

What is a monk?

Talk by Br Nicholas Palmer

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Introduction

One of the desert Fathers was asked by his disciple this very question: what is a monk? The reply was that a monk is someone who asks himself every day, what is a monk?

He was suggesting that there is no final answer to this question; it is a mystery to be explored every day. That is because to be a monk is to be formed into the mystery of Christ who we can never fully understand.

We, as monks, are called and helped by Jesus Christ to follow Him by sharing in the mysteries of His life. The Catechism says that all Christians are in fact called to live Christ's mysteries, and that "Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived..."¹ The monk has a particular way of living these mysteries, in a monastery.² It is a journey of faith in which he learns to trust in the Lord who is always with him. Monks often experience a deep, personal love of Jesus as they grow in union with Him and this helps them persevere.³

St Aelred, 12th century Abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx in North Yorkshire, taught that monastic life has the aim of forming the monk into the likeness of Christ that was lost at the Fall. He emphasised that it is a task that the monk must work at with God's grace, which is the help God gives him by His Holy Spirit. The Cistercian Constitutions put it another way, saying that monastic life has the purpose of restoring the divine likeness as the monk progressively attains the "full measure of the stature of Christ".⁴ St Paul commands the early Church to take on the attitude of Christ when he says: *For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.*⁵ The likeness of Christ that monks must grow into is His way of thinking, His attitude, character, sentiments and filial disposition of love towards God His Father and towards His brothers and sisters.

We are treating this subject in 5 sections: the Vows, Praying the Word, Separation from the world, Work and Asceticism, concluding with the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and of Monks. The aim is show how these aspects of monastic life help form the monk to be like Christ, his Model.

Section 1: The Vows

The monk takes vows to help him in his formation to the likeness of Christ. These are poverty, celibacy,⁶ and obedience, known as the Evangelical Counsels,⁷ and stability of life.

¹ CCC521

² The monk would be following Christ according to the evangelical counsels, as Vatican II said about religious life: "Indeed from the very beginning of the Church men and women have set about following Christ with greater freedom and imitating Him more closely through the practice of the evangelical counsels, each in his own way leading a life dedicated to God." Cf. Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

³ OCSO *Constitutions and Statutes* (C) 3.5

⁴ C.45.1; Eph.4:13

⁵ Phil. 2:5

⁶ Celibacy rather than chastity because all Christians are called to chastity which simply means sexual purity.

⁷ Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1

The Vow of Poverty

In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, we read: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*⁸ Before becoming a monk, a young man first receives a call from Christ to leave all behind: his home, family, friends, social standing and possessions; and to come and follow Him.⁹ It is a call to poverty and is part of the monk's vow to *conversatio morum*, or conversion to monastic life. It is a life-long conversion that must begin anew every day as he battles with himself and his passions. But the vow to poverty also brings with it the riches of the Spirit, including joy and peace in God's presence. The Holy Spirit is already active in the heart of the young man before he responds, creating a deep desire within him for the vocation. In this way, he is able to choose freely the direction which God is proposing to him, in His love.

We can use a couple of examples from the Saints. St Antony of Egypt, known as the father of monasticism, heard the call of Christ as the gospel was read in church one day, 'if you would be perfect go and sell all you have and then come, follow me'; so he sold all he had and lived as a hermit in the desert.¹⁰ St Benedict, known as the Father of *Western* monasticism, wrote a Rule on which Cistercian monastic life is based. St Benedict heard the same call as St Antony while a student in Rome and abandoned everything: his studies, his home and his inheritance, and gave himself totally to God in solitary prayer in a cave. Eventually, a community of disciples gathered around him and he went on to found a number of monasteries.¹¹

In our monastery at Mount Saint Bernard, we practise poverty by working for the community without payment and by receiving what we need from a common fund, like the first community in Jerusalem.¹² We do not own anything personally and share the use of the goods of the monastery, for example cars, kitchen, laundry and garden. It is a poverty that sets us free.

The Vow of Celibacy

Alongside poverty, *conversatio morum* involves a call to celibacy,¹³ where the monk renounces marriage. One reason Jesus did not marry¹⁴ was so that He could focus on serving His Father exclusively which involved forming the Church as His Bride.¹⁵ Likewise, celibacy helps a monk to do what he wants deep down – to give himself to God and to serve Him alone, as recommended by St Paul.¹⁶ The word 'monk' comes from the Greek word *monos*, which means 'unity' or integrity of the flesh and spirit that came with the likeness of God that was lost at the Fall. The monk aims to regain this integrity by living his vows, particularly celibacy. *Monos* also means 'alone'. Although monks usually live in communities sharing their goods and being bound together by obedience to an abbot and a rule, there is a real

⁸ 2 Cor.8:9

⁹ Mt.19:21; Mk.10:21; Lk.12:33; Acts 2:45

¹⁰ Boland, V. *Patterns of Personal and Communal Spirituality: Learning from Monasticism*, p.13

¹¹ Boland, p.31

¹² Acts 2:43-45

¹³ The OCSO *Constitutions* call it 'perfect continence and celibacy'. (C.10)

¹⁴ Some say these days that Jesus was married, but this is not mentioned either in the Gospels or the Tradition of the Church. The Catechism affirms the opposite, in n.1618: "...From the very beginning of the Church there have been men and women who have renounced the great good of marriage to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, ... he remains the model..."

¹⁵ Eph. 5. This does not explicitly say that the Church is Jesus' Bride but it does say that the mystery of a man leaving father and mother and joining himself to his wife is an image of Jesus and the Church, cf. Eph.5:31, 32.

¹⁶ 1Cor. 7:32-34

sense in which they are alone. They are not joined to a wife, but live chaste, celibate lives, solely for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven.¹⁷ There is a tension in monastic life between solitude and community. Monastic life is a school of divine and brotherly love where all aspire to be of one heart and mind.¹⁸ In the midst of community life, however, the monk has a place reserved in his heart where he is alone with God. There, he retreats in prayer, contemplating God, enjoying His love and seeking His will, while interceding for the needs of his brethren, the Church, the world and his own needs.

In our abbey, we express this blend of community and solitude every evening when we gather together in the church while each monk prays privately to God.

The Vow of Obedience

Celibacy enables the monk to submit himself totally to God in obedience to His will. St Benedict sees obedience as the key monastic virtue because it was the key virtue of Our Lord in his disposition towards His Father. It was an attitude of obedience founded on love and ensuring the salvation of the world. Christ's obedience culminated in His agony in the garden when He expressed His love for the Father's will: *Abba, Father...Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will.*¹⁹ The monk follows Christ in His obedience to the Father by being obedient to the abbot of his monastery, in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict.

One way that obedience is expressed in our monastery is when our duties are chosen by the abbot and we obey in faith and love.

The Vow of Stability

The Rule says it is not good for the monk to move from monastery to monastery.²⁰ The purpose of monastic life in a stable community is to help him fight the vices and so progress in conversion. The desert fathers say we need each other to test our virtues and grow in them. The monk lives by his vow of stability in a school of charity which enables him to learn to love as Christ loved. As Christ was faithful to His disciples and promises to be with His Church to the end of time, so the monk practices faithfulness to His community. Therefore, at his solemn profession, a monk promises stability and fidelity to the monastic way of life, and obedience until death. The monk trusts in the providence of God to provide for his needs in this setting.²¹ Peace and regularity in a familiar community have the benefit of reducing the monk's concern for external matters and enable him to focus on his inner life, where he is united to Christ in contemplation of His mysteries.

At Mount Saint Bernard, a monk promises stability to the monastery and community after 5 ½ years of testing and discernment when he can be reasonably sure that God is calling him to this place.

¹⁷ C.10; Mt.19:12

¹⁸ C.31

¹⁹ Mk.14:36. Boland, p.34

²⁰ RB1

²¹ C.9

Section 2: Praying with the Word

The Divine Office and the Eucharist

St Benedict says that nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God, otherwise known as the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours. The Psalms, which are the Word of God, are sung at the Office, and their first role is to bring conversion and purity of heart to the monk, so that he can praise God worthily and enter completely into the intercession of Christ for the world. The monk is especially formed in the likeness of Christ in this way because he is fulfilling Christ's priestly function.²² Jesus made the Psalms His own as He sung them in His earthly life as part of the Jewish liturgy. The monk can now be formed in Christ's prayer by singing the Psalms with and through Him, in the Holy Spirit, to God the Father. For us monks, the Divine Office is called a school of continual prayer²³ because it is sung at regular hours throughout the day, enabling us to focus on the presence of God in the intervening periods and meditate on the Psalms which are still fresh in our memory.

Continual prayer is also nourished by the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of the brothers' union with Christ and is the surest means of their formation in His likeness. It is celebrated every day by the Cistercian community and is the source of their joy.

At our monastery, we have two bells which announce the Divine Offices and Mass: one called *Maria*, which weighs two tons and which announces the major Hours and Mass, and the other, *Bernardus*, which weighs three quarters of a ton and announces the little Hours. The bells are located in the bell chamber, above the sanctuary. In the past, the bells were rung manually but now they are regulated by computer.

Lectio Divina

Not only singing, but reading the Word of God, known as *lectio divina*, is a very special way in which the monk is formed in the likeness of Christ. Christ is the Father's Word and when the monk reads Scripture, he connects with Christ in the depths of his soul and speaks with Him heart to heart.²⁴ The Holy Spirit enables him to take on the character of Christ as he reads of His life and his heart is enflamed with love of Him and His teaching and example. The four traditional stages of *lectio divina* are reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. They enable the Word of God to descend into the monk's heart so he can savour its sweetness and attain conversion of life. Monks also read the works of the Church Fathers and other theological works as part of their intellectual and spiritual formation to monastic life. This helps them interpret the Word of God authentically and apply it to their lives.

At Mount Saint Bernard, we come together after Vigils to read the Word, in common *lectio divina*. We have two places where we do this: one for the community in the Reading Cloister, and one in the novitiate. We have libraries situated in the Chapter House and the Reading Cloister, with over 20,000 books, and also in the Novitiate.

Private Prayer

Jesus often prayed to His Father, both day and night. He prayed especially before He made important decisions, like choosing His disciples.²⁵ We, as monks, are to follow Christ in

²² C.19.1

²³ C.19.2

²⁴ C.21

²⁵ Lk. 6:12-16

frequent personal prayer, seeking to know His Father's will and asking for His help in the tasks we are called upon to perform throughout the day. The aim is to form our heart in continual remembrance of God, called perpetual prayer.

Our community pray together each evening, during Exposition. We have a minimum of 45 minutes of private prayer per day, but it is normal for a monk to extend this in his regular conversation with the Lord as he meets the different challenges of his life.

Section 3: Separation from the World

The Hidden Life

The monk's prayer is helped by the hiddenness of his life. Jesus often went to isolated places to be alone with His disciples, so that they could rest and pray, and so He could gain their full attention when teaching them. The monk follows Christ into the monastery and enjoys being alone with Him. He is striving to purify himself so that he can listen to God and respond to His grace and the monastery enclosure helps him in this. The monk aims to live a contemplative life of silence, prayer and penance, as his way of participating in the life of Christ and His Church. This is his apostolate.²⁶

Guests

Though living a hidden life, monks are always open to receiving guests, and not just Christians but all people of good will.²⁷ The brothers receive the guests with reverence and kindness but without letting this service disturb monastic quiet.²⁸

We have many guests stay with us in our monastery and monks are available to speak with them on a daily basis. We also hold daily confessions for visitors in our church, and events to which the public are invited; for example, last weekend we held the Blessed Cyprian Pilgrimage and the Rosary Rally, both of which take place here every year. Blessed Cyprian was a monk in our monastery between 1950 and 1964. He was beatified in 1998. A shrine was built a few years ago on the Guest House lawn for use during the pilgrimage.

The Monastery

To maintain a monk's separation from the world, Cistercian monasteries are built in remote places. A bare church minimises distractions and draws attention to God alone. Beauty and simplicity in Cistercian architecture, with its heavenward arches and vaulted ceilings, raise the spirit to the transcendent God. The heart of the monastery is the church, where the Divine Office is sung. The infirmary, cells, and refectory lie parallel to the church and communicate easily with it. The cloister, traditionally a place of silence, is the innermost courtyard of the monastery, and gives unity and cohesion to the buildings. All these elements contribute to the house of God as a workshop where the monks are formed in likeness to His Son.

Our monastery's natural surroundings, including trees, meadows and ponds, are a great help for the contemplative life. Our father St Bernard used to say that he learned more of his faith from woods and fields than from books and his masters were the beeches and the oaks.²⁹ This is not a pretext, or course, to abandon our studies!

²⁶ C.31

²⁷ ST.30B

²⁸ C.30

²⁹ Wm. St Thierry, "Vita Sancti Bernardi", 4:23

Silence

Jesus' early, hidden, life in Nazareth enabled him to grow in patient and silent expectation of the mission His Father desired Him to fulfil. It gave Him space to develop in wisdom and in favour with God and men.³⁰ Similarly, the monk can grow in wisdom in the hidden life of the monastery, as he ponders in silence the Word of God prayed in the Office or in his *lectio divina*. Silence is one of the main monastic values because it is a way of assuring solitude for the monk in community and it enables him to remain mindful of God. Jesus spent long hours in silent prayer to His Father while discerning His will. In silence, the monk learns to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and respond to the inspirations of His grace.³¹

In our monastery, we observe a quiet period known as the Great Silence, between the end of Compline and the end of Mass, from 8pm to 8.45am. We also observe silence in the church, the cloisters, the refectory, and the library. Our Customary says that silence is a gift we make to one another.³²

Section 4: Work and Asceticism

Work

During Jesus' hidden life He worked as a carpenter.³³ All things were made through Him and for Him, yet he chose a humble profession of manual work. Monks are called to follow Christ in their work. It gives them an opportunity as God's sons to participate in the divine work of creation and restoration.³⁴ The aim of work is to provide a livelihood for the brothers and for others who work with them. It also enables them to support those in need and so fulfil Christ's precept to love our neighbour.

At Mount Saint Bernard, our new industry is the brewery. The beer we brew is called 'Tynt Meadow English Trappist Ale', and some of the proceeds will go to charitable causes. We also run a shop, a guest house, vegetable garden, pottery, bookbindery, and recently we began baking our own bread. Like in any household, our work also includes the basic domestic duties of cleaning, laundry and some cooking.

Asceticism

The work of the monk contributes in a special way to the life of asceticism and penance he has undertaken on behalf of the Church and the world. Early Christians saw asceticism as a means of acquiring virtue through spiritual exercises.³⁵ The whole of monastic life is ascetical and penitential, including fasting and abstinence, vigils, the hidden life and voluntary poverty.³⁶ It is the monk's way of carrying Christ's cross which he freely chooses for love of Him. Jesus led an ascetical life, from His temptations in the desert through to His Passion and Death, and the monk follows Him, in a spirit of joyful penitence,³⁷ and so takes part in His redemptive suffering for mankind, while being formed to His likeness.

³⁰ Lk.2:52

³¹ C.24

³² Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, *The Customary*, IX.6

³³ Mk.6:3

³⁴ C.26

³⁵ *The New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1917, *Asceticism*.

³⁶ C.25

³⁷ C.25

The expressions of asceticism in our community include not eating meat and fasting every first Friday of the year, as well as having additional penances in the Season of Lent. We also rise for Vigils at 3.15 every morning to sing God's praises and afterwards we ponder the Word and wait upon the Lord in silent, watchful prayer.

Section 5: Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and of Monks

The Blessed Virgin Mary helped her Son Jesus grow in wisdom and stature before God and men during His hidden life in Nazareth.³⁸ She is therefore a great advocate of monks, her sons in Christ, in their formation to His likeness. She is a model for the monk of silent prayer, as she and the Apostles waited and prayed, after Christ's Ascension, for nine days before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.³⁹ She is also a model of faith and obedience at the Annunciation where she assented to the Father's will.⁴⁰ All Cistercian communities as well as individual monks are dedicated to Mary, Mother of Christ and of the Church.

Legend has it that St. Alberic (+ 1109), the second abbot of Cîteaux, introduced the white choir habit, or cowl, for his monks after it was given to him by the Blessed Virgin Mary as they were singing Vigils. The white cowl honours the purity of Mary and the glory that is hers now assumed into heaven, seated next to her risen and ascended Son. The cowl is a sign of her protection, and the monk symbolically clothes himself with her virtues when he puts it on before going into choir.⁴¹

The *Salve* Statue, above the East Porch of our Abbey Church, is of Mary and the Child Jesus and was made for us in 1958 by Costa in Italy. It was copied from the seal of Furness Abbey, in Cumbria. It is lit as we sing the *Salve Regina* at the end of Compline each evening. As well as honouring Mary at the annual Rosary Rally which I discussed earlier, we have a daily Rosary in the Guest House.

Conclusion

To conclude, we revisit the question, what is a monk? and have to say again that the answer will always remain incomplete. The monk was described as a man who responds to Christ's call to follow Him in the Evangelical Counsels of Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience and in life-long faithfulness to a monastery and a community. It was explained that the monk is helped by Christ to re-live the mysteries of His life in his monastic practices, and so is formed to His likeness.

However, questions still remain because, not only is the mystery of Christ beyond our full understanding, but each monk is called to re-live it in a unique way. This reflects the depth of the mystery. It is ultimately a life that can only be travelled with Christ in the dim light of faith; but with expectant hope of future vision.

³⁸ Lk.2:52

³⁹ Acts 1:14

⁴⁰ Lk.1:38

⁴¹ <http://vultus.stblogs.org/the-mother-of-god/2007/05/>
<http://www.msjrscreea.ie/cistercian-life/liturgy/mary-mother-of-god/>

As mentioned earlier, all Christians are called to live the mysteries, or events, of Jesus' life in order to be formed in His likeness. *Lectio divina* is one way that Christians can study and pray about Jesus' life and so try and follow Him according to their individual circumstances.

Monks have a particular way of following Christ that demands everything yet promises a 100-fold return, as well as eternal life.⁴² It is a gift for which they can never thank the Lord enough.

⁴² Mt.19:29; Mk.10:29-30; Lk.18:29-30