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Benedictine monks working in the cloister of the monastery of Samos, Lugo, Spain (Alamy Stock Photo)

I have read Thomas Merton off and on since I was thirteen, and over those sixty years have gone through stages of admiration, emulation, disenchantment, and rediscovery. Like many other readers, I have been impressed by the importance of mercy in his writings. Where did this emphasis come from? I think some part must have been played by Merton's experience as a monk living under the Rule of Benedict. Merton's emphasis on the practice of mercy had important roots in his monastic formation. The Rule of Benedict created a Scripture-shaped world suffused with reminders of God's mercy, and the experience of life together made monks aware of their need for mercy, even as it gave them the means of exercising it toward each other.

The School of the Lord's Service

When Benedict declared in the prologue to the Rule that he was establishing a "school of the Lord's service," he was tapping into an already ancient tradition with roots in Greco-Roman culture, in Scripture, and in the Gospel portrayal of Jesus as a teacher with disciples. In this tradition, a school was not a place for the transmission of abstract information, but rather for the cultivation of personal transformation. Such transformation took place when disciples who were committed to the common life

engaged in practices—Benedict calls them the “tools of good works”—that embodied the monastic ideal of humility and obedience.

The “strictness of discipline” in monastic life was no mere matter of regulations and punishments. It was above all a matter of progressively actualizing the character of Christ through *bodily practice*. In his simple “rule for beginners,” Benedict provided the framework within which such transformation could take place. All ancient education took for granted that character derived from habitual virtuous action, and the formation of habits was basic to all philosophical training. Benedict spends the bulk of the Rule talking about what monks should do with their bodies, the where, when, and how of life together. Readers who find pedestrian the prescriptions concerning the measure of food and drink, clothing, sleeping arrangements, modes of procession, service at table, and the special concern for the young, elderly, and guests, miss the point: namely, that habits of virtue are formed by all these bodily practices.

Repetition is the key mechanism of habit formation, and the distinctive Benedictine vow of stability ensured that monks would stay long enough to gain the full benefit of such repetition. As Benedicta Ward has observed, the Benedictine practice of reading Scripture was less a search for answers than a savoring of the divine word; the same passage could be read again and again. The Rule also was read aloud, not only when someone entered the community, but also daily at meals through the year. The round of the liturgical year and the pattern of the monastic life alike provided the structure for learning through embodied repetition.

The supreme instrument shaping the disposition of monks was the *Opus Dei*, the “work of God.” The importance Benedict attached to the *Opus Dei* is indicated by the amount of legislation he devotes to it. All of chapters 8–20 are given to the *Opus Dei*, and fourteen other chapters touch on it. The monastic day was punctuated by times of prayer in common: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. Benedict justified the eight times of prayer using Psalm 118:164, “Seven times a day have I given praise to you,” and Psalm 119:62, “At midnight I rose to give praise to thee.” The complete psalter was chanted together each week.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the formative role played by the repetitive chanting of the psalms. This practice, above all, enabled the monks to imagine the world that Scripture envisions, and to live within that imagined world as though it was real—and then, by their practices, to *make* it real. In the *Opus Dei* the psalms were not studied at a distance, as the prayers of ancient people. They were actualized, appropriated, performed, and personalized. The psalms enabled first-person, first-order speech to the Living God in praise, thanksgiving, complaint, and petition. And bit by bit, the world of the psalms, a world created at every moment by God, a world in which God hears the prayers of the faithful and comes to their assistance, became their world as well. As Merton noted in his conferences to the novices at Gethsemane, “The office is not the whole prayer life of the monk. It is only a part of that prayer life. But it is the great school of monastic prayer.”

Mercy in Scripture

Nowhere is this truth about God more extravagantly displayed than in the psalms chanted by monks every day, week, month, and year of their lives.

What is the meaning of the term “mercy” in Scripture? The Greek and Latin versions of the Bible used by the Catholic tradition—the Septuagint and the Vulgate—employ the terms *eleos* and *misericordia* in the manner of Greek and Roman culture. Both terms point to what can be called a transactional disposition. In common usage, mercy is not egalitarian; it denotes the stance of a superior to an inferior, that is, from one blessed to one miserable. The terms for mercy embrace practical assistance, rescue, forgiveness of debts; thus, *eleos* is extended by *eleemosyne*, or the sharing of possessions with those without.

The scriptural use of these terms is enriched, however, by the fact that they are used to translate *chesed*, one of the most theologically fraught terms in the Hebrew Bible, used for one of the two

fundamental covenantal qualities—modern English translations render it as “loving kindness.” In the covenant between God and Israel, *chesed* and *emeth* (fidelity) are qualities that God ascribes to himself, as he reveals himself to Moses on the mountain (Exodus 34:6–7). Thus, Scripture adds to the Greek and Latin understandings of mercy the element of a covenantal relationship, and makes bold to imagine the creator of all that exists as entering into such a covenant with humans.

If we think about the elements in human mercy—that we see or hear the other as other; recognize the other as being in need; respond with a disposition of fellow feeling or compassion; and act to relieve the other of the condition of misery—we realize that Scripture ascribes these elements in a preeminent degree to God and his essential character. The Living God who brings all that into existence at every moment has a personal relationship to creation, and above all to those bearing his image, and shows his fidelity and mercy to them forever.

Nowhere is this truth about God more extravagantly displayed than in the psalms chanted by monks every day, week, month, and year of their lives. More than half the occurrences of *miseriordia* in the Vulgate are in the psalms. God’s mercy is extended to Israel as a nation and to every individual: “The earth is filled with the mercy of the Lord” (Psalm 118:64); “In the morning let me hear of your mercy, for in you I trust.” (Psalm 143:8). Such is the character of the God that monks found in the *Opus Dei*, and by their constant chanting of the psalms, they were able to imagine their own world as one saturated with divine mercy.

The Canticles

Luke has Mary anticipate the prophetic message of her son: good news to the poor means also bad news to the rich.

The Rule of Benedict pays particular attention to the two main daytime hours of prayer. At both Lauds and Vespers, the Rule directs “the canticle from the Gospel Book” to be sung in addition to the assigned psalms. Benedict refers to the Benedictus and the Magnificat from the Gospel of Luke (1:46–59 and 1:68–79). For the monks who chanted these canticles together with the other psalms of Lauds and Vespers, they were experienced as New Testament psalms, which carried into the story of John, Jesus, and Mary the same powerful emphasis on God’s mercy. Merton tells his novices that the canticles are “the bridges between the Old and New and contain in themselves all the riches of divine revelation in Scripture.” The term “mercy” occurs twice in each canticle, and a comment on each of these songs in turn enables us to appreciate how they might have enhanced an appreciation of the monastic life as one steeped in mercy.

The Benedictus speaks of God’s visitation of his people and the raising of a horn of salvation as a fulfillment of the prophets and as a remembrance of the covenant God made with Abraham—this present action is “to perform the mercy promised to our fathers”; it is a “redemption” and “horn of salvation” that “saves us from our enemies and from the hands of all who hate us.” Monks chanting this canticle at the break of their day would need no elaborate scheme of allegory to understand themselves as having escaped the clutches of their enemies (the vices from which they had turned) and as living in the way of peace according to the rule, so that, as the canticle says, they might “serve [God] without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

At the late-afternoon hour of Vespers, Mary’s Canticle again follows the regular assigned psalms every day; thus, the Magnificat and the Benedictus are the “psalms” most frequently chanted by monks. In the Magnificat the theme of mercy is again sounded twice. Mary states that God has done great things for her, “and his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.” Like Zechariah, she connects God’s present mercy with his promises to the patriarchs: “He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his posterity forever.”

Two particular features, though, distinguish her song from that of Zechariah. First, the display of God’s mercy on those who fear him comes together with judgment on those who do not: even as God exalts

those of low degree and fills the hungry with good things, he scatters the proud, casts the mighty from their thrones, and sends the rich away empty. Luke has Mary anticipate the prophetic message of her son (Luke 4:16–21; 6:20–26): good news to the poor means also bad news to the rich. The monks who chanted these words, however, could take comfort from knowing they had chosen to be among the humble, while at the same time remembering that they must fight always to scatter the arrogance that could so easily enter their hearts.

Second, monks could also identify particularly with Mary herself, whose “low estate” corresponded to their own humility, just as her words to Gabriel—“Let it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38)—provide an exemplar for their own commitment to obedience. Indeed, the Magnificat reveals Mary as the model for the monk, and a conduit for God’s mercy. At least since the eleventh century, the final song of the monastic day was the *Salve Regina*, sung every night at the end of Compline. It begins, “Hail, our Queen, the mother of mercy, hail, our life, sweetness and hope,” and the monks, identifying themselves as the exiled children of Eve, cry out in song, “Therefore, our advocate, turn your merciful eyes toward us,” begging, “and after our exile, show us Jesus the blessed fruit of your womb.”

Merton comments on these canticles of Lauds and Vespers, “How tragic to sing these words every day, and not know what they mean, to go on acting as though we had not received the mercy of God, as if we were abandoned, as if we still needed something, struggling to ‘save ourselves’ as if He could not save us.”

Thus, God’s mercy toward monks; what about monks showing mercy to each other?

Mercy Toward Each Other

The practices that helped form Merton no longer exist in the same way they once did, even in monasteries. Whether the changes to monastic life are all for the better is not clear.

Both at Opus Dei and in the daily round of activities, monks are especially prone to pass negative judgment on each other. A clash of personalities is inevitable, a natural if unfortunate consequence of the common life. When almost all activities are done in common—working together, eating together, singing and sleeping together—the smallest differences can quickly become major irritants. This monk cannot keep the pitch; this one snuffles; that one stinks; this one eats more than his share or is chronically late for everything; that one is, well, lazy. The common life leaves few things secret and no faults unexposed. Thomas Merton became aware of this early on at Gethsemane, and thereby became aware of his own need for mercy, and his need to show mercy to his fellow monks. Perhaps his quest for a hermitage, for a “room of his own,” owed more than a little to the constant grind that the common life had on a spirit as naturally sensitive—and critical—as his.

Two elements of the Rule provide guidance to help monks avoid the judgment and contempt found in communal life, and learn instead to practice mercy. The first is taciturnity. Benedict places his chapter on silence, not accidentally, between the chapters on obedience and humility. Benedict stresses the power and danger of speech; quoting the proverbs, he warns that “In much speaking thou shalt not escape sin” (Proverbs 10:19), and “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). In this way, he echoes ancient wisdom traditions, which regarded loose speech as the mark of the fool and careless speech as the greatest of social dangers. Monks are therefore to speak seldom, even for “good, holy, and edifying conversations”—a practice that Merton’s Trappists took to a level far beyond my comparatively garrulous Benedictines. Benedict reminds his monks that they are in a school of the Lord’s service, where “it becometh the master to speak and to teach, but it befits the disciple to be silent and to listen.” And if taciturnity even in good speech is the ideal, evil speech is utterly banished: “But as for buffoonery and talk that is vain and stirs laughter, we condemn such things everywhere with a perpetual ban, and forbid the disciple to open his mouth for such conversation.”

The most destructive forms of speech in community, Benedict understood, are those that involve judgments against the other. Benedict calls this form of speech “murmuring,” included all forms of

gripping, gossiping, and nagging. He forbids it absolutely. When I was a monk, I thought that the rule of silence was mainly in service of contemplation. Now, after many years of suffering poisoned discourse in the halls of academe, I have come to understand that silence was mainly about charity. As we learn every day in our new world of constant chatter, savage judgment, and long-distance shaming via (anti)social media, when speech is totally without restraint, mercilessness is an almost inevitable consequence.

The second means provided by the Rule is prayer and the mutual confession of faults. Benedict prescribed that Lauds and Vespers should be concluded with the communal recitation of the Lord's Prayer. The purpose of this was the removal of those thorns of scandal, or mutual offense, which inevitably arise in communities: "For, being warned by the covenant which they make in that prayer, when they say 'Forgive us as we forgive,' the brethren will cleanse their souls of such faults" (Chapter 13). Note here that it is not the ones giving scandal or offense whose souls are cleansed by the words of forgiveness, but those who are called to *forgive* scandal or offense. This is the practice of mercy on the ground.

An even more embodied expression of mercy is the chapter of faults. Benedict did not establish the formal chapter of faults, or *culpa*, but once in place, it served for centuries as an important mode of mutual forgiveness within monastic communities. The chapter provided a way to repent of precisely those faults that would most irritate others—tardiness, slovenliness, carelessness, noisiness, failure to carry out assigned chores—and to ask for forgiveness from those so affected or offended. As I experienced it as a Benedictine, the chapter of faults cultivated the virtue of mercy in two ways. Most obviously, for each monk present it evoked mercy and forgiveness toward others, whose faults are so openly disclosed before me. But as I also confess the things I have done that have disturbed the common life, I become sharply aware of my own need of mercy, first of all from God, but also from my fellow disciples in the school of the Lord's service. Merton's Trappist tradition included the declarations of faults by monks against each other, a practice notoriously capable of abuse—and in his conferences with novices, Merton struggled mightily against the negative aspects of this inherited tradition. In his lengthy and subtle discussion of the practice (since then abandoned by the monks of Gethsemane), Merton emphasized the need for empathy toward the other when making such declarations, stressing the spirit of charity over the zeal for God and mercy over judgment (*Observances* 215–239).

The term mercy occurs a final time in the Rule, in the splendid chapter on the reception of guests (Chapter 53), which opens with the striking statement, "Let all guests that come be received like Christ, for he will say, 'I was a stranger and you took me in' (Matthew 25:35)." The reception of guests is to begin with prayer and the kiss of peace, the greeting done with "the greatest humility," with the head bowed and the whole body prostrate, "and so let Christ be worshipped in them, for indeed he is received in their persons." After Scripture is read with the guest, the monks are to say, "We have received, O Lord, your mercy in the midst of your temple" (Psalm 47:10). It would be difficult to find a more profound appreciation for the presence of the Risen Christ among humans than in these directions for monastic hospitality. But we see here as well how the world imagined by the Psalms is made real by embodied practice: receiving guests is the experience of God's mercy.

It would be foolish to suggest that the distinctive role played by mercy in Thomas Merton owed everything to his monastic formation. But I hope I have shown how the singing of psalms and canticles in the Opus Dei cultivated an appreciation for God's creation as one drenched in mercy, and how the practices of silence, the mutual confession of faults, and the reception of guests provided opportunities for the expression of mercy within the monastic community—all of it putting the monastic formation of Thomas Merton very much in harmony with his devotion to mercy. When Merton made his turn to the world through a more explicitly prophetic stance, his voice had substance and credibility because it came from his deep grounding in the monastic life.

The practices that helped form Merton no longer exist in the same way they once did, even in monasteries. Whether the changes to monastic life are all for the better is not clear. What is clear is that if Merton—indeed, if monasticism itself is to continue to have a prophetic role in our own very different world—then the values espoused and lived by Merton the monk must be translated by those who are

not monks into the changed circumstances of an increasingly secular society. How to form disciples with minds and hearts of mercy when the embodied practices of the monastic life—when even the intentional gathering of disciples into community—are not readily available? The way forward is uncertain. But if Christians are to cogently and consistently represent the face of mercy—which is the face of Christ—in this valley of tears, then in some fashion, I think, they must find ways to gather together for prayer, to sing the psalms and canticles, to practice silence in the name of charity, to readily confess their faults to each other, and to receive strangers as Christ.

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