

## *Why Do We Sing What We Sing: Life Together*

The Monastic Tradition

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As we know, in the first century, John the Baptist lived a life of solitude in the wilderness of the desert. He wore only camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and existed on a daily diet of locusts and honey. John was believed to be a member of the Essenes, an ancient Jewish sect which practiced asceticism — people who renounce physical comfort to live a life of simplicity and prayer in pursuit of spiritual growth. In the barren wilderness, John preached to and baptized others seeking a conversion of the heart outside the temple walls. That was the beginning of another pendulum swing recurrent throughout church history — the church within the walls on one end and spiritual communities existing outside the walls on the other. That pendulum swung again at the beginning of the fifth century.

In 410, Rome fell to the Barbarians, and in 455 was again invaded by Islamic forces. For the entire fifth century, Italy was at war. Into this unsettled, war-torn society, where the church was no longer a virtuous refuge from life's tumultuous challenges, Benedict of Nursia was born. At the age of 20, Benedict retreated to a life of prayer and solitude. His life of prayer became an inspiration to others so it wasn't too long before a group of disciples gathered around him, ultimately vowing to live together in community. Benedict sought to order their life together by creating a set of guiding principles that became known as the Rule of St. Benedict. To this day, the Rule continues to be followed in monasteries throughout the world and even by ordinary people striving to live prayerfully in the midst of their very ordinary lives. Rather than advocating for extreme self-denial, the Rule of Benedict seeks to demonstrate a harmonious life in community. The heart of that harmonious life in community is a commitment to growth in greater humility through obedience to the Rule and to the Abbot — the person elected by the members to serve as head of the community. Benedict was fully aware that obedience doesn't come naturally to us humans, so he organized life in very simple and practical terms that as the Rule says, "the brothers may go about their activities without justifiable grumbling." He also dictated that "communal life should be entered into with a spirit of willingness and sincerity." Admonishing those desiring to live in harmonious community "to never give a hollow greeting of peace." While the outside world was in great social upheaval, Benedict sought to demonstrate it is possible for followers of Jesus to live together in harmony.

In the monastery, daily life consisted of prayer and worship, manual work, and rest. Monks believed that prayer was the work God called them to perform. Seven times a day they gathered for common prayer, and it wasn't long before music became part of their life of prayer. As one music historian wrote, to this day, "the monastic world is where music blooms in silence." Like its communal lifestyle, the focus of music was on harmony. As Benedict instructed, "Let us stand and sing psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices." The monastic ideal of harmony produced its greatest musical legacy — the music of chant. For centuries, Gregorian chant, named after Pope Gregory, himself a Benedictine monk, was *the* music of the Roman Catholic church. Chanting is not only aesthetically magnificent, expressing an attitude of devotion and inducing a sense of humility, but most importantly chant unites individual voices of communities of men and women into one harmonious sound. If you've ever

had the joy of hearing chant being sung in a cathedral, you know there's nothing like that sound of a sea of harmony resonating throughout stone walls. A stunning icon of what life in Christian community should not only sound like, but look like.

In monastic life, there are three common vows someone takes in order to join a community. Vows that express their commitment to God, to the community, and to their own spiritual growth and vocation. The first is stability — a lifelong commitment to remain in the community. The second vow is a lifelong commitment to conversion. To a monk or nun, conversion of life reminds them that everything they do, morning to night, is from, for, and with God, and that their lives with God are constantly a work in progress. Their vow is to be open to that conversion. An open heart is one that allows the balanced practices of prayer, work, study, hospitality, and renewal to illuminate the ways that God is working within us and within the world. For us, who live in the “world,” we make that same vow to lifelong conversion — to live into our baptism into the image and likeness of Christ. Our own balance of prayer, work, study, hospitality, and renewal helps us walk day in and day out in the presence of God.

The third vow is obedience. I already know from my own short silent prayer retreats, that would be the most likely cause for my immediate expulsion from the monastery. Obedience comes from the Latin word for “listen.” The practice of attentive listening is foundational to the Benedictine Rule of Life. Benedict wrote that everyone in the community needed to listen to one another, and that sometimes God speaks through even the youngest person in the community. Nonetheless, it is the abbot who needs to make the decisions in the end, and each member of the community must obey him. Obedience can be a loaded word for us in our day. Yet a healthy, balanced view of obedience is that it is a way of cultivating a disciplined, intentional life yearning to be obedient to God, requiring a healthy sense of humility and respect for others God might just be using to guide us on our path toward God.

In the tumultuous upheaval of these days, much like that of the St. Benedict, I think these are the lessons from this period in church history that can actually help us. Monasticism grew out of the dissatisfaction with the institutional church. The monks' commitment to obedience, humility, a simple lifestyle, hospitality, and stability modeled the way of discipleship that led to a renewed integrity in the life of the church and in the world around it. Proving that sometimes the best way to change a system is by modeling something different. As we lift our voices in song, in praise and worship of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may they resound in harmony as a reflection of our commitment to strive to live in harmony with one another that by our witness we might help to transform the world around us.