

THE VIEW FROM  
A MONASTERY



## *The View From a Monastery*

In the northeastern corner of South Dakota where I live, there are two attractions to which sightseers are drawn: a cheese factory and a monastery. The monastery is located two hundred miles west of Minneapolis and one hundred thirty miles from both Fargo and Sioux Falls, the two largest cities in the Dakotas. A sign at a roadside park on U.S. Highway 12 indicates that the monastery is one of the nearby points of interest, and motorists who pass through frequently swing by for a look. On Sunday afternoons, people who live in the area like to drive out to see the monastery. During the week, a busload of people might arrive, bearing a homemakers' club, school children, or a group of senior citizens. Sometimes they have come directly to the monastery from the cheese factory.

I have lived in the monastery for over forty years, and I have witnessed this unending stream of tourists. Neighbors of the monastery often like to bring visiting relatives and friends here for a tour. One day people from Kansas, Wisconsin, Florida, California, and Norway signed the guest register. On occasion, I have had the responsibility of showing the monastery to people who have arranged a tour. Many of

them appear genuinely impressed by what they see. Others are obviously baffled. This is understandable, because monasticism will always be a mystery to most people. Some tourists are concerned only about the physical structure of the place. They compliment us for having constructed the monastery ourselves and seldom ask about our prayer life.

There are many false notions about monasticism. Pious people think that monks are holy. People who don't know much about religion think we are peculiar. The truth of the matter is that we are neither, though I have known individual monks who were both. Most of us are ordinary men who find that it is easier for us to be holier here than in some other place.

Brother Patrick was holy. His holiness was not the kind that is commonly associated with sanctity, but he was my kind of saint. He was not a plaster saint. He had a solid piety without being the least bit sanctimonious. Ambrose Bierce, the nineteenth-century American writer, said, "A saint is a dead sinner, revised and edited." I prefer remembering Brother Patrick in all of his originality. He came to the monastery when he was in his fifties and lived with us for fifteen years. On his deathbed, he told us that the happiest years of his life had been spent in the monastery. Earlier he had worked on the General Motors assembly line in Flint, Michigan, and before that he had fought in the Battle of the Bulge. If we had been naive, we would have been convinced from his tales that he had won this decisive battle of World War II single-handedly.

Brother Paddy worked in our laundry for a while. By the time we had grown accustomed to pranks like having our underwear starched, he was transferred to the monastery kitchen. His menus were posted so that we could always be prepared. We learned not to expect much for lunch on "T.T.

and R.” day. No one was ever able to establish whether “Turkey Turds and Rainwater” was an army term or if Brother Paddy had invented it himself. The other veterans in the monastery claimed never to have heard the expression. Paddy had been on the winning side in the Battle of the Bulge, and in more recent years he had won his own personal battle with alcoholism. Now, however, he knew that cancer would win the last battle. He’d had two skirmishes with it. This time it was inoperable.

A week before his death, he was as eager as ever to entertain all of the “brethren” (as he called us) who gathered at his bedside. Sitting on the edge of his bed and chain-smoking cigarettes (“Why not? I don’t have lung cancer”), he regaled us with war stories and recollections of his youth in an upstate New York town where he could buy a bucket of beer for a nickel. When Brother James was alone with him one day, Brother Paddy told him, “Jim, when you see that I’m gone, grab this watch off my wrist. Don’t let any of the brethren get to it first. It’s a good watch, and it’ll keep time for you the rest of your life.”

A day or so before he lost consciousness, he told those of us who were in his smoke-filled room, “I hope you bastards have to bury me on the coldest day of the winter.” We could have pleaded with him to wait for spring, but he was ready to leave and he seemed assured of his destination. We carried Brother Patrick to the monastery cemetery not on the coldest day of that winter but on a day with a wind-chill factor that would nevertheless have pleased him.

There is some misunderstanding about where monks come from, a notion that we are conditioned from childhood to enter a monastery, or that our previous circumstances in life were different from other people’s. This is not so. We had other alternatives. One monk gave up a navy career. Another

abandoned his studies for a doctorate. Others had to dispose of a farm or a business.

Some of us came to the monastery from cities—Milwaukee, Seattle, Indianapolis, Minneapolis—and others came from farms and small towns in the Dakotas. Why did we leave and come to this place? I know when I look down into the valley at night. The monastery is built on a rise from which the flat farmland of the Whetstone Valley can be seen. In the dark, the fields are not visible, but the lights are. The lights from Ortonville, thirty miles away in Minnesota, the lights from Milbank, half that distance, and the lights of the smaller towns—Wilmot, Corona, Twin Brooks—all these lights and the yard lights on the farms create an illusion. I look at the valley and I think that I see an enormous city. It is distant and I am removed from it. This is the way it should be, I tell myself.

This is the way it was in the third and fourth centuries when throngs of Christians fled from the cities and went to live in the desert. They believed the *parousia* (the second coming of Christ) was imminent. They wanted to be ready. In the desert, apart from the rest of mankind, these hermits could prepare themselves by prayer and penance. The word “monk” comes from the Greek *monos*, meaning alone, solitary. Gradually, these hermit-monks evolved into communities. The *parousia* didn’t occur, but monasticism became firmly rooted in Christendom. *Fuga munda*—flight from the world—is no longer a retreat to the desert, but men still seek to live apart from the rest of society in monasteries such as ours. Although we can hear the muffled sounds of traffic along U.S. Highway 12, there is an appreciable sense of solitude on our hill.

Near the end of the fifth century, St. Benedict, the Father of Western Monasticism, abandoned his studies in the city of

Rome and went to live in a cave. I can understand why St. Benedict left the city. Sometimes when I look at the lights in the valley, I think of the things I'd like to do in that imaginary city. Most of the time, though, I am satisfied to be where I am. And at dawn when we are on our way to morning prayer, and the lights in the valley are going off and the sun is rising, then I can see reality—hay bales and fields of corn and alfalfa.

It is much better for a monk to live in the country. Agrarians can understand our need to work the land, to grow much of our own food, to provide bread for both the table and the altar. People who are into Zen and Transcendental Meditation can appreciate our need for contemplation. Communitarians know how important it is for us to depend on the resources of those with whom we share our lot. We hold all things in common, and the whole community benefits, directly or indirectly, from the abilities of the individual monks—the teacher, the carpenter, the potter, the beekeeper, the weaver, the priest, even the writer. People who come here to make a retreat, to absorb the atmosphere of the monastery, know what we are about. Still, there are countless others for whom we remain mysterious.

Between the monastery church and the Whetstone Valley is the cemetery. The trees surrounding the cemetery are obscured by the night. In the moonlight, I cannot distinguish a Russian olive from a spruce, but I know the trees are there and I know that they enclose the graves of monks. There is no illusion here. This is where our bodies wait for their resurrection. You see, monks still believe that the *parousia* will happen. This is why we came to the monastery, and, perhaps, this is why we will always remain an enigma to many people.



## *St. Benedict and His Rule*

It was impossible for St. Benedict to flee from the world. In the ages before his, other hermits also had a hard time escaping. They were driven deeper and deeper into the desert by the curious who kept seeking them out. Not everyone who found the hermit's hiding place came to gawk, however. Some people sought him out because of a desire to have him impart wisdom to them.

St. Benedict left his cave because monks nearby wanted him for their abbot. They soon changed their minds about that and tried to kill him. After refusing to accept the reforms of monastic observance proposed by St. Benedict, these monks tried poisoning his drink—but the glass pitcher that contained it broke when he blessed the wine at table. “Go and find yourselves an abbot to your liking,” he told the monks. “It is impossible for me to stay here any longer.” He returned to the cave at Subiaco and established monastic life there. Later he and some of his monks moved to Monte Cassino, where he wrote the Rule. The Rule was written for monks, but nuns also accepted it as their guide for Christian living. At the time of St. Benedict's death in 547, the Rule was followed in only a few monasteries in central Italy. By the ninth century,

it had supplanted many other monastic rules. By the twelfth century, it had become the universal rule of monks and nuns.

St. Benedict was a wise abbot. He was flexible and moderate. This is why the Rule has lasted all these centuries. Although many of its regulations are no longer practical or practiced, the basic principles of the Rule have remained the same. Some of the customs that existed when I became a monk were accretions from the late Middle Ages. One of these was the manner in which we showed respect for the abbot. In those days when he was the celebrant of Mass, we had to kiss his ring, a symbol of abbatial authority, before receiving communion. This ritual often confused newcomers to the monastery. The abbot sometimes suffered the displeasure of having the stone in his ring licked by the communicant whose tongue was ready to receive the host but who had forgotten to kiss the ring first. We no longer have to do this, nor do we kneel and kiss the abbot's ring when we enter or leave his office. Our present abbot doesn't even wear a ring. St. Benedict would not have been comfortable with many of the trappings that accrued to the abbot over the years. He would have found them pretentious. In the Rule, he said an abbot should not seek "preeminence for himself" (64:8).

The Second Vatican Council, which was convened by Pope John XXIII, met in Rome between 1962 and 1965 in order to modernize and revitalize the Catholic Church. *Aggiornamento* was the Italian word the Pope used for this updating. Among the decrees promulgated by the Council Fathers was one that called for "The Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life." In this document, members of religious orders were advised to recapture the spirit of their founders. Although the spirit of St. Benedict is clearly manifested in his Rule, we found ourselves responding to surveys and questionnaires. Community meetings were held so frequently in the 1960s

that our abbot quipped, “Nowadays, monks profess the vows of poverty, chastity, and discussion.” Besides returning to the spirit of our founder, we were expected to update ourselves. Obsolete customs were discarded and adaptations were made in various areas. The most radical change was in the manner of worship when modern English replaced ancient Latin.

Perhaps some religious orders were baffled by the decree from Rome. They may have asked themselves: What if the spirit of our founder has nothing to do with the spirit of the times? We Benedictines had the evidence of history that the Rule of our Holy Patriarch had been an effective guide for generations of monks and nuns. Returning to the spirit of our founder was a matter of asking ourselves how we had departed from the Rule of St. Benedict. Kissing the abbot’s ring seemed to be one of the things that were not in accord with St. Benedict’s teachings.

The Rule indicates what St. Benedict disliked: grumbling, laziness, wastefulness, indifference, and arrogance. And what he liked: a sense of responsibility, honesty, temperance, and simplicity. He gave us a regulated life. He had us profess a vow of stability.

Living under the Rule is supposed to make us face reality and stop thinking about what might have been or what life might be like now in different circumstances. This is what we mean by stability. All of us who follow the Rule of St. Benedict learn to live one day at a time. The Rule of St. Benedict is basically a document of daily routine, a blueprint for people who live together day after day. It teaches us to settle down. “They no longer live by their own judgment, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather they walk according to another’s decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have an abbot over them” (5:12).

St. Benedict ends the Rule by declaring that anyone who follows it will achieve “some degree of virtue” (73:1). He doesn’t promise perfection. He doesn’t even expect it. Sometimes, applicants to the monastery make a point of telling the vocation director how very good they’ve always been and still are. We prefer hearing from people who tell us they aren’t perfect. They have a better chance of fitting into the community. St. Benedict does not demand heroic virtue. Nor are hair shirts and chains to be found in our wardrobes. No extraordinary means are to be taken in procuring and preserving virtue. A prospective candidate for our monastery once asked me, “Do you use the discipline?” He appeared disappointed when I told him we don’t whip our bodies. If such a practice was once fashionable in religious orders, it was never a custom in ours. St. Benedict would have frowned upon anything masochistic. He cautions us to be practical, even about the season of Lent. Don’t presume to do more penance than is good for you, he says.



## *How the Monastery Came to Be Here*

A retired rural mail carrier living in Marvin, the little town a mile from our abbey, told the founding monks that he had once lived on the property that is now ours. He had a relative, a Benedictine nun, who used to visit him and his wife those many years ago. The nun had the custom of burying medals of St. Benedict in the soil, beseeching his protection of garden and fields. In 1949, when the monks of St. Benedict came from Indiana to look for a site on which to build this monastery, late autumn's sun setting over these Coteau Hills overwhelmed them. They stopped at a farm and asked about the availability of land in the area. The farmer directed them to one of the banks in Milbank, the county seat. The man at the bank said, "Yes, I know that part of the country. Just a few minutes ago someone from out there was in here to arrange the selling of a farm. Maybe you will want to buy it." The man who offered this valuable information was named Mr. Benedict. The farm he had in mind was the one where the medals of St. Benedict had been buried in the ground. These are the legends we tell about our founding.

This is the story told by the monk who purchased our property at the public auction and who, along with volunteer workmen, was responsible for preparing the deserted farm buildings for occupancy: “I said the first Mass in the house on the kitchen sink, using an old shed door for the altar top. Then I rigged up that chicken house and said Mass in it every day thereafter. The mice used to run across the altar while I was saying Mass. It rained one day, and there was a hole in the center of the house where the brooder stovepipe used to go through. When I turned around for the *Dominus vobiscum*, my faithful workers were seen through a shower. The dormitory room was a sheep stable, and we shoveled a foot and a half of organic matter out of it.”

Some of the townspeople were alarmed when they heard that monks were moving into the neighborhood. How would you feel about having a monastery planted in your backyard? The retired mail carrier and his wife and another elderly couple were the town’s only Catholics. Everyone got along well with them and they with the town’s Lutherans and Baptists. But here was a whole horde of papists moving in—and the strangest kind. Monks! No wonder there was cause for concern. Martians might just as well have been descending on them.

A town meeting was called. Fortunately, one of the townspeople stood in our defense. He said, “They aren’t even here yet and you’ve already condemned them. Give the bastards a chance.” It didn’t take long for our neighbors to realize we meant them no harm. We became good friends and have remained so. They affectionately call us “The Abbey Boys.” If you aren’t from around here, you might think that’s the name of a country-western band.

 *Legends*

From the time I entered the novitiate and learned about my Benedictine forebears until now, Pope St. Gregory the Great was presumed to have written the biography of St. Benedict in the summer of 593. This was less than fifty years after St. Benedict's death. Now there is some doubt among scholars about Gregory's authorship and when exactly the biography was written. The author, whether or not he was a scribe in the Vatican Library almost a hundred years later, has given us wonderful legends of a saint. Until there is a consensus, however, I prefer identifying Gregory as the biographer of Benedict.

In every monastery there are monks who show their potential for becoming legendary characters. We recognize them while they are still with us, and when they are gone we tell stories about them and make certain that our memory of them never diminishes. Oral tradition is very important in monasteries. The stories are family heirlooms, which are passed on from one generation to another.

Whenever I visit other monasteries, my hosts reminisce about memorable characters in their communities. They tell the kinds of stories that are so often repeated in my own

monastic family. “Now, do you remember the time Father Dan got the car stuck in the mud? There was a horse in the pasture next to the road. Father Dan got the horse and tied its tail to the front bumper of the car. Then he got behind the steering wheel and leaned on the horn. The horse bolted and ran off, leaving most of the hair from its tail on the bumper.”

This incident with the horse is one of the anecdotes that will be told about Father Dan for many years to come. I’ve heard several versions of the story. In one, the tail itself was left attached to the bumper. We could have asked Father Dan to tell us once again the exact circumstances, but it wouldn’t have mattered. The story had already become a legend, and each of us tells it his own way.

The life of St. Benedict is filled with stories, many of them having to do with miracles wrought by the Abbot of Monte Cassino for the benefit of his monks and for people in the neighborhood. They are contained in what has been known as Book Two of *The Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great*. He relates all of these legends to an imaginary character named Deacon Peter. “I should like to tell you much more about this saintly abbot,” Gregory says, “but I am purposely passing over some of his miraculous deeds in my eagerness to take up others.” Before going on to relate the more pertinent stories, Gregory tells Peter, “With all the renown he gained by his numerous miracles, the holy man was no less outstanding for the wisdom of his teaching. He wrote a rule for monks that is remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language. Anyone who wishes to know more about his life and character can discover in his Rule exactly what he was like as an abbot, for his life could not have differed from his teaching.”

Just as there is conjecture nowadays regarding the author of St. Benedict’s life, so was there once controversy regarding the legislator of his Rule. When I was a novice forty-some

years ago, I never heard about the Rule of the Master. Although scholars were discussing it, this was no time to tell novices that St. Benedict had borrowed from someone else in the composition of his Rule. Nowadays, everyone agrees that St. Benedict condensed the Rule of the Master, which was written in the vicinity of Rome at the end of the fifth century. St. Benedict threw out whole chapters and changed the tone of others. He would not rule a monastery in the same manner the anonymous Master did. St. Benedict says an abbot should not be “excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous, or over suspicious.” The Master has all of these unfavorable characteristics. He had very little discretion.

Indeed, we can learn much about St. Benedict from the Rule as it has been passed on through the generations of monastic men and women.

## How I Came to Be Here

As a teenager in a small North Dakota town, I read Thomas Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The description on the book's jacket informed me this was the story of "a young man who lived an exciting worldly life until the age of twenty-six, when he entered a Trappist monastery." This meant that Merton got drunk, read dirty books, and flirted with Communism before becoming a monk. At least this was how I, a high-school sophomore, interpreted his "exciting worldly life."

It was Merton's book that first prompted my interest in monasticism. At that age, though, I was more interested in the theater. Every month when I went to the orthodontist in Fargo, I stopped at the newsstand in the bus depot and bought a copy of *Theatre Arts*. There were never more than two copies of the magazine on the rack. I daydreamed about being an actor, but I revealed this aspiration to no one. I was afraid of being told that membership in the drama club was all right in high school, but one simply didn't make it a profession—not even if one's crooked teeth had been straightened.

Since becoming a monk, I've met several others of my profession who have acknowledged Merton's influence in either drawing them to the monastic life or in keeping them there once they arrived. Merton belonged to the Trappists, a religious order that places great emphasis on silence. Out of this silence came words. He was a silent monk who dared to speak out in prose and poetry. He was an apologist of the monastic tradition, but he also became a prophet calling for change within the monastic order. When I was still in high school, a young man from my hometown joined the Trappists and came back a few years later terribly emaciated and with his head shaved. I remember wondering why Merton's kind of monasticism had to be so rough on people.

In college at St. John's in Minnesota, I encountered monks of another kind. Most of my professors were Benedictines, and their life appeared to be less penitential than that of the Trappists. By now, I knew something about monastic history. The Trappists were reformed Cistercians who were reformed Benedictines. All three orders followed the Rule of St. Benedict. The two reform movements occurred when it was believed that the Rule was no longer being observed as St. Benedict would have wished. But it was clear to me that the Benedictines lived by the spirit of the Rule if not by the letter of the law.

On the day my parents took me to college, from the moment I saw two black-robed, hooded monks strolling on the road leading to their community's institution of higher learning, I fell in love with the Benedictines. I became a monk watcher. Some of the monks were friendly; others were aloof. Some were docile, and others were easily perturbed. Another freshman told me he'd heard of one who had become so upset by the ignorance of his students that he threw an eraser at them, shouting, "I'd give up if I didn't love

you goddamned sons of bitches.” To me, monks seemed pretty much like ordinary people.

While pursuing a degree in English, I had it in the back of my mind that I would become a monk someday. There were two distinct classes in monastic life then: priests and brothers. I was attracted to the latter because I had no desire to seek ordination. Besides, the brothers appeared more genuinely monastic. In its origins, monasticism was a lay movement. St. Benedict himself was not a priest. Although he foresaw the need for an abbot to choose one of his monks for ordination, it was by way of exception that someone who was already an ordained priest was accepted into the monastery. St. Benedict was fearful that such a person would be lacking in humility and would become demanding because of his priestly status.

I soon learned, however, that the brothers were treated as second-class citizens in the monastery. They were forbidden by church law to hold certain offices, they could not vote on matters affecting the whole community, and they were restricted in the kinds of work they could do. St. Benedict would have been disqualified from being an abbot in a twentieth-century monastery because he was not a priest. Monasticism had departed from his idea of a classless society with equal rights.

Nevertheless, I felt comfortable with the Benedictines. And in a few years, changes would take place in monasticism. Many of the former distinctions between ordained and non-ordained monks would disappear after Vatican II. This was certainly evident at my alma mater when a brother was named president of the college.

Monks of the monastery I entered, in addition to inhabiting the monastery itself, were living among Native American people on four reservations in the Dakotas. Most of them had been assigned to these missions while they were still members

of St. Meinrad's Abbey in Indiana. When Blue Cloud Abbey was founded, it took on the responsibility of staffing the missions. The new monastery was named in memory of Mahpiyato, a tribal leader who was buried at the mission on the Yankton Reservation in South Dakota. Beginning in 1970, we initiated a policy of transferring the mission schools to the ownership and administration of the local tribes. Monks remained on the reservations for another twenty years, tending to the pastoral needs of the Dakota and Ojibwa people. Then we withdrew from this ministry altogether.

Although I was aware of the monastery's involvement in the missions, I was attracted to Blue Cloud Abbey's monastic life because there was more democracy here than elsewhere. Unlike the custom at other monasteries, including St. Meinrad's, there was no separation between the priests and brothers. They mingled during work and recreation. Fraternization between priests and brothers was not only tolerated here, it was encouraged. There were no separate novitiates for clerical and non-clerical novices. There was only one novitiate class and one novice master. I was convinced that I'd found the type of monastery St. Benedict would have found praiseworthy.

George, my college friend from South Dakota, first told me about the monastery. When he entered the novitiate here, I attended his investiture ceremony. When I applied for entrance two years later, George was no longer here. He almost returned the year I made first vows, but he changed his mind and went out West. He's disappeared from my life but not my memory.

The youngest of three sons, I was born late in my parents' marriage. As an adult, I learned it had been feared that my mother might not survive my birth. If this had been the case, my three maiden Lutheran aunts would have helped raise me.