

# ALLIANCE INTER MONASTÈRES

## A Mirror of Monastic Life Today

Thoughts of the A.I.M. International Team  
on the present challenges facing Monastic Life



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## Introduction

This short paper began as informal discussions amongst members of the International Team at AIM led by the President, Abbot Jean-Pierre Longeat. Our thoughts have been collated and are presented here to encourage the dialogue taking place in all communities, large or small, on all continents and in the most diverse circumstances, concerning the challenges facing monastic life today as lived by those following the Benedictine Rule and tradition. Perhaps some of what we say does not reflect the situation in your country or region, in your community or congregation. Nevertheless, we hope that it can be helpful in discerning the way that God is leading us today through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and Christ's call to follow him on the way of St Benedict. We offer these reflections with humility as a springboard, knowing that others are working on the same issues and realities.

Central to the monastic life is the love of God. He calls us because he loves us and we respond to him in love. It is this love that moves our hearts and enables us to be faithful to him and persevere in the monastery until death. It is the love of God that has drawn us together to live in community in which we live out the Benedictine vows as we search for God and give our lives to him and to our brothers and sisters. Conscious that God is love, all things become possible for those who love him.

We could best look at what the Lord is calling us to do today by dividing our discussion into seven sections or themes. These are not mutually exclusive, but rather interconnected and intimately related. Each community might wish to adapt these themes to fit the reality of its own situation.

1. Community: building up community life and living it to the full.

2. Leadership: the nurturing and training of monastic leaders.
3. Formation: initial and continuing formation and the forming of formators.
4. Vocations: discerning and fostering of monastic vocations.
5. Work: suitable monastic work and the development of a serious work ethic.
6. Financial Stability: becoming a financially viable community – from dependence to financial autonomy.
7. The monastery and the world, separation and immersion.

There are, of course, many more topics for discussion, e.g. Traditional Monastic Values and their place in Monastic Life today. However, each of the seven topics above includes some aspect of that subject too.



### **The general state of the world and monastic life today**

Benedictines and Cistercians throughout the world have shared with us these observations on the challenges we face today. The collapse of institutionalised religion, together with individualism and relativism, has led many people to give up religious practice altogether. This has particularly affected Christianity, including Catholicism, in the Western world. This “spirit of the age” is now spreading throughout all continents.

Another phenomenon is the rapid decline in the birth rate throughout the world, leading to smaller families with fewer children. Traditional monastic life, and the Catholic Church in general, thrived on families, both rich and poor, encouraging their children to become clergy and religious. For some, it could be a step up the social ladder and a means of education. The availability of education for all, especially for women, makes it unnecessary to enter religious life in order to teach, nurse or become a professional.

The development of social communications since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and rapid advances in media technology in the 21<sup>st</sup>, together with the sexual revolution in all but the most traditional societies, means that young people believe themselves to be free from the constraints of former times. The local church or parish has ceased to be the focal point of community life (music, sport, drama, dances, interest groups) and is now irrelevant to most people.

All in all, there is a much-reduced pool from which vocations come. Our communities in many countries are aging and diminishing. Some have ceased to exist. Obviously, there are significant differences between continents and countries and there are communities experiencing new life and vigour. There are, of course, signs of hope, but these are sometimes channelled into new movements and religious congregations, some of which are monastic in nature, whilst others contain certain monastic elements.

The Dutch missiologist Herbert Kraemer says that, “the fact the Church lives in difficult times is not the problem. It is the fact that we forget that the Church has always lived in difficult times – that is our problem.” It is important to look on the challenges of the present time as God’s gift to us for today. We should not be dismayed or dejected by the precariousness and fragility that beset our communities, but rather live by faith in Jesus Christ and in the power of his Spirit. Each age has its own challenges and in each age the Lord says to his Church and to us monastics, as he said to St Paul, “My strength is sufficient for you.” We must not lose heart or give up: the monastic life has always been and will always be an act of faith in the God, who calls us to search for him by following the way of the Gospel as taught by St Benedict.

However, there is a stark contrast between the present and the period immediately before. In many ways, we can be

considered as coming after the distinct period of the reinvigoration of monastic life in the mid-nineteenth century to the Second Vatican Council. Throughout this period the Catholic Church, and monasticism in particular, was in sync with broader social movements (neo-medievalism and communitarian responses to industrialisation; the need for meaning after the horrors of two world wars). In consequence, the number of vocations was higher than at any time since the desert was made a city. We have suddenly become fundamentally out of sync with society. Essentially the point is that, although the Church has always faced difficulties, we have moved dramatically from a time when there were relatively few overt problems (perhaps the Church's very triumphalism was its greatest problem) to one where the problems are many and obvious. The locus of our sense of crisis is in the number of vocations, which have declined rapidly. This is a challenge to us personally because we need vocations, not only to sustain our institutions, but also for our own sense of validation. It is a natural human phenomenon to view the recent past as somehow stretching far into history. A broader historical perspective could give a more helpful theoretical understanding and increased confidence in the value of our lives, though, of course, it would not make any of our current problems disappear. This is the moment, perhaps, to focus on the quality rather than on the quantity of vocations, indeed on the quality of life in our communities.

### Possible questions for discussion:

- a) What challenges do we see affecting our community at the moment and what are we doing to respond to these challenges?
- b) Are we planning for the future or simply reacting to the present with some nostalgia for the past?
- c) Are we able to identify the "signs of the times"?



## 1) Community

God created human beings for family and community life, to live and work together and so continue what he has begun. He called the people of Israel to be his people and made a covenant with them. Jesus called his disciples to be the new Israel of God, the Church. The followers of Jesus were to be living stones, making up the Body of Christ. The ideal of monastic life is found in the first community of Christians in Jerusalem, where all things were held in common and the disciples were faithful to the teaching of the apostles (*didache*), the fellowship (*koinonia*), the breaking of bread and the prayers (Ac. 2:42). Community life is central to the Church, and so to the monastic tradition. St Benedict talks of the coenobitic life, the traditional word for monastery being coenobium, as it truly describes the lifestyle of those living there.

Today, when many of the values and customs of traditional family and community life have been lost in society and

are disappearing even in the most traditional of countries and religions, there is a strong desire to rediscover this lost reality. Can it be found in our monastic communities? There is a real danger of importing into our communities ideals and forms of behaviour that are now current in the outside world. We can easily become a group of individuals who live under the same roof but do not share the same lifestyle and ideals. There is an urgent need to nurture and build real community in our monasteries, thus deepening the reality of true communion. *Conversatio morum* can only flourish in an authentic community, i.e. where there is stability. We need to learn the importance of understanding, respect, acceptance and compassion and a chaste affection for our brothers and sisters, as well as for guests and neighbours. It is important to believe that from the day of our profession, the community is our true family and that our blood family no longer come first.

The real question is the practical one of how one recognises a group of individuals from a true community. Where does the balance of the individual and the corporate lie, so that we have a clearer understanding of our expectations and aspirations? No matter what difficulties a community might be passing through, it is essential to give witness to young people and possible candidates of the joyful hope and happiness that are intrinsic to monastic life.

A particular problem affecting communities of men is that of clericalisation, where the monks themselves become clericalised and where men enter to become priests rather than monks. This is compounded when the monastery places too much emphasis on priestly, rather than monastic, formation.

### Possible questions for discussion:

- a) What are the fundamental dangers affecting community life in my monastery today? Can we name them? What practical measures are we taking to respond to these?
- b) How can we best create a healthy atmosphere of fraternal charity in our community? What aspects of the life described by the Holy Rule or in our Constitutions are missing and how can we put this right?
- c) Is there a genuine monastic culture in my community? Do we have a shared vision? Are we aware of the fact that the best leader can do nothing unless we have a common vision?
- d) For men only: are we a community of monks or a college of priests?



## 2) Leadership

Leadership is one of the most critical areas in religious life today and yet it is essential for developing and sustaining a good and integrated community life in our monasteries. Many communities today have difficulty in electing and keeping a suitable superior. If a community cannot produce a superior, how viable is it?

St Benedict tells us that the abbot holds the place of Christ in the community and that he teaches by word and example, that he is the interpreter of the Rule and the Gospel for his community. He must accompany and encourage the community; he is to be both father and mother, an elder brother and a companion on the road of life. He must not have favourites, but treat each member of the community with justice and with moderation, seeking what is best for him. An abbot must know how to share his authority with other monks and become the leader of a team. He must be able to work with others in his community, his deputy (prior), the novice master (formator), the bursar

(procurator), the infirmarian, guest master, porter and the other officials of the monastery. What St Benedict says of the abbot is true of any monastic superior.

We must seek to form and train future leaders of the community in all areas of community life. Individual monasteries, congregations and orders must devote the necessary resources to this end. All monks must receive a solid formation. Without good leaders, well-prepared for the task, our communities will fail and collapse. At the same time, the community must learn to nurture and support their superior, recognising that we are all fragile and in need of loving care on the part of our brethren. It is important to elect a superior who has the necessary wisdom and spiritual depth.

There is, perhaps, a significant balance to be drawn between recognising and preparing future leaders with the need of a community to have a genuine election process and to elect freely its leader at the appropriate time. This means that all the brethren in formation and all the members of the community have to be looked at as possible future superiors. In no way should particular men or women be singled out for succession to the superior.

### Possible questions for discussion:

- a) Does my community attract candidates who might be future leaders and if not, why not?
- b) Are those in formation given adequate training and education to take up positions of responsibility within the community?
- c) What is lacking in the way we prepare to elect a superior and in the way we support our superior once elected?
- d) Do we seek to see Christ in our abbot and in all our brethren?  
Do I recognise Christ in myself?



### 3) Formation

Good leadership and well-prepared formators are not enough in themselves to guarantee adequate formation in a monastery. The whole community, by its way of life, integrity and commitment to the monastic ideal and above all to prayer, is of its nature the first formator. It is also important to recognise that all of us, from the moment we enter monastic life until death, are responsible for our own formation by our dedication to prayer, reading, study, work and community life. No community can survive unless there is a serious formation programme, backed up by the genuine effort of all its members to live faithfully the coenobitic vocation. The bad example of a few can destroy the cohesion of the group. We must not forget that a monastery is a “school for the Lord’s service,” and a focus for evangelisation, both for our members and for guests and neighbours.

There needs to be a practical and viable discernment process at every stage of monastic formation, from first

contact with a candidate until – and beyond – solemn profession. Perhaps we are not thorough enough in discerning whether a candidate is suitable or not. It is essential to have a police check as well as some kind of psychological assessment before the candidate enters. There also needs to be a stringent safeguarding policy in place to avoid any repetition of past and present abuse scandals. Candidates must be educated for the celibate life and helped in the practice of Christian chastity. We are to become expert in living the Gospel and Christ alone should be the centre of our lives. Candidates should be introduced to the art of monastic living and taught the skill of building up the monastic community with its spirit of inter-dependence amongst its members. Gradually they should become responsible for their new community or monastic family.

All candidates should undertake a sound philosophical and theological study programme, whether men or women, and whether they are going on to the priesthood or not. This is in addition to any higher studies that might be desirable for a candidate to undertake a full part in the work or ministry of the community. There should be no cutting of corners in this area and financial resources should be invested primarily in this. Yet all this is pointless unless those in formation can absorb the silent ethos of monastic life, in which alone contemplative prayer can flourish. Candidates coming into the monastery from today's noisy and gadget-cluttered world need to learn the value and beauty of silence, of being alone with God and dedicating substantial periods of time each day to prayer and *lectio*. The example of the whole community is of the greatest importance.

### Possible questions for discussion:

- a) In my monastery, is formation the work of the whole community?
- b) How can formation, both initial and on-going, be improved in my community or congregation?
- c) Are adequate resources set aside for the work of formation?
- d) Are our discernment processes vigorous enough? Do we have a robust safeguarding policy in place and how can it be improved?
- e) Is my community truly a focus for evangelization and is Christ clearly visible in our midst?



#### 4) Vocations

No vocation, seriously undertaken, is easy, whether it is to marriage, the single life, religious life, the priesthood or any other kind of vocational work. Salvation history is the history of vocation. God calls creation into being and calls human beings to know, love and serve Him, living together as families and communities. He calls patriarchs, judges, kings and prophets to form and guide a nation and he calls Israel to be his own people, the People of God. Jesus continues his Father's work by calling his disciples and does so still through the working of the Holy Spirit. The constant message in both Old and New Testaments is, "Do not be afraid. I am with you." God not only calls men and women to the monastic life, he also walks with them as they journey on the monastic way, taking the Gospel for their guide. Today we talk of a "vocations crisis", but this is a human crisis, not a divine one. God has not suddenly stopped calling people to a life of obedience, stability and *conversatio morum*, the coenobitic

life that leads to perfect charity, but people are no longer able or willing to hear God's call, through fear, other interests or lack of faith. Yet faith often comes as a result of God's call. Some monastic communities, above all in the northern hemisphere, are unwilling or unable to assist people in the listening process. They are convinced that vocations have dried up and so have slipped into a death-wish mode. Communities need to be educated into taking responsibility for seeking out and encouraging vocations.

It is the duty of monastic communities today to help and accompany people, young and not so young, in discerning, discovering and nurturing their specific vocation, whatever that may be. All communities need to develop a serious, well-organised vocations programme. This may be a new ministry within the monastic world, but we have to be proactive in making the monastic life known and understood, attractive and desirable, showing clearly that the search for God remains one of the most exciting propositions on offer even today. This might not be the traditional monastic way of meeting and encouraging candidates, but we have to accept that the world has changed dramatically and is continuing to change at a rapid rate. We need to become masters of media communication in order to be known and available for dialogue with anyone who might or might not be considering the possibility of a monastic vocation. This is as true of the developing world as elsewhere. Mention should also be made of the interesting experiment practised in some communities of inviting people to live alongside the community for a limited period, which can be extended and, in some cases, lead to permanent commitment. We must open up our monasteries for those who are seeking to know and serve God in the monastic life. It can be a long process, as often some of these people might not be Catholic or even Christian.

### Possible questions for discussion:

- a) What kind of vocations ministry is it possible for my community to engage in and are people being trained to do this work?
- b) Are we tapping into the right sources of today's vocations? Do we even have contact with people who might be seeking the monastic life? How do we make contact with such seekers after God?
- c) How could we offer a different model of vocation in our community, such as temporary commitment?



## 5) Work

Work is an integral part of monastic life and the whole of our lives is, in effect, the Work of God, the *Opus Dei*. St Benedict, as well as saying that, “Idleness is the enemy of the soul,” and “they are truly monks who live by the labour of their hands,” also organises the monastic timetable in such a way that there is substantial time for work in the course of the day. In fact, he arranges the Divine Office, particularly the Little Hours, in such a way that monks can do a full day’s work. He is the first monastic legislator to take work seriously and to incorporate it into the monastic timetable. He even envisages monks being absent from office on account of the heavy labour that certain seasons of the year demand. Nevertheless, there has to be a balance between prayer, work and rest. We must recognise the value of work in building up and unifying the community, as well as the need for income to cover expenses and enable investment for the future. The search for God must lie at the heart of all we do with

love of the brethren as the goal. St Augustine said, “Monastic life is a work in itself.” and whilst this is true, it must not be used as an excuse for not doing a full day’s work. Chapter 4 of the Rule, *On the Tools of Good Works*, can be our guide in this.

All over the world, life is changing rapidly and in quite dramatic ways. Mechanisation, automation and digitalisation are having a profound effect in the workplace, which, in turn, is having an effect on work in the monastic life. Much of what we did effectively in the past is no longer viable today, whether it is in agriculture, education or in other important areas of traditional monastic work. Many communities are finding it difficult to replace traditional works with alternatives, especially a work that involves a major part of the community. Common work should bring greater cohesion to a monastic community but today this is often lacking. However, monks have different skills and talents, so there have always been workshops and artisans in a monastery. What is important is that each member of the community should work hard and well. Nevertheless, there is the danger of dabbling in hobbies and of wasting financial resources in experimenting with unrealistic projects. Communities need to inculcate a sense of responsibility where work is concerned with those in formation as well as search for work that is both financially productive and recognises the creative and spiritual dimension that all work should have. In addition, as St Benedict teaches, there needs to be a shared responsibility for the property of the monastery. All should take part in menial tasks that keep the monastery running smoothly.

Whilst it is true that monasteries have always been the recipients of donations and legacies, we cannot rely on these as a major source of income. Monastics

must work assiduously both to earn an income for the monastery as well as for their own individual human dignity and sense of self-esteem. Work encourages accountability, responsibility and a spirit of detachment and service.

**Possible questions for discussion:**

- a) Does our timetable and lifestyle permit all members of the community to do a full day's work? What needs to change?
- b) Does our work, like our prayer, unite the community in a common endeavour? Do we respect one another's work and contribution to the life of the community?
- c) Does our work encourage individualism and pride or a spirit of service, mutual respect and responsibility?
- d) Are we aware of the theology of work in the Holy Rule and recognise the spiritual dimension of work as a participation in God's creation?



## **6) Economic and Financial Stability**

We live in a very different world from that with which St Benedict was familiar. Nevertheless, he did expect monks to work for their living and not depend solely on the donations of the rich and powerful. The monastery was to support itself as well as provide help for the poor and those in need. A monastic community can only be viable if, in addition to being able to provide its own leaders and formators, it also has members who are able to organise, sustain and administer the economy of the community. Financial stability is essential for the wellbeing of a monastic community. This involves not only developing monastic work that provides sufficient income for the daily needs of the community, but also money for emergencies and investment. Emergencies could include unplanned health needs, though preferably there should be a health insurance plan that covers the entire community. Emergencies could also include natural disasters of all kinds, some of which are not covered by ordinary

insurance policies. Whereas the lifestyle of the community should always be marked by frugality and austerity and, of course, faith in Divine Providence, nevertheless it is wise to have investments to guard against difficult times, as well as to bring in some extra income for the community. Other considerations are the care of the elderly and chronically infirm and the possibility of providing for a pension to help generate the monastery's income, when older members can no longer work.

An important aspect of financial stability is the obligation to work within the legal and financial framework of the country in which one lives, seeking, at the same time, always to act with justice in regard to any employees the monastery might have. We will be judged on our treatment of the monastery work force. It is important that each community has a finance committee or group of trustees, according to legal requirements, and that accounts are kept and audited by professional auditors. Transparency in financial matters is pivotal. Just as monastics practice common ownership of all that belongs to the monastery, eradicating all forms of private ownership, which goes against the very nature of the coenobitic life, so common ownership depends on joint responsibility for all that pertains to the monastery and the life of its members.

The accumulation of wealth is unhealthy for a monastic community. Security and superfluity should not be confused. Monastic buildings, whilst spacious, clean and uplifting, should never show opulence or be filled with unnecessary possessions. Monastics should have what is necessary to live a good monastic life: silence, solitude, books and a library should be available, but no more than this. A community should never differentiate itself from its neighbours by a lifestyle not in consonance with those among whom we live

and work. We have the duty to bear witness to the poverty of Christ.

An issue that needs to be addressed openly and honestly is the custom and expectation in some societies for men, in particular, to contribute to the care of their parents and siblings, especially in old age or ill health. This really has no place in the monastic life, but must be addressed transparently.

### Possible questions for discussion:

- a) Are all the brothers/sisters aware of the financial state of their community? Is this seen as a shared responsibility? Are they informed of the state of the monthly accounts?
- b) Are our finances properly managed and what can be done to improve the situation?
- c) Do we observe civil law as well as canon law? Are our accounts legally audited?
- d) Are we too reliant on donations and legacies and do we expect these as a matter of course?
- e) Is private ownership a problem in my monastery? Is there really a common purse and are all things held in common?



## **7) The monastery's place in the local Church and in society**

Hospitality has been central to the life of the people of Israel and the Church ever since Abraham and Sarah welcomed angels (seen by the Fathers to be the Holy Trinity) to their home and it is central to monastic life. St Benedict states that, “Guests are never lacking in a monastery.” He also writes about the local poor being helped and supported by the community and that pilgrims who come from afar should be made welcome. By the Middle Ages, this simple act of charity had led to the development of great guest houses, which catered for hundreds of pilgrims and guests; the creation of hospitals, where the sick and dying were cared for; and the foundation of schools of all kinds, where philosophy and theology, logic and mathematics, music, art and agricultural skills were imparted. Today, what most communities can offer the wider world is smaller and humbler in nature, but important nevertheless, much of it to do with ecumenical and

inter-religious dialogue. Monasteries are also oases of silence and peace in a noisy and busy world and places of prayer and reconciliation with God. We must never underestimate the power of God's love that touch people's hearts when they visit our monasteries, no matter how small or insignificant they appear to be. Monasteries also lie at the very heart of the local Church and give prophetic witness to the reality and presence of God in an ever more secularised world.

A monastic community's outreach to the local Church and society in general can take many forms. Monasteries have always responded to local needs. All monasteries have groups of lay oblates or associates. Some have organised groups of friends and benefactors. These people share more closely in the life of the community, both spiritually and materially, and are a great support to our communities. Today there is also widespread interest in the Rule of St Benedict, in community living, in the various ways of prayer that our communities practise, in Gregorian Chant and so on. There are also deep spiritual needs that are not being met by the culture of the age. Today monastic communities of the Benedictine and Cistercian tradition have much to give to a world that is thirsting for God and for spiritual values. We should not underestimate the mission that God is giving us today.

St Benedict states that all things necessary for the ordered life of the community should be found within the enclosure of the monastery. He also says that monks who go on a journey should not relate to their brethren on their return what they have seen or heard outside the monastery. This is a far cry from the monastic world of today. In this fast moving digital age of the Internet, mobile phones, tablets, computers and mass media, it is extremely difficult to discern and even more difficult to put into practice where the line between necessary and unnecessary contact with the "world"

should be drawn. The result is that the world has invaded the monastery as never before and with it, unless we are very disciplined, the danger that our silence, solitude, peace and spirit of recollection might disappear altogether. It could be said that the market place has entered the cloister. When people accustomed to living “online” enter monastic life, many communities are unprepared as to how to deal with this new phenomenon. Monastic communities need to work out how to adjust to this, not rejecting what is useful and good. Study and work rather than entertainment should be the norm. The wise use of such things can help build up the life of a community and prove an invaluable tool in monastic formation, as well as in administration.

Our monastic timetables must guarantee generous times of silence for lectio, personal prayer and study. Periods of recreation should not be dedicated to watching television, but to conversation and creative interchange among members of the community. All aspects of our life should build up the community and give expression to the deep communion amongst the members, which should be the mark of sound monastic living.

### Possible questions for discussion:

- a) Does our policy on the use of mobile phones, tablets, computers and the Internet adequately safeguard monastic life from invasion by the outside world?
- b) Is our monastery marked with a spirit of silence and recollection?
- c) How can the quality of community recreation and dialogue be improved?
- d) What does the enclosure mean in reality to my community today?

- e) Are there ways in which we can improve hospitality in our community? Are guests truly welcomed as Christ?
- f) Do we take part fully in the life of the local Church? Do we regard the bishop, local clergy and other religious as friends of the community?
- g) To what extent and in what ways are we involved in helping the poor? Could we do more?
- h) How integrated are our oblates or associates, friends and benefactors, into the life of the community? Do we truly appreciate them?

## **Conclusion**

There are, of course, other areas of monastic life and other challenges that need to be looked at closely. Some of these challenges are specifically of the present moment, some recurring from time to time, whilst others are ever present and indicated by St Benedict himself. Each community or congregation will have to work out its own agenda for discussion. We hope that the points raised by AIM might be helpful for fostering reflection, discussion and decision-making.