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The Reforming Role of Religious Communities in the History of Western Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

White-robed Cistercians, gathered in their austere chapel before a wooden cross;

Black-cassocked Benedictines, eyes downcast, reciting the Psalter;

Canons of Chartres;

Nuns of St. Gilbert —

What have these to do with Lutheran Christians in the 20th century? Because Lutherans are Christians, they have a great deal to do with us, for we stand in the Western tradition. The church of the Augsburg Confession was born on Pentecost, and all of Christian history until 1530 is part of its history. A parochial doctrine of the church tends to ignore the millennium that separated Augustine from Luther. True catholicity demands that we reappropriate the history we share with other Christians in our common patristic and medieval tradition. Not only do we call Martin of Wittenberg "blessed" but also Gregory I, Francis, Bernard, Boniface, and many more. One cannot simply dismiss a 1,000-year span of Christian life

as being sub-Christian, especially when the roots of our own Latin tradition lie buried here. One enthusiastic student, striding with seven-league boots across the centuries, summarized the thrust of these remarks by exclaiming, "Thank God for Pope Gregory II, without whose support Boniface may not have evangelized the Germans, from whom we derive our faith!" If this kind of *Deo gratias* is jarring, it simply indicates the need we have for a reassessment of our understanding of church history and of the Holy Spirit's continuing guidance of the church.

Reformed Christians have traditionally been suspicious of, if not viscerally opposed to, one ancient institution of Christianity — monasticism. Ever since the upheavals of the 16th century most non-Roman Catholics in the West have been content to view the monks as being psychological eccentrics at best, or the spiritual heirs of Pelagius at worst. It is the purpose of this essay to indicate the vital role monasticism played in the continuing reform of Christianity, and to encourage Lutheran Christians, who stand in a similar reforming tradition, to approach the concept of communal religious life with understanding if not with sympathetic support.

ORIGINS OF COMMUNAL LIFE

Christian religious communities were an early protest movement, reacting against

the secularization of the church. To be sure, the Christian ideal of renunciation had been practiced since New Testament times, either as an end in itself or as a way to God. But organized communal life as it flourished in the fourth century was strongly motivated by its abhorrence of the laxity and luxury of a paganized Christianity. In that century, following the emperor's own conversion to the faith, the church was faced with the dubious blessing of receiving masses of half-converted pagans who tended to dilute the Christian's understanding of humility, poverty, simplicity, and the need of grace. "The hermit fled not so much from the world as from the world within the church." [1] Communal life was also a reaction against the bureaucracy and ineffectiveness of the church and its leaders, although most of these leaders were drawn from the monasteries. Far from serving as an arm of the organized church, the monks often found themselves in opposition to it. It is not difficult to read large segments of fifth- and sixth-century history as a struggle, or at best an uneasy truce, between the bishops and the monks. It is surely not without significance that no religious order has ever been founded by official administrative action or conciliar decision. The church has always given its sanction (on occasion mere toleration) after the community had been organized and gave promise of flourishing. The religious communities usually have been established by those who sought forms of life and work within Christianity which the church of their time did not provide.

Some scholars claim that monasticism in its origins was an anticlerical movement fostered by the laity who protested the increasing domination of the church by the clergy. Though this is an oversimplification, it is nonetheless true that the first monks were laymen and that they were indifferent to, if not suspicious of, clergy. The rule of St. Benedict cautions against receiving priests into the monastery "without due consideration," and if admitted, the priest was not to expect preferential treatment because of his ordination.[2] Cassian's warning that a monk "ought by all means to flee from women and bishops" reflects the estimation of the hierarchy held by the monks.[3] Many of the greatest monks, including Anthony, Benedict, and Francis, were never ordained.

Richard Sullivan has recently suggested that early monasticism played a reforming role in the area of anthropology. The prevailing concept of man among the Greco-Romans was decidedly optimistic and man-centered; they believed with unbounded faith that "man could create an earthly paradise by the exercise of his natural

[1] Herbert B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 10.

[2] "The Rule of St. Benedict," *Western Asceticism*, trans. Owen Chadwick, The Library of Christian Classics, eds. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen, XII (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 329.

[3] Cassian, *Institutes*, XI, 14, 16, 18, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series Two, XI (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 278—279. In Canon II of the Council of Chalcedon a distinction is made between monks and ordained clergy. Cf. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series Two, XIV, 268. By the time of Gregory of Tours, monks began to be classified as *clerici de gloria martyr*, 76. Louis Duschesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* (London: John Murray, 1910), II, 390 states, "We cannot see how Anthony during his twenty years of seclusion can ever have been enabled to receive the Eucharist."

talents." [4] Although earlier second- and third-century Christians had stressed man's impotence before God, by the fourth century the concept of human depravity had become blurred in many places. "The futility of human power was little evident when in the normal course of affairs great prelates counseled emperors, bishops built palaces, priests arrayed themselves in splendor to discharge their spiritual duties, and ordinary Christians did honor to God in magnificent temples." [5] It was at this crucial juncture that the monks reasserted a Pauline anthropology by their conviction that man could find help only from God and that, although man was still God's foremost creature, he was fallen and in need of grace. In short, the unexpected victory of Christianity posed a problem of identity for the church, so that the "new" church created by the monks "was hardly less revolutionary than the primitive Christian community." [6] Sullivan's summary is worth quoting:

> Sociologically speaking, the monks provided a prophetic vision capable of recreating the Church and thus of guiding the faithful through a time of trouble wherein there lurked dangers never before experienced by the believers in Christ. Put another way, the monks became reformers, supplying a regenerative impulse in a perilous age. [7]

[4] Richard E. Sullivan, "Some Influences of Monasticism on Fourth- and Fifth-Century Society," in *Studies in Medieval Culture,* ed. John R. Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo: The Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1966), II, 21.

[5] Ibid., p. 21.

[6] Ibid., p. 28.

[7] Ibid. In this connection see the ideas developed by Gerhard Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Ac-*

It is possible to explain the popularity of early monasticism by viewing it as a protest against the all-pervading tyranny of the empire. By the end of the fourth century the kingdom of God had become virtually identifiable with the Roman state, a concept fostered by Eusebius of Caesarea and vigorously opposed by the monk-bishop Augustine. The monks recoiled from the depersonalizing nature of society and affirmed a strongly marked individualism. Over against society in general the monastic communities displayed a kind of judgmental aloofness by styling themselves "island," "paradise," "fortress," "societas sanctorum," "the house of God," and "stadium of athletes." In other words, the monks introduced a new order of interpersonal relationships which became the archetype for all Christian associations. [8]

But the monks did not simply flee into the desert, letting the church and society shift for themselves. Many of the early hermits had done just that, but by a strange paradox of history the monastic ideal of Christianity soon became the norm for the church at large. The moral patterns developed in the monasteries strongly in-

tion in the Age of the Fathers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959). Joachim Prinz, *Popes from the Ghetto* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 76, overstates the case. "Monasticism, in any event, becomes the wellspring of developing Christianity. If it is paradoxical to say that those who ate and drank little fed the surfeited and smug, it is nevertheless true. Without the continuing stream of harsh admonitions that came from the monks, Christianity would have perished in the morass of daily compromises."

[8] Cf. Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae, Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina,* ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1844—1864), 22, cols. 1309—44; *De opere monachorum, P. L.* 40, cols. 547—82.

fluenced the patterns established for all of Christian society. The monk-bishops were the medium by which this took place. Those were the men who had espoused the monastery for longer or shorter periods and then returned to the church in the world where they exercised a reforming influence by imposing the monastic ideals on the church. It is difficult to name a Father of the early centuries who was not influenced by monasticism. Athanasius, Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers, Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, Jerome, Augustine — all came from the monastery. In the West the monastic schools of Lerins, Marseilles, and Tours produced scores of bishops who in turn brought their ideals to their pastoral work. The moral concepts enunciated in the numerous church councils, in handbooks of pastoral theology, in sermons, and in the writings of the Fathers were first hammered out in the monasteries. Although the monks may have retreated from the world, the end result seemed to be a virtual "monasticization" of the church and society. It may not be altogether incorrect to say that next to the Bible the document most influential in shaping Western Christianity for a thousand years was the Rule of St. Benedict, for which reason the period between A. D. 600 and 1200 is sometimes known as the "Benedictine Centuries."

Reform movements in Christianity have usually taken their inspiration and vitality from the Scriptures. Conversely, a revival of Scriptural studies has almost always led to efforts at reform. Monasticism was no exception. Although Protestants generally have been quick to emphasize the non-Biblical nature of 16th-century monasticism, it is questionable scholarship which

judges an institution from its period of decadence. Built into the structure of the early monkish routine was a heavy emphasis on Scriptural studies. Pachomius refused to receive a monk until he had memorized 20 psalms and 2 New Testament epistles. The Egyptian ascetics recited the entire Psalter daily, but from Benedict's time (ca. 450) this was done weekly. Through the liturgy, the *lectio divina, meditatio,* and copying manuscripts the monks came to know Scripture thoroughly, and monastic correspondence is permeated with Scriptural allusions which are lost on most modern Christians.[9]

The origins of Christian communal life are rooted in the monastic interpretation of the Scriptures. All efforts which have been made to associate the rise of Christian communal life solely with non-Christian influences (for example, monks of Buddha, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Near East religions) have so far failed. The monks took literally Christ's advice to the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and to follow Him (Matt. 19:18-22), and to deny oneself and to take up one's cross (Luke 9:23). They resolved to follow His example of celibacy, to follow Paul's caution regarding marriage (1 Cor. 7), to become eunuchs for the kingdom of God

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[9] On the monastic use of Scripture see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), especially Ch. 5, "Sacred Learning." Claude Peifer, *Monastic Spirituality* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p. 73: "Monastic life is not merely based upon the principles of the Gospel, as is every form of the Christian life, but every aspect of it has its roots in the inspired Word of God. The entire mentality of the monk is formed by the Bible, so that the proportion of the various elements in his spirituality is the same proportion as is found in revelation itself."

(Matt. 19:12), and in general not to love the world (1 John 2:15). Exemplars of the "desert motif" such as Elijah, John the Baptist, Paul, and Christ Himself were popular. The Augsburg Confession reminds us that "formerly the monasteries had conducted schools of Holy Scripture and other branches of learning which are profitable to the Christian Church, so that pastors and bishops were taken from the monasteries" (Art. XXVII); "In former times people gathered and adopted monastic life for the purpose of learning the Scriptures" (Art. XXVII). Although it is relatively simple for modern men to fault the monks for their deficient exegesis, the monastic interpretations of Scripture were influenced by their needs and environment and thereby constitute for us a prime example of the environmental factors which enter into many interpretations of Scripture. Early Christian monasticism as a reform movement believed it was reflecting a valid understanding of Scripture.

MEDIEVAL MONASTIC RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

The role of the monks in preserving classical culture and literature is too well known to require elaboration.[10] But their role in the preservation of Christianity is

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[10] Cf. Jean Decarreaux, *Monks and Civilization* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), pp. 338—39, "Even in the darkest ages classical ancient literature never ceased to be transcribed. . . . The services they thereby rendered to civilization were such that seven centuries from the fall of the Roman Empire until the twelfth century are rightly called the monastic period in literary history." William Bark, *Origins of the Medieval World* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 78, attributes the monastic literary and cultural success to the fact that monasticism was the best organized institution during this period.

all too often neglected by those who have profited most from it. The documents preserved by the monks, notably the writings of St. Augustine (quoted in the Lutheran Confessions 40 times), supported the 16th-century reformers and have significantly shaped contemporary Christian life and piety. The barbarian invasions which disrupted the West from the fifth to the eighth century upset civilization and proved deleterious for Christianity as well. Although the term "dark ages" is no longer commonly used, these centuries witnessed brutality and coarseness on a grand scale which threatened to eclipse whatever gains Christianity had made north of the Alps. The Latin Church under the Merovingians (ca. A. D. 496—751) was completely dominated by the secular princes who set up and deposed bishops at will. Although the "state" also controlled the monasteries, it was in these alone that a tradition of scholarship, Christian virtue, and a spirit of independence was maintained which occasionally aroused the conscience of a nominally Christian society. It was also within these establishments that a rudimentary training of the clergy took place and from which most of the bishops of the church were taken.

By far the most significant factor in the renewal of Christianity during these centuries was the evangelistic work of the monks. Christianity expanded from its Mediterranean base to include vast stretches of land drained by the Rhine, Oder, Vistula, Rhone, and Danube rivers. The birth of Latin Christianity in England is due entirely to the religious orders. From England, Winfrid (Boniface) and scores of like-minded companions brought the Word of God to Germany, and from

the mother house at Fulda much of the Teutonic territory was converted.

One of the most colorful of medieval reformers was Columban, a physical giant and moral rigorist who was determined to revive the Gallican Church by preaching, moral example, disputation, and occasionally through feats of strength. On a summer's day in A. D. 575 he landed near Mont St. Michel with a boatload of companions, the first of a wave of hundreds of Irish and English monks who were to cross the channel during the next two centuries to do mission work on the continent. The inspiration for this activity came from a principle of the monastic vocation which was unique to the Celts, the *peregrinatio pro Christo,* voluntary exile for the purpose of spreading the Gospel. The theory seems to have been akin to the early church's idea of "white martyrdom" as contrasted with blood martyrdom. Since the state was no longer persecuting the Christians, it behooved those who sought to test their faith to seek out other dangerous situations which demanded courage and privation. Columban established a monastic house at Luxeuil in Gaul which served as a center for the revival of Christianity and the conversion of pagans. The Celts encountered considerable hostility from the neighboring bishops, not only because their mission was a judgment upon the existing church but also because they followed the Celtic assumption that the abbot was superior to any bishop. In A. D. 603 the bishops called a council to discipline Columban, but when he appeared, he fearlessly lectured the assembled prelates on their vices. He also denounced the vicious life of Queen Brunhilde, calling her a new Jezebel, for which act of heroism he was

expelled from the country. Eventually he found his way to northern Italy where he died, but not before he had established over 40 monasteries which served as mission centers in Europe.

The best known and most successful Anglo-Saxon missionary-monk was Winfrid of Nursling, later known as Boniface, who for 30 years consolidated the existing churches and pushed the frontiers of Christianity north to Scandinavia. He used monks as his missionaries, though he is credited with introducing the use of women evangelists as well. He established more than 60 monastic houses in Germany, each of which served as a center for the renewal of the church and for the conversion of the pagans. After establishing a self-sufficient community by planting crops, acquiring herds, and erecting buildings, the monks travelled far and wide contacting pagans wherever they could find them. Boniface established the See of Mainz, which became an archiepiscopal see in the center of German Christianity and remained that for centuries. In A. D. 741 he undertook a thorough reform of the Franco-German Church by holding a series of five councils in which laymen participated alongside the bishops. A modern historian has observed that "it was the Anglo-Saxon monks and above all Boniface who first realized that union of Teutonic initiative and Latin order which is the source of the whole medieval development of culture." [11]

Part of the historic genius of Christianity has been its ability to create new forms

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[11] Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948), p. 212.

of life and ministry in response to the needs of the time. Cluny was such a creation. During the two centuries of anarchy and dissolution which followed the death of Charlemagne (A. D. 814) the church suffered from the control and domination of self-seeking princes. The papacy, far from exercising a beneficent influence on the church, reached its nadir during the 10th century. Reformation of the church was not to be expected from this quarter. As often happens in the history of the church, reform was initiated from the grass roots. The monks of Cluny recognized that a prior condition for reform was the dissociation of the church from control by the state, and it was to this task that the order of Cluny addressed itself. Rather than seek the Christian ideal by fleeing from the world, it argued it was better to infuse the ideal into the world. The order was founded in A. D. 910 by Berno of Baume, and by the mid-12th century there were 314 monasteries under Cluny supervision with a total of more than 1,500 affiliates. The document which brought this order into being is significant, for it established the right of the church to exist independently of king and prince *(existens sine rege et principe)*.[12] For 200 years Cluny exercised a decisive influence on the Western Church. "In the 10th and 11th centuries the hope of Christendom lay in the monasteries. The monk and not the secular (priest) represented all that was vital and progressive."[13] Cluny's best-known representative is Hildebrand (Gregory VII)

who, though never a monk himself, represented the ideals of separation of church and state promoted by Cluny.[14] Hildebrand has been presented by Protestant homiletical historians as the archexemplar of proud papal pretensions to power. The humiliation of Henry IV at Canossa is for them the symbol of medieval ecclesiastical might. A more objective assessment of the situation suggests that Christians should at least regard sympathetically this pope's attempts to liberate the church from secular control and realize that at Canossa it was Hildebrand's pastoral obligations (if not genuine concern) which finally overcame his desire for power and ultimately caused his own downfall. Cluny also fostered a reform within the monastic institution itself, recalling the monks to their primary obligation of worshiping God and serving Him by serving mankind. In this way Christianity was renewed during the dark ages of Carolingian decadence.

Cluny's very success proved its undoing, and two centuries after its foundation this reforming order was itself in need of reform. By the end of the 11th century Europe was emerging from agrarian feudalism into an age of commercial and capitalistic expansion. With the influx of wealth came a corresponding decline in the values which had been attached to poverty, simplicity, and humility. The church was rapidly becoming "secularized"

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12 The foundation charter is translated by Joan Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny, 910—1157* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp. 4—6.

13 Workman, p. 235.

14 Norman Cantor, "The Crisis of Western Monasticism 1050—1130," *The American Historical Review*, LXVI (October 1960), 47—67, takes issue with this traditional interpretation of Cluny. He maintains that the Cluniac monks sought to uphold the status quo, whereas Gregory "revolted against the medieval equilibrium and hence against many things that eleventh century Cluny and its allies represented." P. 61.

in a debased sense. Once again renewal came from the cloister, this time from the Cistercian Order, founded A. D. 1098 in Burgundy. The Cistercian monks recalled the church to her pilgrim ideal of being in the world but not of the world. They symbolically underscored this ideal by founding their houses in remote spots — in marshes, swamps, deep forests, and isolated valleys. By doing this they also tended to expand the internal frontiers of Europe by creating more arable land. In fact, part of Holland owes its existence to the Cistercian reclamation of land from the sea. But the Cistercians' role in society was only secondary to their effect on the church. Every Cistercian house became a missionary center.[15] The "white monks," by their frugality and simplicity, were a living denunciation of the materialism of the 12th century. Their example called forth other orders which sought to counteract the secularization of the church.

Ninth-century England witnessed an almost total eclipse of ordered Christian life as the marauding Danes swept everything before them. Monasteries were plundered and burned, churches were destroyed, and the eastern half of the island seemed doomed to return to a form of primitive paganism. It was through the efforts of Alfred of Wessex that a truce was finally brought about which would permit the rebuilding of the church. Once again this task fell to the monks, notably Oswald, Ethelwold, and Dunstan and the houses of Abingdon, Westbury, and Glastonbury. From a meeting of English church leaders at Winchester in A. D. 970 there emerged the *Regularis Concordia,* a lengthy reform

document which thereafter continued to influence the relationship between church and state to the time of Henry VIII. All three of these monks were also bishops, and they were instrumental in restoring an ordered scheme of Christian life to England. "They did everything. They called the dead to life. They created a great and flourishing system upon vacant soil; and to Dunstan especially, as to Augustine of Canterbury before him, are due in a very real sense the titles of patron and father of the monks of medieval England." [16]

Europe underwent a socioeconomic crisis with the further development of commerce and the rise of cities. During the 12th century multitudes flocked to the cities where they found freedom from direct feudal obligations and opportunities for personal advancement. However, the church of the Middle Ages, like most other institutions of that time, was based on an agrarian economy. The monastery of the 12th century, like its counterpart in the rural parish, no longer exercised the influence it had enjoyed in earlier ages. The church was also losing its battle for the minds of the educated who crowded around teachers in the emerging universities. At this critical juncture in its history the church again received help from the religious orders, most notably the Franciscans and Dominicans. Preaching and pastoral care had fallen to a dreadfully low estate among the secular clergy at the close of the 12th century. The universities tended to foster a secular gospel and called into question truths which had been held to be absolute for nearly a millennium. The

[15] Cf. Louis Bouyer, *The Cistercian Heritage* (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., 1958).

[16] David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1963), p. 456.

clergy and hierarchy were embroiled in a struggle with powerful nobles and emerging kings to keep a firm hold on their landed estates. The papacy, too, was involved in an unhappy conflict with the rulers of the young national states, a struggle which resulted in the Great Schism of 1378. The preaching and intellectual labors of the Dominicans, the poverty and self-sacrificing social work of the Franciscans, the houses of mercy and learning supported by all served to renew and reform the church. In addition to these, the missionary enterprises of the Friars in Africa, Spain, Scandinavia, and Palestine are well known.

Enough has been said to give general direction to the thesis that the reforming impetus throughout the history of the Western Church has often, if not usually, originated in the cloister. William Bark refers to the monks as pioneers in a frontier society, inventors who met new needs, shapers and formulators of theology and practice.[17]

MONASTICISM AND THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

In a very real sense the Lutheran Reformation owes its initial impetus to the cloister. For nearly 20 years Luther was an Augustinian eremite, and some of his most significant writings (to Oct. 9, 1524) were produced while he was a monk. The quasi-monastic Brethren of the Common Life and similar reforming movements which antedated Luther helped significantly to prepare northern European soil to receive Lutheranism.

After he left the monastery, Luther had little good to say about the conditions pre-

[17] Bark, pp. 80—81.

vailing in this venerable Christian institution. In 1521 he published his *Theses on Vows* which became the basis for his *Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* published February 1522. This treatise, together with his university lectures on Psalm 45, verse 11 (1532), provide a basis for understanding his position. His treatise on vows is not a polemic against monasticism, but it is a guide for the troubled consciences of those who were leaving the monasteries. The problem of true vs. false vows is discussed under five major headings:

1. Monastic vows do not find support in Scripture. "[The monks] divide the Christian life into a state of perfection and a state of imperfection; to themselves, a life of perfection." [18]

[18] Martin Luther, "Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 44, 262. Luther begins his treatise with the declaration: "The question is not whether a vow ought to be kept, but what vows are true vows. No one can deny that the command to offer vows was instituted by divine authority. Scripture says, 'Make your vows and keep them' (Ps. 76:11), so there is no point in disputing whether a vow ought to be offered. What we are trying to show is how to distinguish one vow from another and recognize which vows are godly, good, and pleasing to God. Only these must be considered as vows. They are named and demanded in Scripture. Further, we are trying to show how we may distinguish whether vows are ungodly, evil, and displeasing to God, vows which would otherwise not be regarded as vows; for example, if a man were to vow to kill his neighbor or commit adultery and call that godliness. In such a case there is no need to discuss whether vows of this kind are to be kept or broken. . . . There is no doubt that the monastic vow is in itself a most dangerous thing because it is without the authority and example of Scripture. . . . St. Anthony, the very father of monks and the founder of monastic life, most wisely and in a Christian manner believed and taught that absolutely nothing should be observed

2. Monastic vows are contrary to faith. "If there were no other reason for abandoning and revoking the monastic vow, this blasphemy which denies Christ and repudiates faith would be sufficiently urging and compelling." [19]

3. Monastic vows are against evangelical freedom. "The vow of chastity and the whole of monasticism, if godly, ought necessarily include the freedom to retract the vows. Vows are a matter of free choice, and we are their master." [20]

4. Monastic vows are contrary to the commandments of God. "So you see, faith and the First Commandment cannot stand alongside their self-glory and their love for titles." [21]

5. Monasticism is contrary to common sense and reason. "Every vow is made conditionally. The impossibility of keeping it [must] always be conceded." [22]

Luther's primary concern lies with the abuses attending monastic vows, and his main argument against the monasticism that he knew is its faith-destroying nature. Monks believed they were a superior type of Christian who will be saved by their works.

> When I was a monk, I wearied myself greatly for almost fifteen years with the daily sacrifice, tortured myself with fastings, vigils, prayers, and other very rigorous works. I earnestly thought to acquire righteousness by my works, nor did I

think it possible that I should ever forget this life.[23]

Commenting on Luther's treatment of Psalm 45, Heinz Bluhm observes:

> The substance of *religio monachi* is trust, at least some trust, in *optima justicia nostra;* the essence of *religio Lutheri (et Pauli)* is utter trust without any reservation whatsoever *in unius Christi justicia.*[24]

In a recent study, René Esnault relates Luther's doctrine of the church to the issues of monastic theology, and suggests that an important element of his ecclesiology was the application of the monastic ideal to the Christian community in the world.[25] In this work Luther emerges as something of Odo of Cluny redivivus, inasmuch as both attempted to infuse secular Christianity with ideals nurtured in the cloister.

In the Torgau Articles, drawn up shortly before the Diet of Augsburg, the Lutherans cited three abuses of monasticism which required correction:

1. The monks err in thinking that their life is meritorious in the eyes of God.

2. The vow of perpetual celibacy is contrary to God's will.

3. Monks are required to celebrate masses

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which did not have the authority of Scripture." Vol. 44, pp. 251—53. For Luther those vows are God-pleasing which are commanded or sanctioned by Scripture and which support the Gospel of justification by grace through faith.

[19] Ibid., p. 282.

[20] Ibid., p. 311.

[21] Ibid., pp. 318—19.

[22] Ibid., p. 337.

[23] Ibid., 12, 273. Jaroslav Pelikan, "After the Monks — What?" in *The Springfielder,* XXXI (Autumn 1967), 10: "For [Luther] there was evangelical freedom to leave the monastery or to remain in the monastery, but not to enter the monastery and take the vows."

[24] Heinz Bluhm, "Martin Luther and the Idea of Monasticism," CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XXXIV (October 1963), 600.

[25] Cf. René H. Esnault, "Kontinuität von Kirche und Mönchtum bei Luther." *Kirche, Mystik, Heiligung und das Natürliche bei Luther. Vorträge des Dritten Internationalen Kongresses für Lutherforschung,* 1966, ed. Ivar Asheim (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 122—42.

for the dead and engage in other faith-denying activities.[26]

The statements in the Lutheran Confessions on monasticism reflect the spirit of Luther, although the former tend to be more sympathetic! Article XXVII of the Augsburg Confession ("On Monastic Vows") elaborates these points. "Observances [in the monasteries] were contrary not only to the Word of God but also to the papal canons." "Many persons entered the monastic life ignorantly." "It was claimed that by monastic life one could earn forgiveness of sin and justification before God." "The majority of monks entered the cloister in their childhood before attaining an age [of discretion]." The Apology (Art. XXVII) repeats the basic double charge, as do the Smalcald Articles that (a) monastic vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience are illegitimate vows, and (b) monastic concepts of merit and satisfaction are contrary to the Gospel.

On the other hand, the Confessions admit the possibility of useful work to be performed by the monasteries in the service of the church.

> The chapters and monasteries which in former times had been founded with good intentions for the education of learned men and decent women should be restored to such purposes in order that we may have pastors, preachers, and other ministers in the church, others who are necessary for secular government in cities and states, and also well trained girls to become mothers, housekeepers, etc. (Smalcald Articles, Part II, Art. III).[27]

The Augsburg Confession and the Apology acknowledge a time in the history of the church when monasticism was not so permeated with corruption. "Anthony, Bernard, Dominic, Francis, and other holy Fathers chose a certain kind of life for study and other useful exercises. At the same time they believed that through faith they were accounted righteous and had a gracious God because of Christ, not because of their own spiritual exercises" (Apology, Art. IV). "In the days of Saint Augustine monastic life was voluntary. Later . . . vows were invented" (Augsburg Confession, Art. XXVII). "Obedience, poverty, and celibacy, provided they are not impure, are non-obligatory forms of discipline. Hence the saints can use them without sinning, as did Bernard, Francis, and other holy men. . . . Virginity is recommended — but to those who have the gift" (Apology, Art. XXVII). The Augsburg Confession and the Apology do not condemn monasticism as an institution, as Luther was inclined to do. They are concerned primarily with correcting the abuses of vows and the works-righteousness that had become associated with it.[28]

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[26] M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: Collection of Sources with an Historical Introduction* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930), p. 88.

[27] Pelikan, p. 13, comments on Luther's as-

sumption that early monasticism had been established primarily for the purpose of education. "He supposed that this had been a primary responsibility of the orders since their founding. In the treatise *On Monastic Vows,* discussing voluntary vows as 'an institution of the primitive church,' he declared: 'The first Christian schools came from this practice. . . . Colleges and monasteries eventually developed from these early beginnings.' But now, he complained, these 'free Christian schools have been made into servile Jewish monasteries which are actually nothing but synagogues of ungodliness.' " *Luther's Works,* 44, 312—13.

[28] The Apology (Art. XXVII) quotes Bernard of Clairvaux to support the idea that in the past there have been good monks who were not guilty of work-righteousness. "As Bernard

The Lutheran attack on the religious orders in Germany combined with changing economic patterns to cause a general dissolution of monasteries. This proved deleterious to the church in at least three areas of her work: missions, welfare, and education. Although Luther is sometimes represented as favoring foreign mission work, he and his followers failed to replace monasticism with a structure that could implement an effective program of missions.[29] In the field of welfare the dissolution of the monasteries left the Lutherans with no corresponding institution to care for the needy. "Luther's Reformation had

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says very powerfully, 'First of all, you must believe that you cannot have the forgiveness of sins except by God's indulgence; secondly, that you cannot have any good work at all unless He has given this too; finally, that by no works can you merit eternal life but that this is freely given as well. Let nobody deceive himself, for if he considers carefully he will undoubtedly discover that even with ten thousand soldiers he cannot stand up against the Lord who comes at him with twenty thousand.' " See Bernard's *Sermon on the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, I, 1—2. Also James Pragman, "Bernard and Luther on Monasticism," unpublished S. T. M. dissertation, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo. 1965. The Lutheran Confessions appeal to the following monastic Fathers in support of their position: Anthony, Athanasius, Augustine, Basil of Caesarea, Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Chrysostom, Dominic, Francis, Gregory of Nyssa, Hugh of St. Victor, Jerome, John of Damascus, Peter Lombard, Gregory of Nazianzus, Origen.

29 This is the conclusion of Pelikan. K. S. Latourette comments on the missions aspect: "Protestantism lacked the monks who for more than a thousand years had been the chief agents for propagating the faith. Even when they were interested in giving the Gospel to non-Christians, Protestants did not have ready to hand machinery for spreading it among non-Christians." *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Three Centuries of Advance* (New York: 1937—45), III, 26.

proceeded on the expectation that Christian love, animated by the Spirit, could be relied upon to carry out the ministry to the needy, and that the monastic structures inherited from the middle ages were worse than useless." [30] Unhappily, Luther's expectations were not fulfilled. With the closing of the monasteries a crisis in education ensued which Luther expected the secular princes to handle. Wherever the state assumed the leadership in education, however, the spiritual aspect was often completely ignored. Pelikan sums up the situation:

> Luther's faith that the Spirit could dispense with the monastic structures was accompanied by the hope that the Spirit would, by creating true Christians, call forth the establishment of new and more authentic structures. The faith was sound, the hope was illusory. No such structure for missions was erected; the structures for welfare were a series of unworkable improvisations; and even the educational structures came into the hands of *das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment* which proved to be even less responsive to the Gospel than the religious orders had been.[31]

The Lutheran reformers inherited a 1,000-year tradition of church reform which had been largely sponsored by monasticism. In

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30 Pelikan, p. 13. Pelikan cites Luther's sermon on December 26, 1523: "It would be good if there were people available for it (welfare work), if such a city as this [Leisnig] were to be divided into four or five sectors. To each one there would be assigned a preacher and a deacon, who would distribute goods, care for the sick, and see who is suffering need. But we do not have the personnel for this; therefore I do not think we can put it into effect until God makes Christians." WA, XII, 693, 27—38.

31 Ibid., p. 18.

repudiating monastic life, the source of
continuous reform, they seriously impaired
the success of their own program.

COMMUNAL VOCATIONS TODAY

Up to this point, the reader may agree
with the general thesis that monasticism
has served the church splendidly in the
past and that the reformers of the 16th
century may have been hasty in abolishing
it. But what has this to do with the church
of today? Can a responsible churchman
seriously propose that a revival of this
"medieval" institution would serve any
purpose in the 20th century? My own
response is a tentative affirmative, and
I propose that theoretical and practical
considerations justify experiments in reli-
gious community by Lutherans.

At the outset, in order to remain Lu-
theran and true to the Gospel of Jesus
Christ, we must take seriously the objec-
tions voiced by Luther and the Confessions.
Both the question of vows and work-
righteousness must be dealt with. As to
vows, we would insist that if vows are
made at all in every case provision be
made for the dispensation from vows if
an individual is no longer able to fulfill
his vocation. Actually, dispensation from
vows is nothing new in monasticism, and
the Confessions repeatedly refer to medie-
val canon law to support such dispensa-
tions.[32] As to work-righteousness, we would
insist that those who live in religious com-
munities are simply pursuing a style of
Christian life which is comparable to any
other God-pleasing vocation, with the un-
derstanding that all men are sinners in

the sight of God and are utterly incapable
of earning their salvation through human
merits.[33] Any notion that monasticism
represents a more perfect way or that its
followers are in any sense a superior breed
of Christians is completely foreign to the
Gospel of Jesus Christ.[34]

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32 The Augsburg Confession (Article
XXVII) repeatedly cites Gratian's *Decretum*,
Part II.

33 Although many 20th-century monks no
doubt still cling to a notion of work-righteous-
ness, this attitude is rapidly being displaced
among monastic leaders in the Roman Catholic
Church by a truly Pauline emphasis. Consider,
for example, the most recent authoritative in-
terpretation of St. Benedict's Rule, which is to
be used henceforth in the Benedictine noviate.
Claude Peifer, op. cit., writes, "Conversion is
a grace. Man himself can do nothing to accom-
plish it. God must take the initiative. . . . God
does not place any conditions on His forgive-
ness. Satisfaction can in no way placate God"
(pp. 138 and 171). The same author warns
against denying the goodness of God's creation,
"This is the old Manichean heresy, and the
modern Christian is by no means exempt from
the same mentality" (p. 152). On marriage he
says that any deprecation of the conjugal estate
"does not represent the authentic Christian at-
titude" (p. 259). Sex is a gift of God and is
good, and the monks should be warned against
making a profession of celibacy because of un-
christian views on marriage. "It is by the merits
of Christ, then, that we are made obedient and
placed in the state of salvation. Salvation has
been won for us once and for all" (p. 273). A
Benedictine prior wrote to me on Nov. 23,
1965: "Put out of your head the notion of merit
in the sense which is objectionable to Lutherans.
. . . This form [monasticism] is one of many
of following Christ" (Dom. Columba-Cary
Elwes, OSB). A meeting of Benedictine abbots
held in Rome in September 1967 declared: "It
does not follow that this personal call which is
made to certain men provides any basis for a
comparison of the value of this vocation with
that of others and still less for any belittling of
other forms of Christian life." ("A Statement
on Benedictine Life," printed at Mt. Angel Ab-
bey, Mt. Angel, Oreg., Feb. 1968)

34 This distinction between superior and in-
ferior Christians developed out of the monastic
interpretation of Christ's words to the rich
young ruler (Matt. 19:21): "If you would be
perfect, go sell what you possess and give it to

What, then, are some of the reasons for experimenting with it? First there is the obvious one — that many Christians still experience the need for fulfilling their Christian calling in this way. The apostolate of the monks still attracts thousands of Christians every year, who, following the proper motives, find in communal life a form of Christian expression which they cannot find elsewhere. To insist that this vocation is somehow sub-Christian violates the law of charity, denies the variety in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and usurps God's prerogative of judgment. The community reemphasizes the fact of a variety of gifts within the church (1 Cor. 12:4 ff.), and it seeks to rescue the church from a kind of "uniformity of all believers" which replaces the "priesthood of all believers." As Donald Bloesch puts it, "The Church in the world should be a coat of many colors, but all too often it resembles a grey flannel suit." [35]

The most overworked word among religious orders today is the word "sign" used to designate the role of monasticism vis-à-vis the church and the world. Yet it is a useful concept, and we see no good substitute ready at hand. The monks, by means of their espousal of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, are certainly signs to

the church of basic Scriptural truths. On poverty the community stands in opposition to a luxury-centered culture. It is a living example of a type of *imitatio Christi* which is indifferent to earthly things and does not rely on them for ultimate happiness and meaning. It is a reminder that Christ came not to be ministered unto but to minister. By espousing the ideal of poverty, the community serves as a witness against self-seeking persons, even Christians (including clergy), who measure value in terms of earthly gain, material comforts, and social prestige. This was exactly what the medieval orders sought to do, although they generated considerable hostility from the secular clergy. It is possible that all forms of ministry can be viewed as complementary rather than competitive. There is always the danger of monasticism degenerating into a "theology of glory" in which the monk in effect says to other Christians: "I am poorer than you. I am humbler than you. Therefore I am better than you. You really ought to become more like me." This kind of pharisaism is to be condemned.

Celibacy is likewise a sign. Our age glorifies sensuality to a pathological degree. For those who have the gift, even the Lutheran Confessions admit the value of the celibate life ("virginity is recommended, but to those who have the gift," Apology 27:27).[36] The happy Christian

the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Tertullian distinguished between "precepts of the Gospel," which must be observed by every Christian, and the "counsels of the Gospel," which are not obligatory for all but only to those who wished to attain salvation better and more quickly. An example of the former would be the Ten Commandments; the three counsels are poverty, celibacy, and perfect obedience to a superior. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II, 1, quest. 108, a. 4.

[35] Donald G. Bloesch, *Centers of Christian Renewal* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964), p. 147.

[36] Thomas Merton underscores the importance of normal family life: "There is always an element of perilous ambiguity in monastic theories which glorify the common life of the monastery as if it were the ideal pattern for the Christian community. The basis of human and of Christian community is marriage, and celibate communities are something beyond the normal. "Christian Solitude, Notes on an Experiment," *Current* (February 1967), p. 17.

home, where husband and wife live to-
gether in conjugal fidelity, is an equally
powerful sign against a perverted and
adulterous generation.

The concept of perfect obedience was
often misunderstood and misdirected in
earlier monastic communities. Today it is
interpreted more in the sense of obedience
to the will of God in Scripture, to Gospel,
in the sense of an openness to the needs
of others. Obedience demands the mor-
tifications of self-will. Peter sums it up
by enjoining "obedience to Jesus Christ
(1:2)," "as obedient children (1:14),"
who give evidence of their discipleship
by an attitude of servanthood (3:8).[37]
These passages apply to every Christian, of
course, but the Lutheran orders seek to
channel this obedience in a special way.[38]

[37] The Congress of Benedictine Abbots held
in Rome, September 1967, drew up "A State-
ment on Benedictine Life" *(De re monastica)*
printed for private circulation at Mt. Angel Ab-
bey, Mt. Angel, Oregon, Feb. 1968. The as-
sembled abbots interpreted obedience as follows:

a. The monk takes up obedience that he may
renounce his own will and seek that of God
more effectively. It is a liberation from self-
seeking and a means of acquiring and preserving
true spiritual liberty.

b. The monk takes as his example Christ,
who came not to do His own will but to do that
of Him who sent Him.

c. The monk remains a disciple in the school
of the Lord's service. Obedience has an educa-
tive value. He is willing to learn from the wis-
dom and the tradition of his community.

d. The monk's obedience involves a construc-
tive contribution to the life of the community
by dedicating himself to the service of God.

[38] On the existence of Lutheran orders today
cf. Frederick S. Weiser, "The Survival of Monas-
tic Life in Post-Reformation Lutheranism" (The-
sis submitted to the faculty of the Lutheran
Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pa., for the
degree of master of sacred theology, 1966). On
recent revivals of monasticism among non-
Roman Catholics, including many Lutherans,

An individual who proposes to pursue
this calling will undoubtedly appear to
some to be out of joint with our times.
He renounces current value systems
through a rejection of wealth; he willingly
foregoes, at least for a time, the conjugal
estate; he lives a life for others. The very
fact of his disparity with the world gives
meaning to the words "in the world but
not of the world." To be sure, the same
sign is present in every Christian who does
not allow the world to dictate his standards,
who is chaste and selfless. A Lutheran reli-
gious order would simply seek to assist
the Christian in this vocation.

In a more practical vein, how would
Lutheran monasticism function in the body
of Christ? Perhaps the place to begin
would be in the three areas which were
left orphaned by the Reformation — mis-
sions, welfare, and education. Although
there is certainly room in Christianity for
contemplative orders, my own inclination
would favor a Christian faith active in
service. A Lutheran order of men or
women could find meaningful work in the
inner city where the usual structures of
family life may well impede an individual's
effectiveness. Thomas Merton compares
today's slum with the ancient monk's
desert:

> The slum is the equivalent of the desert
> wilderness today — hence the new quasi-
> monastic families have gravitated to the
> slums of Paris or Detroit. The slum is now

see Francois Biot, O. P., *The Rise of Protestant
Monasticism,* trans. W. J. Kerrigan (Baltimore:
Helicon Press, 1963); Donald G. Bloesch, *Cen-
ters of Christian Renewal* (Philadelphia: United
Church Press, 1964); Lydia Praeger, *Frei für
Gott und die Menschen, das Buch der Bruder-
und Schwesternschaften* (Stuttgart: Quell-Verlag,
1964); Olive Wyon, *Living Springs* (London:
SCM Press, 1963).

the abode of utter loneliness, risk, help-lessness: a true desert. Yet it is massively overcrowded — a tragic and unnatural solitude.[39]

In the field of education there is a serious need for Christianity to reassert itself within the intellectual establishment, and this task might well be undertaken by a community of scholars (after the fashion of the Bollandists, the Jesuits, and the Christian Brothers) who single-mindedly dedicate themselves to this vocation. In the area of foreign evangelism we might consider the example of the Peace Corps, whose members to all practical purposes take vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience for a period of 2 years to get a job done. The United States Government tapped a large reservoir of youthful dedication and idealism which the church needs to identify and channel more successfully. All other considerations aside, the church's treasurers would undoubtedly welcome any proposal which would put more workers into the field at less cost.

Perhaps the most likely place for a program of welfare to begin would be in association with a parish, where a structure already exists. A group of five or more

would, in a sense, constitute a chapter. By identifying with a parish the group would gain entry into a home and areas of need otherwise closed or unknown to it. It would enjoy the respect and support of community welfare agencies which would identify the workers with the activity of a particular church. This arrangement would hopefully assist and complement the work of the local pastor, who would probably direct it, and thus obviate the historic tension between the clergy and the religious orders. The educational apostolate could be associated with the campus ministry as a house of studies.

We began by pointing to the role of religious communities in the renewal of the church. Is it possible for Lutherans to reclaim their historic heritage by experimenting with new forms of ministry which have the sanction of tradition and Christian theology? Do our anti-Roman Catholic prejudices still run so deep that we impoverish ourselves by failing to reflect our confessional appreciation of communal life? It is unrealistic to ask for the church's enthusiastic endorsement of such experiments, but humble experiments ought to be made. In her present desperate situation the church can possibly tap new sources of strength by emulating the Fathers of the past.

St. Louis, Mo.

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[39] Merton, p. 15. Recent Lutheran experiments in inner-city communal life include Atonement House in Washington, D. C., and the parish of St. John the Evangelist in Brooklyn, N. Y.