesteros called “unshakable humility of heart.” This was the task of presenting one’s spirit naked to God referred to in the *Philokalia*.

John Eudes Bamberger concluded his Oxford lecture by pointing out that “In the advice, so often given by the Desert Fathers, to ‘guard the cell’ Merton saw the expression of a whole orientation in spirituality.” This spiritual orientation made Merton both a student and a teacher: “Merton’s view in all these respects accepts and conforms to the tradition of these various Fathers and in making use of them both in his own life and in guiding others, Merton did more than learn from them. He became a disciple and allowed himself to be formed by them, to enter into their experience so as to be himself transformed by their teaching.”⁷⁴ Merton also desired transformation for the monks he was called to guide. Even as he was beset with countless temptations and distractions that were the result of his fame, Merton strove to guard the cell of his heart employing the monastic virtues of obedience, stability, and humility. The monks of the Egyptian desert had provided him with a compass, and he wanted to show his new brothers how to make use of it as they embarked on their own journeys. In this way Merton was passing on the wisdom of the monastic tradition.

What is critical to appreciate about Merton’s teaching of the novitiate is that he was not simply passing along texts for the new monks to read and digest on their own. Rather it was Merton’s embodiment of what he was teaching that is essential. William

⁷⁴ Bamberger, “*Thomas Merton and the Christian East*,” 76.

Harmless, in his observations about the nature of the writings of many mystics, explains that “Mystics’ words may come down to us as written texts, . . . but often those words preexisted as oral speech. . . . In their genesis, those words were enacted, delivered, and performed.”⁷⁵ We might hold in our minds that Merton’s lectures, now compiled in the *Monastic Wisdom Series*, were delivered to novices in his charge. Over six hundred of them were recorded. It is possible to listen to them with the text in hand and hear Merton’s many insightful and sometimes humorous digressions. One can also listen to the give-and-take between master and disciple as monastic tradition and practice is passed on to another generation of seekers.

Harmless explains this particular method of passing on the inherited teaching by noting, “The Ch’an and Zen traditions understand that mystical awakenings pass from generation to generation *in community*. It is the Ch’an or Zen master who oversees the community’s contemplative training.”⁷⁶ In the Ch’an and Zen tradition this passing on is called the “transmission of the lamp.” The flame of the community’s accumulated teachings and tradition pass from the lamp of the teacher to the lamps of his disciples. With this example, Harmless makes the point that “mystical experiences are not private affairs. They are dialogical, even communal. Disciples learn from masters.”⁷⁷ Such transmission of the lamp was certainly the case with Merton’s teaching of the novitiate at Gethsemani.

⁷⁵ Harmless, *Mystics*, 241.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 240.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Likewise, we remember Adalbert De Vogüé's discussion of the abbot as the center of this communal transmission in his claim that "All the collective organization of the pachomian 'Congregation' has no other end than to procure for everyone the benefit of the direction of the man of God."⁷⁸ Again, it is the abbot, along with the other leaders he employs, who is accountable for the creation of this environment. It is the abbot's adaption of the Rule that allows for shaping the character of the community's ongoing life.

⁷⁸ De Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict*, 108.

Chapter Three

New Seeds of Leadership

This study began by asserting that the vitality of any intentional community is contingent upon the kind of leadership that oversees and shapes its common life. Writing out of his own monastic experience, Matthew Kelty squared up this assertion by observing that “No community gets anywhere without leadership and without fellowship which is consensus in action. Fellowship without fellowship is fraternity-house theology not Christianity. And fellowship without leadership is a kindergarten for there is no communion of action.”⁷⁹ Kelty’s reflection is based upon a community whose mutual obedience and leadership is shaped by Benedict’s Rule and its prescriptions for the abbacy. Benedict prescribed the fundamental nature of the abbacy as he did because he understood its function as the anchor of the community’s life. According to Joan Chittister, this is precisely why Benedict calls the abbot, as a spiritual father, to be “a catalyst for the spiritual and psychological growth of the individual monastic. The prioress and abbot provide an environment that confronts the monastic with the presence of God, that shows them the Way.”⁸⁰

Thomas Merton, speaking from the life of monastic stability and obedience, spent a decade helping younger vocations to understand the way in which the Rule was adapted over time by communities seeking an intentional life of prayer and devotion to God. We

⁷⁹ Matthew Kelty, *The Call of Wild Geese*, ed. William O. Paulsell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 11.

⁸⁰ Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, 152.

remember how Merton taught that monastic communities must continually discriminate and adapt their use of Cassian and the teachings of the Desert Fathers as Benedict did when producing his Rule. Merton openly asked those in the novitiate, “But—in what sense are they to be imitated? Not in all their exterior action—impossible for us—not at all suited to our situation; they were extremists. They are to be followed in their faith, their love of Christ, their zeal for the monastic state and their spirit of prayer and sacrifice.”⁸¹ This zealous corporate energy is an attribute of the “mystical communities” that William Harmless described in *Mystics*. Arousing this corporate energy must be the ambition of any divine household engaged in the forward mission of the Gospel.

As the Church struggles with the many ideological shifts involved in the current transfer from a modern to a postmodern culture, the final claim of this study is that the need for an evolution in leadership models is more urgent than ever. This urgency arises from the reality that the quickly ascending Millennial generation’s understandings of leadership differ significantly from that of the Baby Boomer generation. The leadership models employed in this expanding, boundary free world of the internet and social networking will greatly influence how any community marshals the resources available to it for its mission.

Whether abbot or rector, existing leaders will need to engage others in the cultivation of new forms, while reforming traditional methods, so that the vitality of their Gospel communities can continue or be renewed. Fresh and adaptive models can also provide the environment for determining how the community’s core values and principles

⁸¹ Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*, 101.

are passed to the next generation of leaders. How the lamp of the community's spiritual traditions and common life are passed on to younger emerging leaders is the question to be pursued in this final chapter.

The answer lies in coming to terms with how the understanding of leadership in this new cultural landscape has changed. In the past several years many books have been written about what is currently being called the “emerging” or “emergent” church. Some are written by emerging leaders, like Doug Pagitt and Karen Ward, as battle cries for how the future church must change. Others are written by those who, like Phyllis Tickle and Brian McLaren, observe how churches variously adapt to cultural changes. In her writings and presentations, Phyllis Tickle often uses Episcopal Bishop Mark Dyer's observation that every five hundred years the Church feels it necessary “to hold a giant rummage sale.”⁸²

Fewer books are written on what new leadership models for the emerging church might look like. And even fewer examine how existing leadership models in the church might work together with the ideas and methods of younger, emerging leaders to enhance and navigate the uncertain waters of the current times. One survey that grapples well with this shifting landscape is Jimmy Long's *The Leadership Jump: Building Partnerships Between Existing and Emerging Leaders*. Long's book combines his own experience along with a compilation of insights from others, inside and outside of the Church, who are addressing new leadership models.

⁸² Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 16.

Long describes how a heroic image of modern leadership structure profited from highly regimented and controlling pyramids. The modern church tended to mirror these leadership models and their corresponding characteristics. Long explains, “Since the church has been immersed in modern culture in the twentieth century, we have created a heroic church-leadership culture that attracts the modern corporate leadership style.”⁸³ He emphasizes how in *The Next Reformation* Carl Raschke calls the modern church a “managed faith body.”⁸⁴ Shaped by this hierarchical structure, existing church leaders create and then follow predetermined plans in ways more akin to the models of the modern corporation. Vision and planning originate at the top and then are pushed down through the organization for execution. Therefore, “The long standing philosophy of leadership makes the assumption that leadership rests in individuals who can inspire and influence others to solve the problems, accomplish the task and achieve the goals.”⁸⁵

Jimmy Long has been a regional director for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA for thirty years. Over the past three decades, he has experienced a substantial shift in the expectations of emerging leaders and the tension between them and the leadership models of older, existing leaders. In the opening chapters, Long briefly sums up the Church’s dilemma in transitioning from the outmoded, modern exercise of leadership to the realities of the postmodern and emerging culture. The dilemma for leadership in the church, as is so many other quarters, turns on how existing

⁸³ Ibid., 50.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 49.

and emerging leaders will work together when the way forward is unclear to both. Long writes,

Leaders will need to let go of their present understanding and fixed attitudes. In the midst of our change and the change we are asking others around us to make, leaders will need a high tolerance for uncertainty and confusion. Leaders are not being asked to become postmodern but rather to recognize that the context we are ministering within has changed. We are facing a culture in which both existing and emerging leaders must admit that they do not know how to proceed.⁸⁶

Long's analysis of the leadership dilemma in front of churches begins by generally describing modern leadership characteristics. He spends some time explaining how modern leadership models were born in and adapted to the industrial society of the past couple of centuries. During much of this period, modern leadership placed an emphasis on great leaders being characterized and understood in heroic terms. As many others have, Long portrays this modern, heroic view as a kind of buck-stops-here, John Wayne style of leadership. This heroic leadership turned on notions of the rugged individualism of the American frontier.

To characterize the modern leadership style, Long uses Joyce Fletcher's claim that "The traits commonly associated with traditional, heroic leadership are closely aligned with stereotypical images of masculinity. Men or women can display them, but the traits themselves—such as individualism, assertiveness, and dominance—are socially ascribed to men in our culture."⁸⁷ As we consider developing alternative models for

⁸⁶ Jimmy Long, *The Leadership Jump: Building Partnerships Between Existing and Emerging Leaders* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 29-30.

⁸⁷ Long, *The Leadership Jump*, 49.

leadership in the Church, we might recall Benedict's very different injunctions that the abbot "must be chaste, temperate, and merciful" (RB 64:9).

The hierarchical model that Long describes is a familiar one. It is a model in which the senior minister is the central figure and decider in the church. This type of leadership tends to be predominately goal and program oriented. Everyone in the "managed faith body" follows the vision, planning, and tone of this senior minister. It creates an environment in which junior clergy and other staff members end up worrying more about pleasing him than they do the members of church. At the beginning of my ministry, when I was one of five assistant priests in a corporate style parish, this was certainly my experience. My sole area was outreach and mission, while the other clergy had their own ministry silos. The rector insisted that we pay attention only to our own areas, leaving the other portions of ministry to those to whom he had assigned them.

This model of leadership in which the rector or senior pastor is the heroic manager of the faith body also prevails in smaller parishes larger churches are held up as examples of success. Consider how this modern view of leadership has spawned decades of new schemes for congregational development that focus on the programming and procedures intent on attracting a larger customer base.

Long maintains that the heroic leader is irrelevant for this postmodern culture and must give way in order for the organization to adapt and thrive. While some might miss the mythic rugged individual hero model, Long invokes Ken Blanchard's comment in *Effective Churches and Team Leadership* that "You can't (in today's complex culture) make it anymore with just a horse and a couple of guns . . . None of us are as smart as all

of us.”⁸⁸ To move forward successfully, Long draws from Ronald Heifetz’s and Marty Linsky’s *Leadership on the Line* to explain how in the current cultural landscape many leaders are beginning to recognize that the “lone warrior myth of leadership is a sure route to heroic suicide . . . Nobody is smart enough or fast enough to engage alone the political complexity of an organization or community when it is facing and reacting to adaptive pressure.”⁸⁹ Heifetz and Linsky go on to say that “The hierarchical structures with clearly designed roles are giving way to more horizontal organization with greater flexibility, and room for initiative.”⁹⁰

While Benedict’s abbot appears to be at the top of the community, a closer reading reveals that the Rule’s leadership model is centered in the horizontal organization of monastic community. Joan Chittister explains that “Benedict says that those who hold authority in a community are not to be above that group, they are to be centers of it, the norm of it, the movers of it. They themselves are to mirror its values. Their job is not simply to give orders. Their job is to live out the ideals. It is an office far removed from office elitism or pompous hierarchy or highhanded parenting.”⁹¹ We remember that an authoritarian paterfamilias was not what Benedict envisioned as the abbot. Following Benedict’s intent for leadership within the community, the abbot, or rector, must strive with all humility to occupy the center without needing to possess it.

It might be considered a sad irony that the Church, so quick to adopt the leadership models of the modern corporation, is now slow, if not reluctant, to give them

⁸⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁹¹ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 39.

up even as business leadership models are being forced to adopt collaborative models. Faced with this rapidly changing postmodern environment, business organizations have been engaging the models of mutual leadership that have long been in the DNA of the Church. Benedict's Rule is a sturdy example of leadership in the divine household that is the inheritance of the Church. And the Rule is grounded through and through in the Gospel. Jesus, after all, called together a community of disciples that he would teach and empower for the forward mission of the Gospel. Luke's gospel reports that "Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Lk 9:1-2).

In 2007, the *Harvard Business Review* published a seminal article on the rapidly changing realities of postmodern leadership by Deborah Ancona, Thomas W. Malone, Wanda J. Orlikowski, and Peter M. Senge titled "In Praise of the Incomplete Leader." Pointing to the complex and ambiguous terrain that businesses face, Ancona and her co-authors call for an end to the notion that there ever was, or can continue to be, a person who is the complete leader. They write, "In today's world, the executive's job is no longer to command and control but to cultivate and coordinate the actions of others at all levels of the organization. Only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete—as having both strengths and weaknesses—will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others."⁹²

⁹² Deborah Ancona, Thomas W. Malone, Wanda J. Orlikowski, and Peter Senge, "In Praise of the Incomplete Leader," *Harvard Business Review* (February 2007). www.hbr.org, reprint R0702E (accessed July 2009), 1.

Centuries earlier, Benedict grasped the nature of this unassuming, servant leadership. Concerning the qualities the abbot should possess and the paradigm of leadership that the Rule envisions, Joan Chittister comments, “The function of authority is not to control the other; it is to guide and to challenge and to enable the other.”⁹³ One need look no further than the search profiles for bishops and rectors to find the assumption and expectation that the person sought must be the complete leader. While there are beginning to be some enlightened exceptions, at the top of most profile’s list of desired qualities for the next bishop or rector is a person who has “vision” or one who can “provide the vision” for a new season of mission and ministry. Rather than seeking the mythical complete leader, churches and dioceses should be seeking the incomplete leader who will wisely exercise a vision of calling together and empowering the gifts for leadership that exist throughout the community, especially those of younger, emerging leaders.

In these changing times, where new models are called for, the authors of the *Harvard Business Review* explain that “The incomplete leader knows that leadership exists throughout the organizational hierarchy—wherever expertise, vision, new ideas, and commitment are found.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, “It’s the leader’s responsibility to create an environment that lets people complement one another’s strengths and offset one another’s weaknesses. In this way, leadership is distributed across multiple people throughout the organization.”⁹⁵ As they seek to call people into shared visioning, incomplete leaders

⁹³ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 38-9.

⁹⁴ Ancona et al., 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 7.

will understand that “If they realize other people aren’t joining in or buying into the vision, they don’t just turn up the volume; they engage in a dialogue about the reality they hope to produce. . . . They know that if the vision is credible and compelling enough, others will generate ideas to advance it.”⁹⁶

For hundreds of years, the Rule has offered this type of humble wisdom for the leaders of divine households. “Benedict’s leaders . . . are to lead the group but not drive it; . . . they are to remember and rejoice in their own weaknesses in order to deal tenderly with the weaknesses of others; they are to attend more to the spiritual than to the physical aspects of community life; and, finally, they are to save their own souls in the process, to be human beings themselves, to grow in life themselves.”⁹⁷ Something akin to the virtue of humility is embedded in the conclusion that Deborah Ancona and her colleagues draw from their study of emerging leadership models. They maintain that “No leader is perfect. The best ones don’t try to be—they concentrate on honing their strengths and find others who can make up for their limitations.”⁹⁸

The approach of the incomplete leader is more compatible with the organizational models sought by emerging leaders than the hubris of modern heroic one. Not only is this heroic leadership style an ineffective way to address the complexities of the current times, it is increasingly foreign and distrusted by emerging leaders. With the many examples of corrupt and failed leadership in all kinds of organizations, Long’s recent experience with emerging leaders is that fewer of them actually want to be the boss.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁷ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 47.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 1.

And, in many cases, there is far less desire to join old leadership models. “People do not want to be part of a distrusted leadership team. Also, for emerging leaders, climbing the corporate of church ladder is not their view of success.”⁹⁹

Long stresses that new leaders are being shaped in team environments where the style is open and collaborative. And this way of working together accepts far fewer limitations in its approaches. Here Long quotes from Eddie Gibbs’s and Ryan Bolger’s *Emerging Churches*: “If the modern leader is represented by hierarchy and directing, the emerging leader is presented by a ‘culture of networking, permission giving and empowerment.’”¹⁰⁰

As a result, Long explains that emerging leaders feel increasingly stifled in churches where the model of leadership is already determined and inaccessible. They do not believe there is a willingness to consider new leadership models. And this is precisely why emerging church leaders are breaking away from the denominational structures that formed them and launching their own churches. During a talk at The School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee, emergent pastor and author Tony Jones was dismissive of the denomination that formed him. He boasted, “We started a church that we would want to go to.”¹⁰¹ Jones also spent a good portion of the talk lambasting alleged evils of denominational structures in general.

While there are certainly necessary and authentic expressions of this independent approach, a strong vein of the impatient, sarabaitic spirit can also be detected in the

⁹⁹ Long, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 26

¹⁰¹ Tony Jones, “The Emergent Church.” Lecture presented to the Advance Degrees Studies Program, The School of Theology, Sewanee, TN. June, 2009.

writings and actions of many emergent leaders. In the Rule, Benedict cautions against these sarabaites, observing that “Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden” (RB 1:8-9). The sarabaites, arrogantly following his own preferences rather than the wisdom of the monastic community, descends into ever deeper error as he resists the direction of a superior or a guide.

While some emerging or younger leaders may just be rebelling against slower moving and entrenched structures, Long insists that “When structures take precedence over mission, when highly centralized leadership prevents the contribution of others, people who are gifted tend to leave.”¹⁰² The challenge for churches is to understand how their mission strategies must change and adapt to meet the expectations and needs of an emerging generation.

In *The Leadership Jump*, Long provides a helpful diagram to illustrate the difference he sees between a modern view of task and community versus that of the emerging culture:¹⁰³

Modern Church

Plan → Task → Community (optional)

Emerging Church

Community (essential) → Vision → Task

¹⁰² Long, 149.

¹⁰³ Long, 111.

Long's diagram stresses that in this new postmodern environment the relational or community building aspect of mission must come first. A shared vision for what comes next for a community arises, not from a preconceived plan, but from those who have become stakeholders. Long draws on Jim Collin's *Good to Great* to stress that "The good to great leaders know their first responsibility is to bring together the 'who' rather than the 'what.'"¹⁰⁴

Under the previous bishop of Kentucky, the Diocese's mission committee, made up of older clergy and lay leaders, had its sights and planning set on acquiring a piece of property and building a new church. The only case that could be made for this stale strategy was that the available property was in a growing area of a bedroom community of Louisville where there was no Episcopal church. It did not seem to matter to the committee that the property is less than ten miles from another suburban Episcopal parish. There was, of course, some liberal versus conservative ideology getting played out in the committee's process. Nonetheless, unsubstantiated arguments and limited imagination for addressing new realities drove the planning. The venture was shelved as the diocesan bishop announced retirement and a search process for the next bishop became the central effort of the Diocese.

In contrast, the Baptist church, seeking a mission to younger adults began using an emergent model and opened a small coffee shop and gathering space called Sojourners in a bustling Louisville neighborhood full of new restaurants and trendy stores. To run this new mission venture they engaged young seminarians from Southern Seminary in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 57.

Louisville. Using various social media resources such as Facebook, they began to form circles of community among young adults who lived around and frequented this trendy area. As their numbers grew they began to rent space from established churches in the area for worship. After a few years of this model, the Sojourn community purchased a deconsecrated Roman Catholic church as their new home. The Sojourn Church now boasts over a thousand members spread across four sites.¹⁰⁵

The mission committee in Kentucky sensed rightly that it needed to advance a new missionary effort, but instead of seeking new models or, at least, new ways of exploiting former strategies, it was attempting to force the square peg of a modern strategy into the round opening of a new missional reality. Long explains this kind of blind spot by using Charles Handy's observation in *The Age of Paradox* that "every generation perceives itself as justifiably different from its predecessor, but plans as if its successor generation will be the same."¹⁰⁶

Long sets out three general options for how churches might engage the new mission fields in which they currently find themselves. The first option is a kind of institutional default mode in which existing leaders try to hand over the baton of their leadership to those who are committed to exercising leadership just as they have understood it. With this potentially fatal default option the "leadership will be severely handicapped because they will be trying to lead in an emerging culture using leadership principles and tactics that were designed for a former culture."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ sojournchurch.com

¹⁰⁶ Long, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 21.

The second option that is being employed by many emerging leaders involves leaving the existing church and developing a totally new ministry model using only emergent leadership. Long argues from experience that while they might realize some period of success, “they will not have all the resources and wisdom that could make the venture a longer lasting and more stable venture. And furthermore, this option means the existing church will eventually die out and not make the transition into the emerging culture.”¹⁰⁸

According to Long, the third option and best way forward is to forge partnerships between existing and emerging leaders. He writes,

The best solution is for the existing leaders to bless and empower the emerging leaders to make a leadership jump, realizing that the way emerging leaders will lead will be different from that of their predecessors. This blessing and empowerment will provide the emerging leaders with all the resources they require from the past and all the freedom they will need for the future to lead the church into the emerging culture.¹⁰⁹

While addressing the challenges of the current time, an equally important aspect of this partnership option is passing on essential wisdom and resources from the past.

Joan Chittister quotes an African proverb that says: “You do not teach the paths of forest to an old gorilla.” The proverb does not suggest that old gorillas cannot learn, rather it implies that it is the young who must be taught the safe and useful paths of the band. If the paths of the forest, learned through experience, are not taught to the younger gorillas, they will be lost to the next generation. Chittister follows this proverb declaring

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

that “Experience counts. Wisdom is simply its distillation.”¹¹⁰ Passing on this distilled wisdom is what William Harmless describes as the transmission of the lamp by the leaders of mystical communities.

Leadership models where existing leaders strive to create these new collaborative partnerships have the potential to keep young, emerging leaders within in the tradition. At the same time, these partnerships can infuse the Church with creative new ideas for mission. As an older existing leader, Long strongly urges the formation of these partnerships: “We need the maturity, wisdom and order of the existing leaders, and we need the imagination, creativity and chaos of the emerging leaders.”¹¹¹ Here we ought to recall the Rule’s prescription for the abbot to exercise the wisdom of discretion and “arrange everything so that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from” (RB 64:17-19).

Faced with an uncertain and unpredictable future, Long argues that existing and emerging leaders need each other to chart new directions. “Existing leaders should listen to emerging leaders to help interpret the culture and lead them into an imaginative future. Emerging leaders should be patient and not just immediately run away from existing churches and institutions.”¹¹² Forming spiritual partnerships of responsibility between existing and emerging leaders will involve humility from both. This kind of mutual, listening obedience between existing church leaders and younger, emerging leaders is shot through Benedict’s Rule. In her preface to *For Your Own People: Aelred of*

¹¹⁰ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, 48.

¹¹¹ Long, 39.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

Rievaulx's Pastoral Prayer, Marsha Dutton writes of the mutuality that Aelred sought after being elected abbot in the twelfth century by the Cistercian community at Rievaulx. Dutton writes, "The pervasive themes of *Prayer* . . . all reflect the mutual responsibility and love of the abbot and the monks, gathered, guarded, and ruled by Jesus."¹¹³

As the Church seeks to move from away from these modern concepts of the heroic leader into to this new era of post-heroic leadership, it will need to rely more and more on the experience of younger adult leaders. As existing leaders in the Church begin to consider leadership models that seriously include and seek out the knowledge of younger leaders, they might consider that St. Benedict was quick to point out that wisdom does not necessarily reside in those who are older. In the chapter concerning summoning the brothers for counsel, he instructs, "The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger" (RB 3:3). In the chapter on the election of the abbot, the recommendation is "Goodness of life and wisdom in teaching must be the criteria for choosing the one to be abbot, even if he is the last in community rank" (RB 64:2). And when he discusses rank in the community, the guiding tenet is, "Absolutely nowhere shall age automatically determine rank. Remember that Samuel and Daniel where still boys when they judged their elders (1 Sam 3; Dan 13:44-62)" (RB 63:5-6).

Long is right in his claim that nurturing younger leaders is like lifting up indigenous leaders from the new mission field: "The emerging leaders are the indigenous

¹¹³ Marsha Dutton, *For Your Own People: Aelred of Rievaulx's Pastoral Prayer* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 15.

people, having grown up in this emerging culture.”¹¹⁴ Right from the early days of the Christian mission to the Gentiles, as the Early Church “moved into new cultures throughout history, it has always had the choice either to continue doing ministry as it had in a previous culture or else to be willing to do ministry differently because of the new cultural context.”¹¹⁵ Existing leaders must develop leadership models with emerging leaders that will prepare the Church to address these new mission fields.

This is the kind of model I am cultivating with the young emergent priest who is now the Cathedral’s Canon Missioner for Young Adult Ministry and the Episcopal College Chaplain at the University of Louisville. Five years ago, when I became the dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Louisville, Kentucky, at least fifty percent of the congregation was over sixty. Its staid, business-as-usual approach, coupled with its somewhat isolated position downtown, had contributed to a steady decline in its membership over a twenty year period. However, the recent census reported that the number of people in Louisville between the ages of twenty and thirty-five was 129,325. It was instantly clear that instead of continuing to asking the threadbare question of how to get people from the suburbs to travel back downtown, we would need to begin to ask how we might engage younger adults, as well as the lower economic demographic, who lived in the neighborhoods around us.

At about the same time, a newly ordained priest in her late twenties had been placed by the bishop to be the priest-in-charge of a tiny struggling congregation in a small town about forty minutes east of Louisville. She was also assigned the chaplaincy

¹¹⁴ Long, 147.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

at the University of Louisville. While a practical and a somewhat traditional way of providing full time employment for this new priest, it was an uncreative and frustrating arrangement between two incompatible ministries. To make this young priest's new beginning more difficult, there was no arrangement for mentoring and no mission plan for the struggling parish. She was mostly left on her own to figure out what to do with this new bifurcated ministry. Long is certainly right in his claim that "emerging leaders are seeking existing leaders who are mentors and coaches, not just managers."¹¹⁶

In order to have some camaraderie with other clergy, she began to attend a weekly morning coffee group of other Episcopal clergy in the city. As a new priest in the diocese, I was also attending this gathering. It is worth noting that all of the clergy who attended were older male rectors. It was at these morning meetings that she and I began talking about the impediments to doing effective young adult ministry in the Church. The primary impediment was that there was almost no money allocated solely for ministry aimed at young adults between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. In many dioceses there is money for youth and for summer camp. In some quarters there might be money for part time college chaplaincy. If any young adult work is engaged, it is usually added to the already full portfolio of a younger parish assistant. And then the ministry is mostly with the young adults who are already attending a given parish. There are hardly any models for a priest to devote the majority of her ministry to relational evangelism with young adult seekers.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

Having grown up in the diocese and graduated from the University of Louisville, this talented young priest had the desire and the experience to engage this mission field of young adults in Louisville who were either loosely connected to some denomination or, in many cases, unchurched altogether. As our conversations continued, I believed it imperative for the Cathedral and me to find a way to make this missionary effort possible. Not only would resourcing her work out of the Cathedral allow the ministry to be perceived as less parochial and more diocesan, it had the potential to invigorate our own mission and evangelism. I began writing a grant to the diocese's mission committee in hopes of securing two-year funding for this new and untried ministry.

While the former bishop was intrigued, he was doubtful money could be allocated for such an effort. The grant proposal's initial reception by leaders of the mission committee was tepid at best. They were too focused on buying property and constructing a building. They perceived a relational missionary effort to young adults that did not offer any concrete or measurable results quickly as far too fanciful. On top of this unwillingness to consider new missionary models more suited to the rapidly changing realities of the culture, most of the available mission dollars were already allocated as life support for struggling congregations that were not engaged in anything remotely resembling new missionary work. Even when I directed the grant to an endowed diocesan fund for new mission start ups, the dawdling and vague response was the same.

Rather than wait for our diocese's mission committee to make a decision, I began rewriting the grant with the help of this young emergent priest so that it could be proposed to other sources, including the Episcopal Church and Trinity Episcopal Church,

Wall Street, New York City. In 2009, following part of their directive to promote new mission startups, the Office of Campus and Young Adult Ministries of the Episcopal Church granted the Cathedral a two-year \$60,000 grant to engage a young priest for a mission of evangelism and ministry focused solely on young adults. Responding to this initiative of the Episcopal Church, the bishop and mission committee quickly sought to get on board and stepped up at the final hour with a two-year grant from its endowed funds for new mission initiatives.

With the combination of these grant funds and the diocese's funding of the part time university chaplaincy, I was able was able to appoint this young female priest as the Canon Missioner for Young Adult Ministry and Chaplain to the University of Louisville. To bring everything into her Cathedral office, I also convinced the bishop to make the Cathedral the parish home for the Chaplaincy. At the commissioning of this young priest at the Cathedral, the Chair of the Office of Campus and Young Adult Ministries of the Episcopal Church called this full-time, cathedral-based arrangement of a college chaplaincy combined with a mission to young adults in the city a unique missionary model for the Church.

In the past two years, the Canon Missioner has been able to offer Peer Minister Training at the Interfaith Center at the University and lead mission trips to disaster areas in need. She follows students in their faith journeys after graduation and assists young adults in the city in forming fellowship and worship opportunities. And, in some cases, she was able to encourage the involvement of several previously unchurched or loosely affiliated young people into the liturgical life of the Cathedral. Each Easter Vigil at the

Cathedral, since the inception of this missionary work, the Bishop has baptized, confirmed, and received young adults into the Church. We have married young adults connected with the fellowship, sent one to seminary and, in one heartrending season, buried another.

A home base at the Cathedral has also allowed the Canon Missioner to have a mentoring relationship with me as well as more frequent contact and counsel with the new Bishop. The Cathedral congregation has been invigorated as it has supported and come to know young adults who have different views from them and who bring a variety of new ideas and questions into various aspects of our common life. And having a young female priest regularly preaching and celebrating on Sunday mornings gives the congregation a different model for understanding leadership in the Church.

As we work and learn together, the Canon Missioner and I continually seek to tighten the focus on our work with young adults. One new strategy was to pursue a more directed grant from Trinity Episcopal Church, Wall Street. Specifically, we were interested in the significant funding that they have recently been allocating to start and support programs under the auspices of the Episcopal Service Corps (ESC). ESC describes itself as “a federation of young adult service programs across the United States. ESC helps young adults discern the inner ‘voice’ that is calling them to their life's work, and to develop the skills to listen and respond through a life of service.”¹¹⁷

In 2010, the Cathedral was awarded a large grant from Trinity Wall Street to establish a new ESC program. Our Canon Missioner set about designing and preparing a

¹¹⁷ See the website of the Episcopal Service Corps at www.episcopalservicecorps.org

program and a place for young adults in the Cathedral. The following is her description of our new program:

New Seeds is a residential internship program for young adults based at Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral in Louisville, KY. Our interns will share a simple life together grounded in prayer and service as they seek to discern God's calling in their lives. The interns will serve in local social service agencies and centers and develop a rule of life that balances their service work placement with service and prayer in the church—along with fun and fellowship. They will spend time alongside our local young adult community as they settle into life in Louisville. The New Seeds program is influenced by the work of Thomas Merton (whose work, *New Seeds of Contemplation* is our namesake). Merton experienced his famous “epiphany” just two blocks from our building. He was overcome with God's love for humanity and was called to begin living his contemplative life in a new way that reached out to those outside the monastery, and he began rethinking the connection between prayer and service. His Gethsemani home is just an hour's drive away and will be home to some of the interns' retreat time together. The contemplative discipline produces **new seeds** in our life as Christians. The interns' service to the poor and vulnerable in our world will plant **new seeds** of mercy and compassion in the lives of those they serve and in our community. Young Adult 'millennial' Christians are the new seeds of a Church that is experiencing the world shifting in radical ways. We expect the intern experience will not just be a "gap year" but will plant **new seeds** that will grow throughout your life as a 21st century Christian.¹¹⁸

The established ESC programs around the Church range from agrarian models like the Abundant Table Farm Project in Ventura County, California to urban ministry models like Julian Year in Chicago, to new monastic models like the Society of Saint John the Evangelist Monastic Internship Program in Boston, Massachusetts. As in our own case, emergent leaders mentor and work alongside of other young adults in their spiritual journeys to impart many of the core values of our Episcopal tradition. In all of these models, the lamp is being passed in new creative ways to those seeking fresh expressions of the spiritual life of the Gospel.

¹¹⁸ See description of New Seeds in the Programs section at www.episcopalservicecorps.org

The Cathedral's New Seeds Internship program joins twenty other similar ESC programs around the country in these intentional, quasi-monastic communities of prayer and service. The five interns now living at the Cathedral were chosen from over thirty enthusiastic applications. Their dormitory-like accommodations in the Cathedral's undercroft were readied by Cathedral members and the interns have been warmly received and are contributing much to our common life.

These examples of establishing missionaries for young adult ministry and creating internship programs are models of the leadership partnering that existing leaders and emerging leaders must strive develop together. My experience working with emerging leaders at Christ Church Cathedral is that these partnerships generate learning and approaches that are otherwise unavailable to both leadership models. To begin, existing leaders will need to take the initial steps of advocating for and providing the means for these new ministry partnerships to exist. Part of this new structure will need to involve the ideas of emerging leaders. These new constructions will value relational authority more than positional authority. "Emerging leaders reject positional authority in favor of relational authority. They want existing leaders not to be "over" them but "among" them."¹¹⁹ I have found this to be true in my work with our Canon Missioner and with the other young adults to whom she ministers. Long quotes emerging leaders like Brad Cecil who state, "We measure our success by our ability to maintain relationships rather

¹¹⁹ Long, 96.

than an arbitrary mission developed by a handful of leaders and driven down through the organization.”¹²⁰

These new partnerships cannot just be envisioned by existing leaders as mere ancillary ministries to a larger whole, but must be made central to the Church’s overall mission in these indefinite times. As Long points out, “Emerging leaders have many of the answers and wisdom the church needs to move forward in the ministry within an emerging culture.”¹²¹ Once again, these insights are akin to the wisdom Benedict prescribed in the Rule when he recommends that the abbot seek out the counsel of younger members and those of different rank in his decision making for the community.

On the other hand, Long sees that the journey forward happens on a road that travels in both directions. Emerging leaders will need to make overtures in the direction of existing leaders: “For emerging leaders to succeed in the transitional context . . . they need to be passionately committed to helping the existing church transition into a new way of doing ministry.”¹²² Furthermore, “Emerging leaders will need to recognize that they have something to learn from existing leaders. However this learning can only come from existing leaders whom the emerging leaders trust. The emerging leaders will require a safe environment in which to grow.”¹²³

To facilitate the traffic along this two-way road, Long insists that successful leadership jumps between existing and emerging leaders will entail the involvement of what he calls “hinge leaders.” According to Long, “hinge leaders” are those who “can

¹²⁰ Ibid., 121.

¹²¹ Ibid., 184.

¹²² Ibid., 182.

¹²³ Ibid.

move back and forth between existing and emerging leaders, understanding and appreciating the gifts of both groups. . . . Hinge leaders have attachments in both cultures. They have to be capable of holding in tension the best of both the existing (old) and emerging (new) cultures.”¹²⁴ As the practice of ministry is amended to meet new cultural realities, Long persuasively asserts that seeking out and authorizing the gifts of these leaders is critical for the Church. The space between existing and emerging leaders will be linked by committed “hinge leaders.”

While these leaders might be any age, in the current cultural landscape it is Generation X, those people born in the early 1960s through the early 1980s, who, standing between these two groups, have the greatest potential to become these “hinge leaders.” To make clear the essential condition of these “hinge leaders,” Long cites emergent leader Gerald Kelly’s comment in his book *Get a Grip on the New Without Losing Your Hold on the Past*: “These leaders are people ‘sufficiently at home in the new to understand it, and sufficiently at home in the old to help us understand it.’ Hinge leaders have attachments in both cultures.”¹²⁵ The role of a hinge leader is one I have been seeking to embody in my work among the bishop, older diocesan leaders, and emerging leaders.

In the cultural milieu of his time, Thomas Merton might be considered a sort of hinge leader. Merton straddled the austere discipline of the Gethsemani he entered in the early forties and the emerging expectations of the revolutionary sixties. *The Seven Story Mountain* spurred a wave of younger vocations to flock to Gethsemani and thousands

¹²⁴ Ibid., 177.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 177.

more to a renewed interest in the spiritual life. As his understanding and spirituality grew, many of his writings sought to connect the secluded ascetical practices of monastic life with the social activism he deemed so necessary to Gospel discipleship. As his writings from Gethsemani reached out address the emerging cultural clashes of his time, Merton was thought of in many quarters as the spiritual conscience of the sixties' peace movement. For these writings and conversations, the Roman Catholic hierarchy criticized and censored him as conducting himself in a manner incompatible with being a monk.

During this period of challenging the Church's witness and spiritual discipline, Merton was a young adult. He was twenty-six when he entered Gethsemani and wrote many of his seminal works by the time he was forty. He was thirty-six when he became Master of Scholastics and forty when appointed the Master of Novices. He continually sought, in his writing and practice, to connect and reform the Cistercian tradition for contemporary monastic life. Merton passed on to novices, and successive generations, the wisdom and experience acquired through almost three decades of monastic life. That experience was shaped by Cassian and Benedict who had blazed and taught the pathways though the forests of the spiritual journey.

Merton was ever insistent that he had not made his spiritual progress alone. He had journeyed the Christian life with a committed community of brothers under the direction of an abbot with whom he did not often agree, but always trusted and obeyed. And in his ten years as Master of Novices, he attempted to teach new vocations and

younger members how to form and be the type of divine household that could enrich and inspire their lives while passing on the lamp to those who would follow after them.

Long concludes his study on the necessary work to be engaged between existing and emerging leaders emphasizing that “If we are going to move forward in ministry together, the church must have a high commitment to developing new types of leaders.”¹²⁶ This commitment to build different models of leadership for the good of the whole Church will necessarily require humility, trust, and mutual responsibility between the different generations of leaders.

The depth of the humility required will be achieved through prayer and spiritual guidance. My commitment to this ministry partnership at the Cathedral is grounded in our worship. Complementing our celebrations of the Holy Eucharist, Morning Prayer, led by younger and older clergy and lay people, gives shape to the weekly planning meetings that follow it.

As he prepared to lead his monastic community, the quintessential Cistercian abbot, Aelred of Rievaulx prayed, “And because you have given them this blind leader, this untaught teacher, this ignorant guide, teach the one you have put in a teacher’s position, lead the one you have commanded to lead others, guide the one you have appointed as a guide—if not for me, for them! Therefore teach me, sweet Lord . . . to accommodate myself to each one’s character.”¹²⁷ In his prayerful willingness to accommodate his leadership to the needs of individual monks and the needs of a particular community, Aelred was drawing directly from Benedict’s Rule (RB 2:32).

¹²⁶ Ibid., 185.

¹²⁷ Dutton, *For Your Own People: Aelred of Rievaulx’s Pastoral Prayer*, 51.

Joan Chittister sums up this Benedictine legacy of pastoral wisdom: “The Rule of Benedict examines and adapts from one century and culture to another. . . . It grows with the times and goes with the times and gives us a grasp, a railing, a guide that will not allow us to be ground down to spiritual nothingness and personal torpor by our own times.”¹²⁸ Whether attempting to adapt models of leadership to different times and contexts, or seeking to center one's own guidance of the people of God within the divine household, Benedict's Rule, if it is attended to with the ear of the heart, will continue to serve as a fertile seedbed.

¹²⁸ Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled From The Daily*, 10.

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