Inculturation: 
With Respect and 
Understanding II

"Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on another's dream, more serious still, we may forget .... that God was there before our arrival."

(Author Unknown. Quoted by Anselm Hammerling, O.S.B.)
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The Second International Symposium of
Benedictine Women, held at Sant' Anselmo, Rome, in September of 1993,
produced a rich and rare store of reflections. Monastic Profession
Inculturated, the chosen theme, focused the conversation among the 83 participants
- representing every continent and 30 countries! This issue of Benedictines
Magazine completes the publication of the eight major papers and responses. A previous issue - Winter, 1994 - included half of the
conference presentations.

Voices of women living a monastic, Benedictine life in Brazil,
India, Germany, France, Australia and Italy join the
previous chorus of presenters - who together continue to
open avenues of understanding and deepening respect for
differences and cultural experiences. Former and current Abbots
Primate - Victor Dammertz and Jerome Theisen - lent their
presence, scholarship, and summary perspective to the symposium
as well.

In this series of presentations, again, the sense of an opening of
issues and an ongoing conversation marked the tone. The
responses, brief though they be, illustrated well the possibilities for
continuing what a speaker had begun. It is the hope that the
publication of these reflections will enrich and expand the dialogue
among Benedictines - women and men - whenever and wherever
we come together to gain perspective on our profession and its
meaning and witness for the mission we share with the church for
transforming our world and culture.

Long ago, in one of Joan Chittister’s rousing, challenging,
“light-a-fire-under-them” talks - I recall the question, “So,
what have we renewed for?” Understanding and “living our
profession” with added vision, depth, and openness may help me
answer that question one more time with renewed energy and the
awesome respect for “the holy ground” of our particular
monasteries as well as this diverse world we all share.

- Mary Alice Guilfoil, O.S.B.
The Dynamism of a Living Stability

by Lazare de Seilhac, O.S.B.

"...If the waters of a river remain stagnant due to a lack of sufficient current, it ceases to be a river...if they are living and flowing, then the waters which pass are never the same, but the river itself does not cease to be the same..."

When we made profession we promised stability. That signified that we were entering a path marked out by boundaries: the boundaries of a very concrete Benedictine family; often the boundaries of a place, always the boundaries of a history. All we think, say or do is marked out by boundaries.

Therefore I acknowledge in advance that the remarks that follow do not have universal value - that would, however, be a very French failing - and they are only an attempt to open our common reflections. On what are they based? On the experiences of a certain number of French and Belgian Benedictine nuns; on what I have been able to glimpse in a few monasteries in French-speaking Africa; on what any Benedictine nun can learn by living in her community.

In accepting these boundaries by the very fact of my profession, am I, in fact, so very far removed from one of the convictions of the culture in which I am immersed: that everything we say is situated, determined, by a place, a milieu, a history? That does not mean that we are deprived of all reliable points of reference because no value is universal; the humble realism of the Rule of St. Benedict teaches us rather that the universal cannot be defined in the abstract; it is recognized mysteriously through what is most firmly rooted in a culture, through what is simply human. It is that path of humanity which the Word made flesh took to lead us into the life of God.

The Mystery of Baptism

Whatever may be their divergence's on the genesis of the Rule of St. Benedict, scholars agree in discerning in its Prologue, which comes from the Thema of the Rule of the Master, a fragment of a baptismal catechism. In chapter 4 “What are the Instruments of Good Works” they recognize a list of precepts taken from the Scriptures, a type of document which is classic in Christian tradition, and linked with baptism; such a list could be presented to the catechumens so that they might choose “the way that leads to life,” or else recalled to the newly-baptized so that they might ceaselessly turn over in their memory the conduct appropriate to one who has been reborn of water and the Spirit.

Now, it is by way of conclusion to these two texts that the Rule defines the stability promised at Profession:

“Usque ad mortem in monasterio perseveranter.”

“Officina vero ubi haec diligentia operemur clausura sunt monasterii et stabilitas in congregatione.”

We are immediately situated in the mystery of Baptism. It has established the Christian definitively in Christ; it has marked him or her with the seal of the Holy Spirit: “Be rooted and built up in Christ” (Col. 2:7). A mystery has already been realized in an irreversible manner. Monastic profession is a path which leads to this stability in Christ taking possession of the whole person, little by little. That is to say that it is a matter of an interior dynamism, a constant conversion, worked by the Holy Spirit towards stability of heart.

This stability of heart cannot be captured in a definition. Chapter 7 of the Rule of St. Benedict presents it to us both at the beginning and at the end of the ladder of humility: at the beginning, the fear of God, the constant attention to this gaze which is

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By nature a community presupposes institutions and therefore a certain inertia; but the community, like its members, is called to live out the dynamism of a living stability, orientated towards the future.

upon us; the perpetual remembrance of God's promises; the re-orientation of our desire, that God's will may be done in us. At the end, the charity of God, cleaving to Christ become as second nature through the action of the Holy Spirit who has transformed the heart in love. All the dimensions of existence are to be informed by this "rooting." The monk, inhabited by the fear of God and ceaselessly attentive to this presence, is also the one who distributes what is necessary to the brothers and sisters, cares for the sick, and receives guests.

Every spiritual temperament can recognize itself in this description; a permanent effort, and a simple reception of a unifying grace, our entire liberty is involved. The profession of stability will underpin that involvement of our liberty by integrating us into a visible community. By nature a community presupposes institutions and therefore a certain inertia; but the community, like its members, is called to live out the dynamism of a living stability, orientated towards the future. One could use the familiar comparison with a bicycle, which is only stable when it is moving; the comparison with a river is more appropriate: if the waters remain stagnant due to a lack of sufficient current, it ceases to be a river; if they are living and flowing, then the waters which pass are never the same, but the river itself does not cease to be the same.

How does the profession of stability become a living dynamism through stability of heart? We shall attempt to approach the subject in three areas:

- Permanent commitment,
- Stability in the community,
- Life within the enclosure of a monastery.

The Rule invites us to ask ourselves whether the "visiting monk" might not have some message for us from the Lord. Has the world in which they live anything to teach Benedictine nuns on the subject of the profession of stability?

Our universe has all the appearances of perpetual change. This lack of continuity which affects all areas of life is described to the saturation point in magazines and books: homes which break up; children's difficulty with prolonged concentration; relationships quickly made and quickly unmade; interest centered on the present event, soon eclipsed by another; ignorance of chronological points of reference; forced production of objects which can be used only once; buildings rapidly built and rapidly falling into disrepair; irresponsible destruction of centuries-old trees with no concern for reforestation. The economic crisis is probably already changing that, and yet the image of this changeability is stamped on our minds.

These analyses do shed light on things, but we are capable of registering them ourselves. During the holiday season many Benedictine nuns organize weeks of "monastic life experience" for young people (from 18 - 30 years of age). At the end of one such week a young girl said: "It is the first time that I have known every day, and in advance, what I was going to do during the following hour." At the beginning she had felt this to be a constraint, but then found the experience gave structure and was a source of liberty and peace.

The judgment we pass on this perpetual changing will vary according to the generation or culture from which we come; it can be positive as well as negative. However, and this is more profound than mere surface reactions, we often hear the plea of men and women overburdened with activities who are seeking peace of heart and spirit; of young people who have grown up in a universe of dispersion and are seeking to attain some sort of spiritual stability, sometimes going to rather unreliable spiritual techniques to find it.

We run the risk of viewing our profession of stability as a contrast with this world of change. Perhaps we should begin by turning the question round and ask whether this stability does not, on the contrary, make us able to perceive a more fundamental phenomenon. The speed of communications methods, of transport, or the presence via the media of worldwide events, all make one lose the experienced sense of distance. When the sense of distance is lacking, the sense of time is lacking also; and because there are as a result no points of reference in time and space, a kind of bewilderment, a fear, establishes itself in the depths of the being.

The structured nature of time and space which is part of a life under the Rule of St. Benedict - even if such a life may take forms which are very different from those of a classic monastery - makes us perceive, not by contrast but by the vital character of the experience, from what depths the thirst for interior stability may come to our contemporaries. Perhaps this is question which we can ask ourselves in a general way: does the life according to the Rule develop the capacity to comprehend the most fundamental aspirations of our world?

Fear of Definitive Commitment

How many communities see young and fervent sisters draw back when they grasp the meaning of committing oneself forever. How many couples of our acquaintance do not envisage marriage as definitive. And we know many young people who are capable of giving of their best for a great cause, without envisaging a lasting service; and yet neither the capacity for self-denial nor for self-giving is lacking. Perhaps in this case, too, our personal and community life may permit us to understand the origin of this fear. To believe in a future requires that one base oneself on a powerful desire to live - the
by the exigencies of a particular mode of life? The definitive, and therefore total, character of this commitment is the principle of interior unification. With this the sister can be turned towards the future and be fully present, without dissipation, to the many tasks presupposed by the cenobitic life itself, and to the services which the community may take on.

This gift will admit of many weaknesses and many backslidings, but profession renders it irreversible. Is that possible without the dynamism of a powerful hope? This dynamism comes from the Holy Spirit given in baptism and, through the Rule of St. Benedict, it has its roots in a living tradition. If we are advancing towards the twenty-first century, that is because there have been twenty before.

Firm in this conviction, we may be able to resist the temptation - which is not an imaginary one - to give a false witness which is sometimes demanded of monasteries nowadays: an image of the security offered by the stability of institutions, the illusion of a disembodied spirituality which would be able to make one escape all "turmoil." Rather we need to be, above all, communities able to demonstrate the joy of commitment - to become places which awaken the taste for living, communicating a hope which comes from elsewhere - stimulating people to take the slow and difficult road of durability without which there is no real love in any state of life. Then those who come to tell us of their thirst for peace may discover that they need not commit themselves to a discouraging search for a conscious interior state as much as simply to turn towards the Presence which is already dwelling within them.

Stabilitas in Congregations

The apostolic community made manifest the risen Christ (Act 4:32). The Benedictine community has often been the sign whereby God has caused each sister to become aware of the call which God was addressing to her; but, in constant reciprocity, it is the profession of its members that constitutes the community.

There exists for Benedictine nuns, as there have always existed for monks, three ways of living in community. Each one has its exigencies and its risks in connection with the one goal: stability of heart. The first way can be described thus:

All the sisters of the community live together permanently, in the enclosure of a monastery. Solitude and communal life are combined, with different emphases in different places. That is fundamentally the way of life which corresponds to the practical prescriptions of the Rule of St. Benedict, composed for monks.

A second mode describes small groups in different places:

The sisters of the community live in small groups in different places. Sometimes these places have been chosen to respond to a need of the church or of society by a particular service. However, the emphasis on this service is different according to the families and their history. The sisters may be sent from one small group to another according to need - or they may always remain in the same one. The unity of the whole family makes possible the changes which take place. Among the monks this was the custom, for example of the Congregation of St. Maur. The priorities of the Order of Cluny, although within different structures, are not entirely unlike this second way.

A third way makes new foundations possible:

Some sisters of a monastery are sent in a group to another place, generally to another country or another continent, to respond to the call of the local church and to found a new monastery. The sisters remain members of their community of origin until the new house attains to its maturity and becomes autonomous. This is by its nature a transitory situation, but it often lasts for many years. For men as well as for women, this way of founding new monastic communities has been usual throughout history. During the twentieth century, to speak only of France and Belgium, foundations on other continents have marked the life of a good number of monasteries of men and women.

Small Groups - Different Places

I shall look at certain aspects of these two last ways of life in community before concentrating primarily on the first one. In the case in which the sisters of the one community live in different places, each one knows that a change may be required of her. Now a woman gives herself to the group of which she is a member with all her emotions and energies; a sister living under the Rule of St. Benedict is sensitive to the "all-together." The possibility of a parting, of availability, are gauges of the gratuity, liberty and maturity in that gift. If a change is demanded of her, the integration into a new community arouses a renewed opening of the heart, which becomes more strengthened in the one love of Christ. Similarly, to receive a new sister into a community prevents a group from closing in upon itself, a subtle temptation which stability can bring in its train.

The international dimension of a Benedictine Congregation, with all the sacrifices which that brings with it, confers a broad-
For the place of temptation is, in fact, a place of grace.

The birth of a new monastery arouses an extremely bitter spiritual combat and that is why I shall, firstly, try to discern some of the temptations which may beset its first years. To follow the chronological order, we will begin with the members of the founding monastery. For one there is perhaps the dream that she would be able to live her monastic life better under other conditions. For another, it may be interior rebellion upon being faced with the possibility of departure. For one sister who has left, the time may come when she has nostalgic dreams; another will regard the monastery which she has left with severity, and will cease to look upon it as the body of which she is a member.

In a new community, which is made up of sisters of different races, the slowness of growth may be a temptation for all not to accept the difficulties of persevering duration. And there is the question of co-existence, of women who dare not always look gladly at the situation and admit to each other how difficult it is to live among sisters of different cultures. They may then either cause themselves to suffer a great deal in silence, or else consent tacitly to the formation of two groups within the community. These temptations are normal; each in its own way attacking the spirit of stability in a community. However, they serve above all to reveal the direction in which the heart must be converted in order to be established in genuine love.

For the place of temptation is, in fact, a place of grace. The European sister who has left her "monastery of birth" to put down her roots in another soil, in the position of a foreigner learns in a new way "that our habitation is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). An African sister may feel an exile in her own country. She finds herself living with European sisters who, at the beginning, make up the greater part of the community. They may unintentionally misunderstand, for example, types of relationships, rituals of etiquette which contain an entire concept of existence. This exile in daily life calls each one to establish her home in Christ. Thus the sisters are all foundresses together; together, and each one by way of the others, they pass through the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ in which the community is established. That is where true inculturation comes to pass.

A s Pope John Paul II has pointed out: "Monasteries can be crucibles of culturalization, in the sense that a communal life among persons of different cultural heritages forces one to give priority to the essential and true values in order to deepen the unity of all." In a few words is expressed the value of the period of foundation, spiritually rich in its present and, by that very fact, the preparation for a future. If this period appears long - for the rhythm of growth can vary greatly from one monastery to another - that is not a cause for discouragement, but a call. By obscure paths stability of heart and stability in the community mutually reinforce each other.

None of these three modes of life corresponds completely with the Rule for which St. Benedict legislated. The dissimilarity is undeniable; he was writing for communities of men. A community of women is profoundly different. The Rule only envisages one community, assembled definitively in one single monastery, and not in several locations. Even if it does provide principles for adaptation to the variety of regions, and insists on the diversity of origin of the members, it still presupposes a monastery which has already existed for a certain length of time. And yet all Benedictine nuns recognize in this Rule their spiritual patrimony, the norm of their salvation. Could that enlighten us in our reflections on Benedictine identity?

Drawing Some Conclusions

I have mentioned, among possible temptations, the desire for change. Is this desire bad in itself? The temptation to become entrenched could be equally dangerous. One must underline the fact that the Rule of St. Benedict, where everything coheres in the single profession, fashions a profound mentality of "stability." Whatever be the form of life in community, when faced with a difficulty, it is not a change of place or of task that will first occur to Benedictine nuns. They will first of all seek to solve the problems by conversion of heart, by holding fast to obedience, by the desire to form a community in Christ.

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However, we are also led to a third aspect, and a more fundamental one. The dissimilarity between our situations and what is concretely envisaged by this Rule - written for monks, in the
sixth century, in another culture - helps us to avoid a trap: to consider that the Rule of St. Benedict should dictate to us, as if from without, a certain manner of life. Such a conception could lead one to construct an anachronistic universe by applying the letter of the law. On the other hand, under the pretext that the letter does not correspond to our situation, one could take refuge in a pseudo "spirit" which would do away with the demands enunciated by the Rule. These two tendencies arise, indeed, from the same view of the Rule, and they sap, in the same way, the authenticity of inculturation as well as acculturation.

On the contrary, the dissimilarity invites us to scrutinize ever more the text which we have received from monastic tradition. We must compare and contrast our experience with the experience to which it bears witness and to which it invites us. We need to gauge the demands of this experience and to learn its conditions; thus we will grasp more profoundly the internal coherence of the Rule of St. Benedict. For in the Rule, everything is a way "to find God - "the ladder is our life in the world" - because the Son of God came to share our lowly state. This is the radical nature of the mystery which invites us to think of our Benedictine life of today not in terms of "adaptation," but in terms of call, in the light of this "mistress" of evangelical wisdom from which it would be foolhardy to stray. The Holy Spirit will then be able to transform whatever needs transforming, making use of the limits of the daily round of life. When we have learned under what conditions every human reality must be a place in which to seek God in truth, without trying to delude ourselves about ourselves, then perhaps we will be ready to welcome the 21st century in humility.

What . . . is truly required for stability in community? It is the constant renewal of a profound openness of heart . . . a radical acceptance of the other as what she is, as what her history has made of her - an attitude which can only be the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Monastery - "A Place for God"

Students make a retreat at a monastery. The following year they return and are asked by the fact that: "We prayed with you, and we went away; when we return, you are still there, and you have continued to pray."

They have understood without explanation what stability is: remaining in a place where those who arrive will always find someone spending one's whole life turned towards an invisible reality. That is what makes a monastery into a "place for God." The fact that that place should be obviously consecrated to God does not mean that the rest of the world does not belong to God as well. On the contrary, just as a sacrament is the sign of a mystery which transcends the sign although it is contained in it, a monastery is the visible tip of a reality which is far greater. It seeks to demonstrate that the world belongs to its Creator.

Within the enclosure of our monasteries the surroundings are exclusively female: nuns living together forever. That is a situation without parallel, and more astonishing still for many is the fact that those women are happy. "I love my community; I love the walls in which it lives." "I knew at once that this was the place where the Lord was calling me to live." Such phrases frequently recur. There is deep affection, and a certainty that remaining in the monastery is responding to Christ Jesus saying to his disciples: "Abide in my love" (Jn. 15:9-10). This firm conviction allows one to look in the face the paradoxical nature of the situation and the fact that it does not, by itself, cause one to attain to stability of heart.

Retreatants, male or female, who arrive at the guest house and take part in the Office are penetrated by the silence. Their spirits are calmed and it allows the unnecessary to fade away. The thoughts of their heart are brought into unity and directed towards God. They are inclined to think that that is what a nun experiences all the time.

Alas, the first thing that often reveals itself within the nun is the instability of her thoughts and desires. Inside the enclosure there are no diversions, or not many; and so a thousand memories of which one was previously unaware, present themselves. A thousand worries arise as soon as one has the smallest responsibility in the service of the community. "Nothing can stop my little internal cinema from rolling." And the sisters - are they that "communal support of a large number which helps us fight against the sins of thought" which the first chapter of the Rule promised? Rather, they are the occasions for the awakening of the most varied passions. As for solitude, so often desired, it brings in its train acedia, the heart's incapacity to remain concentrated on the things of God.

But that is the beginning of stability of heart: life in the enclosure and in community begins by showing up how deep the illness goes. Before they become a medicine, this setting provides the conditions for the diagnosis. It is not from external circumstances that this drifting comes, but from the direction of our desires. And so, within the boundaries of these surroundings and this community, a spiritual combat will begin which is so intense that it is greater than the one who is experiencing it. She is herself the battleground where a struggle is in progress between Christ and the forces of evil. Sometimes without knowing it, she is experiencing, as if from within, the great struggles of the world - for truth, for justice, for the dignity of persons, for peace. She could sometimes tell us how her difficulties - how the constant effort to allow grace to re-orientate her being - help her to understand and support in her prayer, people who are unknown to her and who are working directly to deliver their brothers and sisters of the world from evil.
Does the same apply to monks? I do not know. But what I have found is that when a woman prays, the Lord makes her carry, either in her prayer or in the most humble aspects of her daily life, the actual burden of those for whom she prays. The battle of conversion takes on the dimensions of the church's battle. Peace of heart is found through a long drawn out war.

The Transforming Demands of Time

Those who are speaking or writing about the monastic life without having experienced it often remark: how admirable is the wisdom of the timetable! It gives to prayer and reading the time which one has such difficulty finding in other states of life. It establishes a balance between the great necessities of solitude and of community life, work and sleep; it takes in the whole day in one single unifying movement: doing the will of God at every instant. And this is true.

But the novice, who has the impression that she never lives in her own personal rhythm, that she is ceaselessly crossed in that vital dynamism which would allow her to feel herself, says: "What a terrible source of dispersion the timetable is!" As for the professed who hasn't enough hours in her days to take her turn in the common duties, to hand over craft products in time, to find the conditions of tranquility which are equally necessary for doing accounts and for applying oneself to lectio divina - when the common timetable comes and interrupts a job which really requires a continuous length of time - then she is not always sure that that timetable contributes to profound peace of heart and soul.

But what does not seem on the scale of a single day, to favour interior unity, produces in time, with the passing of months and years, a sort of shift in the pole of confidence, a shift in one's inner dynamism. It is the "help from God" received through obedience and through holding fast to community life that one finds the capacity to complete one's tasks. It is the great rhythm of the prayer of the Office which becomes the rhythm of one's own person.

Generational Challenges

How admirable is community life! think those around us. Monasteries are, nowadays, the places where old and young live together, while the whole organization of our society (often for reasons which are purely economic) separate the generations, in a way which is all the more painful as life is prolonged. It is true, and we hold on to it. However, it would be simple if people were only characters playing parts; but they are living persons. Their life in common is the meeting place of different personal histories, of different periods of church history. Women often immerse themselves intensely in what they experience; that can give them a great facility in understanding others. It may also result in not understanding, and certainly a capacity for not being understood. And since, by virtue of profession, the generations are constantly renewed, there is no small risk that they may mutually stifle each other. Then stability can lead to a community stagnation and a deep dissatisfaction within the hearts of the old as well as of the young.

What, then, is truly required for stability in community? It is the constant renewal of a profound openness of heart; not perpetual change, which would not be desirable in a monastic community, but something far more radical: acceptance of the other as what she is, as what her history has made of her; an attitude which can only be the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The is the attitude described in chapter 72 of the Rule, in which the heart is definitively transformed, immovable in a dynamism of charity. If this is not so for the community, the monastery will never be able to open to its times.

One very concrete problem remains untouched, however: remaining in the monastery until death. When the lengthening of life continues to increase due to the progress of medicine, and the elderly sisters do not retain their physical and mental powers, this creates difficult material and moral situations. How is one to combine the conviction that the life of a nun bears fruit in the church until her last hour, and the dangerous imbalance of ages which can paralyze the life and the future of a community? It is an even more painful question for our monasteries when we are in an area where life expectancy is so low because extreme poverty reigns, and old age is there viewed as a blessing. If the profession of stability is a sign of confidence in God and of hope, this is one of the points on which this witness should particularly be given, at the same time as we seek for practical solutions.

Limits of Family Model

People like to say to us and we like to say as well that the community is a family. And that is true. But even under ideal circumstances the family contributes to the upbringing of the children, and once they are adult, they leave home. Is it so easy to mature when one lives one's whole existence under the same eyes? Does one receive from the community of being known which favours growth and allows us to become ourselves? Or the sensation of being a prisoner of a reputation which nothing can ever alter because we are never apart from each other? That may stifle human and spiritual development.

There again, stability in a place and a community cannot bear its fruits except in the unity of the profession. If these women are truly on the path of conversion, they will not enclose each other in an image but each one will be able to recognize with sisterly eyes what is changing in the other and, by the very way in which she looks upon her, will make her able to make a new start each day. If she does not notice any progress, she can base her respect for the mystery of an evolution which God alone knows upon the slack periods in her own experience. And those who come to the monastery from outside will be locked upon with the same respect, as will all the beautiful and tragic elements in the world.

These few lines only present some very partial views of this paradoxical situation: a community of women definitively tied to the same place. Can this be possible...there is a proverb which says: "Whatever the size of a kitchen, it will be too small for two women." In the apostolic community "all were of one heart and soul," but they lived in their own houses and there were men as well as women. And yet, despite, or through the obstacles, happiness exists because true liberty is acquired.
I would like to underline one of the most shining signs: the beautiful monastic friendships which are born and which last throughout the years. If they conform to the demands of chapter 72 of the Rule, far from attacking solitude of heart, or the unity of the community, they are a support for more joyful renunciation and for more communal service, and strengthen one in the search for God.

As a response to the difficulties which I have chosen to mention, is it an illusion always to seek to transcend them by conversion of heart? One must know how to discern a problem which arises simply from the group phenomenon and calls for the healthy use of good technique. For certainly, there are problems which arise from the psychology of individuals and which cannot be solved by exhortations to virtue. Perhaps it would be wise to reflect upon things which may not be entirely appropriate to women in a Rule written for communities of men. But the point always comes at which we must come back to conversion of heart. To profess stability is to accept - without an escape route - to remain within the place where Christ can take hold of us in our entirety, believing that there is our mission and our witness.

Are we then in the process of saying the same thing as the followers of the New Age? "Change yourselves and you will change the world." Scripture shows what we mean: "You have died with Christ and your life is hid with him in God." (Col. 3:1-3). If we believe that our presence for the world of today is played out in this way, it is because the "place par excellence for inculturation is the heart of the Christian." 18

People around us are well aware that the presence of a monastery is for them an extremely powerful sign. How many people, not at all familiar with the church and of all social classes, come to ask prayers from communities of nuns with an instinctive confidence in their intercession. 19

This comment of an old African land owner is very far reaching as well. He was hesitating whether to sell the land from his property for the completion of a monastery building, feeling that he did not have the right to abandon a part of his family possessions. Then he made his decision, setting a price which showed his friendship, and saying: "The monastery will not go away."

Prayer, visible permanence: what is perceived by instinct expresses very well the reality of this life in community for it is bound together in the daily celebration of the liturgy. The Divine Office is the "natural" fruit of a community of the baptized, but in return it is through the Divine Office that the community lives in the grace of the risen Christ. In its entirety, and in each one of those who make it up, it is renewed in the mystery of baptism, reenacted by the rites which take hold of the whole person, reoriented in praise and intercession. As a cell of the Body of Christ it lives the mystery of the church united to Christ, a mystery in which the humble limit of the human condition is assumed and transfigured.

Continuing to "Go Beyond"

Benedict's Rule ends with a chapter which says: Go beyond. It is an invitation. Should we not think of the stability which we promised at our profession in terms of a "responsibility"? Originally, the sarabaites were true monks, attentive to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and desiring not to allow themselves to be enclosed within soulless constraints. They permitted this availability to the Holy Spirit to become perverted by becoming slaves to their own desires.

Originally, the gyrovagues were true monks, living in a perpetual exile for God, leaving a place when they began to be known and honoured there. They permitted this zeal to become perverted into instability, following their own will in all things.

Cenobitic stability may appear to involve fewer risks, but behind an attractive exterior we can just as easily allow it to become perverted. It is for us to discern where the danger of perversion lies. It is our task not to permit the spiritual leaven which is so characteristic of profession according to the Benedictine Rule, and for which we are responsible to the church and to the world to be lost. That discernment and that calm vigilance can come to us from the Holy Spirit. 20

NOTES

1. A questionnaire was sent to the monasteries of France and Belgium. The answers are not cited textually, but they are the source of most of the subjects underscored here.
2. RB Prologue, 50.
3. RB 1,7-8.
4. RB 7,10-13.
5. RB 7,67-70.
6. RB 31, 36; 53.
7. RB 61,4.
8. Overwork, with its implications, has become one of the major problems of monasteries of women in our regions.
9. RB 58,7.

10. RB 2; 31.
12. RB 7,8.
13. RB 3,7.
14. RB 58,7.
15. Chapter 4 of the Rule does not deny all that may happen in the heart of somebody living in the cloister of a monastery with stability in the community.
16. RB 68,5.
17. Various rules written for nuns over the centuries using the RB, would have much to teach us.
19. One can give as an example of this view St. Caesarius of Arles' monastery for women in the sixth century. While in his town there was at least one monastery for men, as soon as he became bishop, he founded a monastery for women "in order to pray for the bishop and the town." 21

Abba Sistofo said, "Seek God, and not where God lives."