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Deificari in otio
Deification in Holy Stillness

Contemplative Dimensions of Monastic Theology

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Content

De votis monasticis
The Monastic Vows

1. The Vows as Liminal Rites and Their Function

The formation of the monastic way of life is a long and lifelong process, which unfolds in well-defined stages. These stages may be classified functionally into three parts: separation, transition, and incorporation.[1] The stage of separation corresponds to the postulancy and novitiate; the transitional phase is represented by the period of temporary vows, the so-called juniorate; while the incorporation phase opens with perpetual profession. These phases are essential components of monastic *formatio*—not in a strictly theological, but rather in a psychodynamic sense. Each of the three stages is marked by a significant liturgical event functioning as a liminal rite, that is, a liturgy of initiation.[2] The core of the process is the resocialization[3] of the monastic candidate, which—understood in the biblical sense—means a radical conversion of mindset, lifestyle, and interior disposition (metanoia). In the words of Saint Aelred of Rievaulx: "Stability in the monastery, he says, conversion of our life, and obedience according to the Rule of Saint Benedict." [4]

If one were to define the essence of the monastic vocation, it could be described as the search for God,[5] a life of dedication to Him, and meditation upon His mysteries.[6] This naturally raises the question: if monastic life can be characterized in this way, why are vows necessary? Would it not suffice—following the example of the Desert Fathers—to withdraw from society into solitude and abandon oneself entirely to God without the need for liturgical and institutional vows?

Logically, personal resolution might seem sufficient; yet ecclesially, institutionally, and psychologically, it is not. The spiritual path can bear

1 Van Gennep, A, *The Rites of Passage*, 94.

2 Clot–Garrel, 'Current Communications of the monastic novitiate', 32.

3 Clot–Garrel, 'Current Communications of the monastic novitiate', 45.

4 Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, 280.

5 Merton, *A csend szava*, 185.

6 Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers*, 55.

fruit and lead to genuine inner transformation only when it is embedded within a tested and proven system of intact symbolic elements, transmitted with proper ecclesiastical authority[7] and always relying upon the aid of divine grace.

Those who aspire to the spiritual life must be initiated into its various stages, for only such initiation grants them the necessary authority and the deep psychological impetus to move forward through the successive phases of the interior journey. Thus, initiation exerts an existential effect. Without it, the candidate cannot ascend the steps of the spiritual ladder[8]—cannot climb the sevenfold ascent of the soul.

Spiritual initiation fundamentally transforms the person's previous identity.[9] It not only offers the most sacred and exalted experiences of the soul, but through initiation the collective unconscious begins to flow into the conscious self, emerging from the direction of the Selbst.[10] The efficacy of the initiation depends directly on the degree to which the candidate is prepared for it, and on the extent to which the Selbst existentially integrates the experience.[11]

Thus, we may say that each of the vows represents a threshold of personal transformation in the monk's life, over which he is guided by his preparation, his life decision, and the grace of God. These threshold moments, marked by profession, confer institutional authorization to enter the next stage, while also moving the monk psychologically toward a harmonization of the ego and the Selbst.

This, of course, is not magic, nor does it occur by a mere gesture. In reality, initiation—through promise and profession—must be regarded as a kind of spiritual down payment, merely an opening of the door, after which the one initiated (the professed religious) must discover for himself the mystery into which he has been admitted.

The candidate does not know what it means to be a novice; the novice cannot foresee what the juniorate will be like; and the temporarily professed has no clear notion of what it means to live in perpetual vows. Nor must they know—only through initiation (the profession of vows) may

7 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 215.

8 Saint Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, 33, 70 - 36, 81.

9 Süle, *Valláspatológia*, 229.

10 Ibidem.

11 Süle, *Valláspatológia*, 233.

they step onto this terra incognita. For this reason, their hearts are often filled with uncertainty, expectation tinged with fear, and inner anxiety. Time and again the same questions arise: "Am I truly suited for this? Do I really want this? Will I be able to remain faithful and keep my vows?"

These questions are appropriate and necessary. Indeed, they contribute to the seriousness and magnitude of the decision behind the profession of vows. The questions themselves, together with the uncertainty they bring and the longing for God they stir, are what give depth and authenticity to the discernment. It is the presence of questioning, doubt, sacred yearning, and the response of radical trust in God's guidance that make possible a life-decision that is grounded, flowing from a pure heart (puritas cordis), and deeply committed. If these conditions are not met—if abandonment to God is not firm enough—then the candidate is not yet ready to move forward. If fear outweighs peace, or if the thirst for God remains faint, then the moment for decision has not yet arrived. For everything that follows depends upon the degree of commitment.

Thus, the effectiveness of the initiation (vow) rests on two pillars: the well-founded personal life-decision and the institutional ratification. For a vow is only valid if it is conferred according to the ancient norms (the Rule or Constitutions), and transmitted by the supreme authority (the prior).[12] In doing so, the superior admits the candidate into a—hopefully—unchanging spiritual tradition, integrating him into the common identity of the religious community. This remains true even if the so-called unchanging tradition[13] is neither immutable nor entirely unbroken. Its liturgical role and spiritual efficacy, however, remain the same.

To understand the mechanism more deeply, we must turn to Jacques Derrida's term *différance*. What we must define is the distinction between the various levels of initiation. Earlier, I defined the essence of monastic life as the seeking of God. The opening lines of the Rule of Saint Augustine likewise identify the primary task of monastic life as the search for God: "With one soul and one heart you are to seek God" (*Regula S. Augustini* I,3). It follows, then, that the highest level of initiation is the admission into the most intimate communion with God.

Différance between the different stages of vowed life does not denote a difference in essence or content, but rather the degree of proximity to

12 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 120.

13 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 119.

or distance from perfect charity—that is, from union with God. In other words, a postulant is not yet as close to God as a perpetually professed monk, who exists—at least in theory—in the most intimate relationship with the Divine, even if practical experience may at times suggest otherwise. The operative function of *différance* through the vow is that it grants the professed, by institutional authorization, the right to perceive themselves as having drawn nearer to God. And insofar as authentic spiritual formation accompanies each phase, the monastic may indeed be drawn ever more deeply into communion with the Divine.[14]

To grasp the above more fully, it is essential to emphasize that initiation is not to be compared with academic education. A university student receives a degree after mastering the required curriculum and demonstrating this mastery through rigorous examinations. Initiation, by contrast, is of an entirely different nature. Since it grants access to a mystery—namely, the hidden reality of divine love and personal communion with God—it is not possible to acquire in advance the „content" required for initiation. Rather, it is only after the decision of personal commitment has been made that the rite of initiation empowers the initiate to develop and embody, with confidence, all that the commitment of vows entails, and to enter progressively into the unfolding mystery. In this sense, initiation is nothing other than a spiritual threshold through which one passes in order to gain access. This finds its clearest expression in solemn profession, for the perpetually professed monk, after making his vows, labors throughout his life to live out and realize this highest and definitive commitment to God.

In summary, we see that vows are of foundational significance within the monastic tradition, as they constitute those *liminal*, *transitional*, and *threshold rites* (rites of passage)[15] which open the initiate to an altered state of consciousness capable of integrating the Selbst.[16] Moreover, through the legitimization conferred by an unbroken tradition and the supreme ecclesial authority, they offer a concrete life program for the realization, preservation, and generational transmission of that tradition. Without initiation, without promises and vows monastic life is inconceivable.

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14 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 105.

15 Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 12.

16 Süle, *Valláspatológia*, 231.

2. The Content of the Vows

2.1. Stability

The classical monastic vow (stability, daily conversion, and obedience) is not excessively elaborated in the Rule of Saint Benedict (RB 58.17), nor is it accompanied by detailed commentary.

Stability, in the earliest period, was understood strictly in a physical sense. The First Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), in its Canon 16, declared that those who were ordained must remain in the place where they were ordained.[17] The Rule of Saint Benedict likewise imposes the requirement that, in contrast to the *sarabaites* and *gyrovagues*, who live according to their own will, the coenobitic monk must remain for life in the monastery (stabilitas loci) that received him (RB 58.17).[18]

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, in his second letter to a monk named Adam, likewise refers to stability in its physical sense: "I remain peaceful and obedient in the place where I have been placed. I say that my conscience is at peace, because I observe faithfully the stability I have promised."[19]

However, by the twenty-first century, the concept has undergone a transformation—and, just as the entire Rule must be read in a symbolic sense—stability no longer signifies mere physical permanence in a place, but rather spiritual steadfastness.

Joan Chittister, a renowned contemporary Benedictine nun and theologian, expressed it as follows: "...to achieve real holiness, Benedict teaches us, we must realize that emotional stability is the attitude of heart that brings us to learn from life..."[20] Thomas Merton expressed a similar view: "The stability of space and of relationships are all the means

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17 Erdő, *Az ókeresztény kor egyházfegyelme*, 290.

18 In the Hungarian translation of the Rule by Dávid Söveges OSB, the term stabilitas is rendered as „perseverance," which, however, is a mistranslation. Cf. Szent Benedek Regulája [The Rule of Saint Benedict], Pannonhalma: Bencés Kiadó, 1995, 113. The original Latin text states: „*promittat de stabilitate sua et conversatione morum suorum et oboedientia*", that is, the monk is to "*promise stability, conversion of life, and obedience.*"

19 Eales, (ed.), *Some Letters of Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux*, 22.

20 Chittister, *The Monastic Heart*, 143.

towards the establishment of stability of the heart."[21]

Thus, over time, stabilitas has become synonymous with inner, spiritual equilibrium—the monastic apatheia.[22] Both Chittister and Merton emphasize the stability of the heart, meaning the inner balance of emotions and spiritual life.

Although the Augustinians do not take a vow of stability, the connection between the heart and stability is equally present in the spirituality of Saint Augustine: "He dwells deep within the heart (...) Abide with Him and you will be steadfast, rest in Him and you shall find peace." (*Conf.* IV,12,18)

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux prayed to God: "My God, illumine even the dark recesses within me, that I may joyfully behold rightly ordered love within myself..."[23] And in his ninth letter, he wrote: "Rightly ordered love advances directly toward the love of neighbor, for the commandment is that we love him as ourselves." Elsewhere he states: "Virtues are rightly ordered affections."[24]

2.2. The Daily Conversion

The vow of daily conversion (*conversio morum*) carries a threefold meaning. First, it expresses the acknowledgment that the monk is a frail human being (Rom 3:23), who can achieve nothing without the grace of God (cf. Tit 3:7). Second, it affirms that, due to the inclination to sin, one must repent anew each and every day. Third, it signifies the total self-gift of one's life,[25] which the monk rekindles and renews in himself daily: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). This vow summarizes the entirety of the monastic journey[26], an undertaking and commitment to the transformation of the whole person.

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21 Thurston, *Shaped by the End You Live For*, 31.

22 Puskely, *keresztény szerzetesség*, 645.

23 e. 85. n. 3. – PL 182, 88.

24 Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *A kegyelemről és a szabad elhatározásról*, 79.

25 Bayer, 'Monastic Vows and the Knowledge of God', in *Expolring the Future of Christian Monasticism*, 2.

26 Thurston, *Shaped by the End You Live For*, 106.

"Every true monastic vocation includes a complete inner conversion. This conversion can never be brought about merely by a change of clothing or by adapting to stricter rules of life."[27]

Perhaps the most accurate definition of daily conversion is offered by Janet Eccles and David Simon: the personal experience of turning away from one's former self toward the new.[28] In practice, daily conversion may be understood as the continual movement—both conscious and unconscious—toward God. This inner conversion is not merely the repeated turning away from faults and sins, but also a persistent striving for communion with God (Reg. Aug. I,3).

"It is inseparable from the interior conversion of our whole being, which turns us from ourselves to God. It is the renunciation of our own imperfection, the abandonment of our poverty, so that we may freely cast ourselves into God and the fullness of His creation, without glancing back at our own nothingness." [29]

Daily conversion also draws our attention to another essential truth: while monastic life is necessarily bound to an institution, the personal and communal fulfillment of the vows gives that institution its actual spiritual and existential content. It is of little value for one to be initiated into religious life and make solemn profession if they do not seek God with persevering and renewed dedication each day—such a person will not truly become a monk. The more members of a religious community who neglect this daily seeking of God, the more spiritually shallow and impoverished that Order becomes. Let us never forget the words of the Rule: "Fulfill the commandments of God daily in your deeds" (RB 4:63).

A similar process occurred in many Hungarian religious orders after the political changes of 1989. As the number of brothers and sisters diminished, survival increasingly became the primary concern. Deep spiritual life was gradually replaced by a form of monastic management focused on endurance. Yet concern with material matters, the relentless pursuit of financial resources, and anxiety about the future are fundamentally incompatible with seeking God and living a contemplative life.

This situation is further exacerbated by a widespread modern attitude in Christianity that the Church must conform to the spirit of the age. Ho-

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27 Merton, *A csend szava*, 107.

28 Eccles — Simon, *The Community of* Resurrection, 186.

29 Merton, *A csend szava*, 81.

wever, this attitude introduces the gravest enemy into the sacred space — secularization. Blaise Pascal warned of this centuries ago: "The most ruthless enemy is brought into the very heart of the Church, even into its loftiest rites: the spirit of the world—the spirit of ambition, revenge, impurity, and lust."[30]

Thus, in the process of daily conversion, the soul that seeks God strives gradually and ever more ardently to enter into the presence of God through contemplation. As the Psalmist proclaims: "Then I will ever sing praise to your name and fulfill my vows day after day" (Ps 61:9).

"The ultimate aim of this way of life—to seek a direct encounter of the individual soul with God—was essentially impossible to capture definitively within any process of institutionalization, because that encounter had always to be achieved anew, uniquely and individually, through inward desire. No external institution could ever coerce a soul's sacrifice to God, and certainly no institution could offer spiritual fulfillment. The principle of free will is of fundamental importance..."[31]

I believe that daily conversion is the very heart of monastic life. Neither physical nor material circumstances are of ultimate importance; it does not matter whether one lives in a monastery or in the world—the essential thing is that the spiritual longing defined by the theologian Paul Evdokimov as thirst for God, and the devoted seeking that flows from it, remain ever alive and active in the life of the monk. "The monastic life is fully explained by the thirst for God."[32]

2.3. Obedience

In October 2024, I delivered a lecture on the Rule of Saint Benedict at the annual conference of the Nordic Catholic Church in Norway. One of the central themes of my presentation was the centuries-long transformation of the monastic way of life, with particular emphasis on how the Rule has moved from a strictly literal interpretation and application to one that is today primarily symbolic.

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30 Pascal, *A korai keresztények összevetése a mai keresztényekkel*, 28.

31 Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism – Its History and Forms of Life*, 321.

32 Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 80.

To illustrate this process of semantic obsolescence and transformation, I referred to the semantic history of the term *martyr* (μάρτυς), which helps to shed light on the shift in the meaning of obedience. In its original usage, martyr referred to a person who bore witness in a court proceeding or elsewhere; later, it denoted one who gave solemn testimony; later still, one who bore witness to the faith; and in modern usage, someone who is willing to die for a cause.[33] The original meaning has faded over the centuries and been replaced by new interpretations.

In a similar way, the concept of obedience in the time of Saint Benedict meant literal obedience. The monk was expected to renounce his own will (RB 0.3; 5.7; 7.21), to turn away from it (RB 3.8), to hate self-will (RB 4.60; 7.31), and to follow in all things the commands of the abbot (RB 4.61). Today, however, it signifies something quite different. In an age marked by „institutionalized individualism," where dialogue and democratic ideals shape both ecclesial life and public consciousness, the vow of *oboedientia* carries a wholly different meaning.

„the expression of the bond which each of us has forged with respect to God's call. It cannot be an imposed word, but [is rather] a suggestion, an invitation that prepares one for a personal choice. Today an imposed obedience without dialogue would make no sense."[34]

Obedience in its modern interpretation is best understood as the opposite of individualism expressed in phrases like "in my opinion," "I think," or "I feel"—that is, a self-referential mode of thinking. It is most clearly manifested in bearing the burdens of others, for their good, for the sake of the community and one's brethren; in persevering amid the soul-wearying routine of daily, sacrificial labor.[35] The same applies to the Augustinian vow of poverty. In antiquity, absolute poverty would more accurately describe a lack of resources, which would place the religious on equal footing with the destitute—thus rendering him unable to assist others or even himself. Therefore, it is better to speak of simplicity, which best expresses the ancient concept of monastic poverty.

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33 Carson, *Exegetikai tévedések*, 39.

34 Clot – Garrel, 'Current Communications of the monastic novitiate', 36.

35 Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers*, 89.

3. Conclusion

The monastic vows are liturgical thresholds through which the candidate passes to be initiated into a spiritual realm yet unknown—a realm to be discovered in accordance with the nature of the initiation received. "Vows, presuming they are made authentically, unify the heart and thus allow it to see God and testify to his reality."[36]

Monastic vows always encourage the search for God through the renunciation of the ego, the abandonment of self-centered thoughts, and the denial of one's own will. "...true happiness is found only in turning away from the empty loneliness of radical self-determination and toward the spiritual abundance and communion..."[37]

According to the Rule, obedience and humility are the most essential tools for this. "Monastic asceticism is therefore primarily directed toward the two great virtues of humility and obedience; but they can only be truly acquired if they empty the person and liberate him from himself."[38]

In this devotion and daily renewal of the search for God, it is the inner, spiritual thirst that most accurately defines the content which compels the monk to an unceasing pursuit.

"Awake, little human! Flee for a while from your activities, hide yourself for a while from your troubled thoughts. Lay aside your burdensome cares, and set aside your toils. Empty yourself a little for God [*vaca aliquantulum Deo*], and rest a short while in Him. Enter into the inner chamber of your mind, shut out all thoughts except God and what may help you to seek Him, lock the door and seek Him. Speak from the depths of your heart! Speak now to God: My eyes seek You! Your face, O Lord, I seek! (cf. Ps 27:8)."[39]

If the monk's spiritual motivation, formation, and disposition are rightly ordered, then his life unfolds in this loving yearning and in the joy of encounter with God, as well as in the ascetic pain of time spent without

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36 Bayer, Monastic Vows and the Knowledge of God, in *Exploring the Future of Christian Monasticism*, 3.

37 Bayer, op. cit., 14.

38 Merton, *A csend szava*, 191.

39 Saint Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion and Monologium*, 7. translated: Aelred Széles)

God. The alternation and relational dynamism of these lead the monk to even greater love, more devoted attachment, and an ever-deepening thirst for the divine: „Totalizing love for God is therefore what drives all his life and thought; it is the existential commitment that underlies all his willing and reasoning."[40]

The vows confer institutional authorization and binding force upon this commitment. Their impact is existential, transforming the whole person and personality. Saint Anselm of Canterbury, in Letter 121, »described monastic life as a *propositum*—a "commitment"—"than which nothing greater can be possessed" (*quo maius habere non potest*) and "than which nothing better can be undertaken" (*proponere quo melius non potest*).«[41] „While all strive for perfection, only the monk binds himself to do so completely."[42]

This is because the lay believer always retains a certain measure of freedom for themselves, whereas the monk strives to commit as fully as possible, renouncing all else in order to belong to God alone. Saint Anselm thought radically about this commitment.

"For him, the essential difference between secular and monastic life had little to do with external matters such as outward observances. For him, the essence of monastic life was an interior reality: an act of the will, or the desire to commit oneself to God entirely."[43]

Therefore, monastic life is not dependent on external, material circumstances. It does not require a monastery, a chapter house, a cathedral, or even a habit. The essential element of monasticism is a spiritual reality and communion, for which the system of initiation through vows and the corresponding states of consciousness proper to each stage of profession are most necessary. These are what lead the monk ever deeper into himself and ever closer to God.

"Thus, to be a monk is to be one, not divided; to be unified in one's goal of coming into union with God. Though many believers live in a multitudinous manner, a μοναχός will set herself apart by living simply and singly. A monk is single-minded."[44]

40 Bayer, op. cit., 4.

41 Bayer, op. cit., 9.

42 Bayer, op. cit., 11.

43 Bayer, op. cit., 12.

44 Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers*, 55.

Paul Evdokimov called the vows the "charter of human freedom." In a world struggling with evil and sin, monks are those individuals who strive with all their effort to live in truth—without duplicity, falsehood, or inner division.[45] If a monastic order and its members follow their vows with authenticity, this is what truly makes them recognizable.

45 Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers*, 93.

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Vita monastica interior
Inner Monastic Life

In public consciousness, the institution of monasticism is inseparably linked to the built monastery. Western monasticism—regrettably estranged from the original meaning of the biblical term—has identified holiness exclusively with the spiritual, conceived as that which is opposed to the bodily. This theological deviation sharpened the binary oppositions of Middle and Neoplatonism, and drove an unbridgeable wedge between body and soul. A further consequence was that monks withdrew into monasteries in order to avoid the defilement of the world and of sin, seeking to live even now on earth a life likened to that of angels..

This erroneous conception of the "consecrated life" pays no heed to the original biblical meaning of holiness (*qadosh*). In Hebrew, the term originally means "cut off" or "set apart," but not in the sense that monks are separated from the impurity of the world. God commanded the Israelites who had settled in Canaan to distinguish themselves from the surrounding nations: "Do not mingle with these nations that remain among you" (Joshua 23:7), meaning: do not intermarry with their daughters, nor adopt their customs or their religion (cf. 1 Kings 11:2). Holiness, in this sense, refers to a form of separation that does not involve a retreat from the world but, on the contrary, a way of life within the world that remains consistently self-possessed—standing as a sign among others, bearing witness to one's identity and faith without compromise.[1]

Thus, holiness does not denote a physical or spatial separation, but rather a separation that is spiritual, a matter of mindset, values, and way of life. When applied to monks and the monastic vocation, this means that monastic spirituality and the monastic charism do not primarily require material conditions or a monastery, but—following the thought of Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov—an *interiorized monasticism* (непостриженный монах), a monastic spirit of the heart.[2]

" Essentially interior, it is also the life of man facing his God, participating in the life of God, the spirit of man listening for the Spirit of

1 Evdokimov, *The Struggle With God*, 4.

2 Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers*, 89.

God."[3] Paul Evdokimov explicitly emphasizes that—since God can only be encountered in spirit (cf. Jn 4:23)—He must not be materialized or objectified. And if the essence of monastic life is precisely the relationship with God, then this relationship depends on no material benefit or external condition: neither on a monastery, nor on a religious habit, nor on any other material prerequisite. "God is the more invisible the more his burning intimacy radiates in man's spirit. The spiritual life and religious experience are likewise incapable of being made objects."[4] Thus, searching for God in any monastery is ultimately futile; one may encounter Him only in those monks who truly dwell there.

From this, however, it also follows that God may be encountered even in a believer who has no connection whatsoever to the institutional framework of monasticism. Naturally, this raises the question: in such a case, what distinguishes the interiorized monastic from the lay believer? "The monastic life is fully explained by the thirst for God."[5] As the Psalmist writes: "My soul thirsts for God, the living God" (Ps 42:3).

According to Evdokimov, the monastic spirit ultimately depends upon the degree of this thirst, which he links to humility.[6] He argues that humility is the force that connects the axis of a person's life to God.[7] "The monks no longer have to leave the world; every· believer can find his vocation under the completely new form of *interiorized monasticism*."[8]

This idea is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition particularly in the inner experience of Christ described by the Apostle Paul (ζῇ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός—Gal 2:20), which appears frequently in his spirituality, especially in his letters to the Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians. Saint Paul was not a monk, yet his interior experience—in contrast to the erroneous ideal of the *bios angelikos*—may rightly be regarded as the biblical archetype of monastic contemplation.

Interiorized monasticism is not as far removed from the Cistercian tradition as it might initially appear. In the twelfth century, the transformation of the image of God—thanks in particular to English Cistercian

3 Evdokimov, *The Struggle With God*, 41.

4 Evdokimov, *The Struggle With God*, 44.

5 Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 80.

6 Evdokimov, *The Struggle With God*, 142.

7 Ibidem.

8 Edokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 94.

mysticism and especially to Saint Aelred of Rievaulx—was decisive. Through his theology, the formerly distant and sovereign God became the loving, near God who empathizes with and suffers alongside humanity.[9] Saint Aelred developed a fundamentally new "theology of love" that opened the way to spiritual union with God and shaped the later currents of English monastic mysticism.[10] He introduced affective prayer and meditation into monastic spirituality and employed the emotions as instruments for building and deepening the relationship with God.[11]

In the Middle Ages, monastic spirituality was characterized by the struggle between good and evil, and the dialectic between sin and virtue.[12] Today, however, it is understood as the discovery, experience, and fulfillment of the spiritual reality of the relationship between God and the human person. " It is more proper to be silent and to venerate it in silence. God is the initiator, and in his presence he is radically transcendent."[13] In neo-monastic spirituality, even the physical form of the vows becomes secondary, and their meaning is interiorized. The symbolic poverty of the evangelical counsels expresses the soul's total openness and self-forgetfulness before God; chastity signifies interior wholeness; and obedience is understood as a form of complete freedom attentively directed toward God—one that is not blinded by personal interest or the value systems of the world.[14]

In his Second Meditation, William of Saint-Thierry summarized the supreme importance of spiritual presence in the following words: "As long as I am with you, I am present to myself; I am not wholly me when I am not with you. Woe to me each and every time that I am not with you, without whom I cannot even be. I should not be able to subsist in any way at all, either in body or in soul, without the indwelling of your power."[15] The monasticism seeks to walk this spiritual path, forming both our religious and the lay faithful who participate in our retreats for an ever deeper and more intimate communion with God.

9 Riehle, *Englische Mystik des Mittelalters*, 43.

10 Riehle, *Englische Mystik des Mittelalters*, 45.

11 Riehle, *Englische Mystik des Mittelalters*, 46.

12 Hughes–Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anachoritism*, 108.

13 Evdokimov, *The Struggle With God*, 49.

14 Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 83.

15 Matarasso, *The Cistercian World*, 128.

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Vita monastica ut iter coniugii mystici cum Deo
The monastic life as a journey of mystical union with God

As a monk, I consider it essential to repeatedly define for myself what it truly means to be a monk, and within that, what my personal monastic striving and individual spiritual path entail. Even as a diocesan priest, I understood the essence of the Christian faith as the unity of the personal relationship between God and man; now, as a monk, I experience and seek to realize this relationship even more fully. In this brief study, I aim to explore this relationship and its communicative nature.

Sacred Scripture tells us: "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11). This passage reveals the intimate relationship through which God manifests Himself to the believer who trusts in Him. Unfortunately, Hungarian Bible translations tend to be imprecise,[1] since the original Hebrew text[2] includes a specific phrase stating that God spoke with Moses "face to face" (מִינָּפִ־לֶא מִינָּפִ) at the entrance of the tent. This detail is significant, for Saint Paul used the very same expression to describe the final blessedness of salvation when writing to the Corinthians: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). The Greek prosōpon pros prosōpon (πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον) is a direct mirror-translation of the Old Testament panim el panim. This term—"the vision of God face to face"—has, for two millennia, been a central subject of biblical exegesis and soteriological reflection.

Scripture contains numerous further references to the profoundly relational nature of salvation. In addition to the vision face to face, we hear that "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8); "In Your light we see light" (Ps 36:10); "We shall see Him as He is" (1 Jn 3:2); and "We shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:17), among others.

1 In the Hungarian Regin of the Nordic Catholic Church we use the catholic Bible translations. Unfortunately, all of them are inaccurate in this verse.

2 *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartiensia*, 143.

According to *Bultmann*, the Evangelist Saint John „describes the relationship between Jesus and His own as mutual *knowledge* in book."[3] This, of course, does not refer to lexical or abstract knowledge, but to the personal knowing of the other—an ever-deepening personal relationship.[4] Truly knowing a person is always bound to encounters and time spent together.

Michael Schmaus expands upon this foundational idea with the observation: "Love and truth cannot be contemplated in a person without a personal relationship being established."[5] In other words, "the essence of salvation lies in the return to God and, ultimately, in the vision of God."[6]

Karl Rahner likewise stated that "the individual must... be in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,"[7] and later affirmed: "Personal love for Jesus Christ... leads to a direct relationship with God... Personal relationship with Jesus Christ is an essential element of Christian existence."[8]

According to the teaching of Jesus, the path that leads to relationship is the path of love: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). With these words, Jesus directs our attention away from the emotionalism so typical of our times and toward the personal commitment inherent in authentic relationship.

From the above, it becomes evident that in Christianity, knowledge, relationship, love, and the vision of God (the *visio beatifica*)—as the consummation of relationship and its eschatological fulfillment—are theologically and practically inseparable concepts. When I examine the inner world of monastic spirituality, I seek to gain insight into that personal relationship with Jesus Christ which, through Him, leads to God—and to allow myself to be drawn into it.

If the beatific vision is to be understood as the fullness of personal knowledge of God—that is, as a personal relationship in which the "I – Thou" dynamic remains but is realized in the most intimate unity[9] imaginable—then two questions arise: How is it possible to attain this

3 Bultmann, *Az Újszövetség teológiája*, 350.

4 Gál, *Az örök élet reménye*, 86.

5 Schmaus, *Katolische Dogmatik IV/2*, 227.

6 Gál, *Az örök élet reménye*, 102.

7 Rahner, *A hit alapjai*, 329.

8 Rahner, *A hit alapjai*, 330.

9 Gen 32:31; Exod 3:2; Exod 33:11; Exod 34:6; etc.

profound relationship? And how can this relationship be described? I wish to begin with the latter, for Sacred Scripture offers us sufficiently well-defined answers to this question.

Beyond the personal or personally characterized relationship with God experienced by the patriarchs,[10] the relationship with God in the Old Testament was often mediated through participation in His grace[11]—more specifically, in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. "To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy" (Ecclesiastes 2:26). "Between God and the perishable, created, earthly world, Wisdom becomes the mediator"; "divine Wisdom is the foundation of the order of creation."[12] Especially the Book of Wisdom presents the relationship between God and man as one founded upon wisdom, and—similarly to the Book of Psalms—makes wisdom the very identity of the righteous person.[13] " Wisdom will guide you in the way of God" (cf. Proverbs 2:1); "Wisdom exalts the righteous" (cf. Proverbs 4:1). Such expressions are also found in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Sirach.[14] Thus, the indwelling or gift of the Holy Spirit—who is the Spirit of Wisdom (cf. Isaiah 11:2)—constitutes a form or foundational level of relationship with God.

An even more intimate form of this relationship is revealed in the prophetic vocation. The prophets, as *men of God*, lived in especially close communion with the Creator. The most beautiful example of this relationship is found in the text already cited above: "The Lord would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). In this relational dynamic, spiritual presence is complemented by deep communication, personal revelation, and intimate interaction: "Moses would speak and God would answer him" (Exodus 19:19).[15] To this belongs also the frequent divine communication through dreams and visions, as it is written: "If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make

10 Gen 32:31; Exod 3:2; 33:11; 34:6; etc.

11 Ps 17:7; 40:11; 61:8; 85:2; 85:8–13; 90:14; 143:8.

12 Valentin, *Az ima szerepe a bölcsesség könyvében*, 208.

13 Valentin, *Az ima szerepe a bölcsesség könyvében*, 210.

14 Prov 1:7; 2:1; 2:3; 2:16; 4:1; 4:7; 10:1; 18:4; 31:26. Eccl 2:13; 7:11–12; 7:19; 7:23; 8:1; 9:18; 9:10; 9:15; 10:10; 10:13. Sir 0:3; 0:12; 1:4; 1:24; 4:23; 6:37; 13:23; 14:20; 15:1; 15:18; 18:28–29; 20:31; 21:18; etc.

15 "If the Lord speaks to man, can he remain alive?" (Deut 5:24)

myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream" (Numbers 12:6).

The third type or degree of relationship is revealed in the New Testament. In the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to Saint John, in His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus speaks of the unity He lives with the Father, and prays that this very unity be granted also to His disciples: "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21).

The Apostle Paul frequently refers to this unity, describing it as the indwelling of Christ in the believer, and the believer's existence "in Christ" (cf. Rom 8:1; 12:5; 16:5,7; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 11:10; Gal 2:20; Phil 4:13; 1 Thess 1:1). Similarly, the Johannine corpus uses the same language (cf. John 2:26; 15:9; 1 John 5:20). To be in Christ—or the condition of being in Christ—expresses a spiritual communion of life with ontological consequences. This already belongs to the domain of mysticism, characterized by a mysterious movement toward the source of divine wisdom and love.[16] Almost a century ago, *Lajos Müller* described the ascending stages of this mystical relationship as follows: *recollection*, *prayer of quiet*, *intoxication of love*, *simple union*, *spiritual betrothal*, and *spiritual marriage* (*perfect union*). [17]

Dénes Farkasfalvy approached this union in a more practical and straightforward manner: "This union […] takes place naturally in every conscious Christian life, insofar as the individual allows faith to permeate, transform, and take possession of the entirety of life. The nearness of God becomes a defining characteristic."[18]

Thus, the intimate relationship with God is the natural fruit of a life lived in faith. Depending on the specific vocation to which God has called the believer — and on the degree of love and devotion with which this vocation is embraced — this personal relationship may deepen and be brought to fulfillment, offering the believer a foretaste of eternal happiness and the beatific vision.[19] How, then, may a believer attain to this intimate communion?

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16 Müller, *Aszketika és misztika*, 9.

17 Müller, *Aszketika és misztika*, 215.

18 Farkasfalvy, *A lelkiélet teológiája*, 106.

19 Ibidem.

According to *Ferenc Gál*, Christ gave us two principal means to foster this closeness: active charity and the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.[20] *Rahner* describes this approach by stating that the path to encounter with Jesus is not mere imitation, but participation in the mystery of His life—from His birth to His death.[21] *Rahner* refers to this as initiation. [22] He explains that the Christian life does not consist merely in fulfilling the precepts of the Church, but in a concrete encounter with Jesus Christ, through which the believer participates in the mysticism of divine love and is brought into direct relationship with God.[23] This path invariably leads through the other—through the neighbor—in whom Christ is present in an anonymous, hidden manner.

Thus, every human encounter becomes at once a divine–human encounter. Not only the liturgy of the Mass or the liturgy of the Hours, but every single ordinary, daily human interaction is elevated to the possibility of sacred encounter. I believe this is the original, biblical meaning of sanctification: not merely the performance of sacramental rites, but the effort to live our gray and mundane daily lives with heavenly content and in a heavenly quality—particularly in and through ordinary human encounters. For this reason, I understand the monastic vocation as a program of maximizing the heavenly quality of encounter and communion—in simple terms, a supernatural form of personal relationship. *Mária Puskely*, reflecting upon two thousand years of monastic experience, summarized it thus: "In the bridal mystery, they found the narrow path of following Christ, the one Bridegroom."[24]

Naturally, this gives rise to the question: if the monk understands his union with God as a form of spousal relationship, then—precisely due to its supernatural nature—to what extent and in what manner is such a relationship actually livable? For while in human marriage or partnership the most powerful bond is formed through numerous modes of intimacy, both emotional and physical, including sexual union, how then does the bond in a supernatural spousal relationship acquire the same sustaining power and depth?

20 Gál, Úton a teljesség felé, 26.

21 Rahner, *A hit alapjai*, 332.

22 Rahner, *A hit alapjai*, 333.

23 Ibidem.

24 Puskely, *A keresztény szerzetesség történeti fogalomtára*, 332.

Teilhard de Chardin locates the sustaining power and relational essence of love in its universality[25] and its personal dimension: "we behold His face and His heart—one could say He becomes personal."[26]

The particular character of a supernatural spousal relationship lies in this: whereas in a human relationship, even with bodily union, there remains a distinction of will and thought, with its necessary compromises, in a supernatural relationship—because God is perfect—there is no bodily union, and yet spiritually, God bestows upon the human soul the lived experience of total unity.[27]

Just as in earthly marriage "the two shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24), so in the highest degrees of the spiritual life, in the states of mystical betrothal and spiritual espousal, "the soul is wholly transformed into God, becoming entirely one with Him (Fit unum quid)."[28]

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of this mystery in these words: "This complete, perfect, mutual consent (which constitutes the essence of all marriage) is here nothing other than a holy and virginally pure love, tender and sweet, as serene as it is sincere, intimate, reciprocal, a powerful love—which unites not in the body, but in the spirit, making of the two one, so that they are no longer two, but only one..."[29]

A fundamental characteristic of this union is the experience of spiritual joy and interior fullness,[30] which offers a fitting basis for comparison with the realities of human marriage and romantic love. The Song of Songs gives poetic expression to this mystical experience and religious intimacy through the allegory of love: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me" (Song 2:6). Likewise, the Psalmist proclaims: "My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me" (Ps 63:9). These biblical verses—which may at first appear bold or even sensual, evoking physical union and drawing upon the imagery of corporeal and

25 Chardin, *Az emberi jelenség*, 330.

26 Chardin, *Az emberi jelenség*, 331.

27 Its realization clearly depends first and foremost on a divine calling, and secondarily on the intensity of the believer's personal spiritual life and individual search.

28 Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, *Homo apostolicus*, App. 1. n. 18.

29 Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo* 83.

30 "My soul is filled as with marrow and fat, and my mouth exults with joyful lips..." (Psalm 63:6)

emotional love—entered the spiritual canon precisely because they allegorically express the consummation of the spiritual relationship between God and the human soul, using the language of nuptial poetry and intimate devotion. "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Song 2:16) conveys, in symbolic terms, the same theological reality as "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

Jesus Christ has „perfected the relationship of man to God."[31] The most renowned witness to this theology of mystical union is the Sermones super *Cantica Canticorum* by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux—a masterful collection of sermones which constitutes the most beautiful and comprehensive treatment of spiritual espousal and the mystical marriage present in the Church since its earliest days.[32]

Further characteristics of union with God include: the experiential awareness of being united with Him; the transformation of spiritual strength into divine strength; the constant contemplation of the Most Holy Trinity; unshakable interior peace; spiritual joy; a thirst for suffering and service; spiritual zeal; the wounding of the heart (transverberatio cordis); and finally, a serene and sweet death.[33]

Since human beings can only come to understand both God and themselves through the events of their lives[34] and through their relationships with the external world, for the believer—especially for the monk—the most definitive of all relationships becomes that with Christ. For "only with Him and in Him is such a meeting possible, in which no created barrier remains to separate the encounter…"[35]

This is precisely what Jesus expressed when He said, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). It is in this light and context that we must interpret His further words: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:24).

If we consider the concept of relationality—especially the kind lived out in complete self-gift—in light of the spousal or nuptial quality of the God–human relationship, then these words of Jesus reveal the dynamic

31 Gál, Úton a teljesség felé, 31.

32 Fejérdy, *Clairvaux-i Szent Bernát krisztológiai tanítása beszédei alapján*, 50.

33 Müller, *Aszketika és misztika*, 256-263.

34 Gál, Úton a teljesség felé, 27.

35 Eifried, A liturgia: élet, In: *Nova Claravallis*, 12.

of the most intimate "I – Thou" relationship of the soul, and more specifically, the inner movement of self-giving love.

Pastoral psychology has developed a thorough understanding of the dynamics and pathologies of human relationships. One of its foundational insights is that "partners in a relationship can only flourish to the extent that the other person responds."[36] Given that God's communication toward humanity is an unceasing and unlimited self-revelation, the question then becomes: to what extent is the human person able to respond to the divine "I"? This dialogue can only develop if the believer's image of God as distant and impersonal gradually gives way to an I – Thou relationship, in which the believer—or the monk—is able to view God as a partner and to engage with Him in reciprocal communication.

The next stage in this process of spiritual dialogue depends on the dynamic of relationship following the "first love" of one's vocation: "the success of a partnership depends on whether... we are capable of recognizing our partner as they truly are in reality: not as a substitute mother or father, not as a dependent, a subject, a ruler, or our sole provider, but as a unique Thou, addressed by name."[37] In other words, the believer must relinquish their internal, imagined image of God—just as one must outgrow projected inner images and wounds related to one's parents—and transcend even the rationally acquired theological conceptions of God, in order for a truly personal encounter to take place.

This I – Thou relationship and recognition can occur exclusively in intimate, interior prayer, and reaches its fulfillment in contemplation. The personal relationship between God and the human person becomes real and authentic only when it follows the path of self-knowledge, is freed from every projection and psychological dependency, and deepens in proportion to the believer's acceptance of their own self.[38]

Just as in human relationships, the secret of this relationship lies in devoting sufficient time and maintaining constant communication (personal prayer, liturgical prayer, meditation, contemplation); in unveiling our own faults before God—that is, in accepting ourselves; in revealing our disappointments, desires, fears, and repressions to God instead of masking them with idealization and perfectionism; in trusting in Him; and, fi-

36 Baumgartner, *Pasztorálpszichológia*, 484.

37 Baumgartner, *Pasztorálpszichológia*, 485.

38 Ibidem *Pasztorálpszichológia*, 485..

nally, in accepting the reality of our human condition and the limitations of the present moment, along with the narrowness of our own finitude.[39] „Bernard never stops at dogma, but always proceeds to the practical level of morality or mutual charity. For him, theology is only the first step; the truths of faith must transform our way of life."[40]

"Take careful note: no one can be saved without self-knowledge," warns Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.[41] Elsewhere, he writes that self-knowledge awakens holy fear of God [42]—that is, it forms the foundation of right and truthful relationship with God, since "true friendship can only exist where the communion of love is founded on truth." [43]

In summary, just as the foundational experience of Israel's relationship with God was the Exodus from Egyptian slavery, so too, from the most basic faith in God to the mystical, spousal faith of the religious (spiritual betrothal, spiritual marriage), one can perceive the deepening and unfolding of the same I–Thou relationship. To the degree that communication between the believer and God becomes truly personal, and to the extent that the believer is willing to undertake the arduous path of self-knowledge, the relationship with God can grow into a friendship, deepen further, and eventually attain a spousal or nuptial character. This, in turn, brings the believer back to the foundational experience of liberation, because "from this newly formed bond with God and the renewed connection with fellow human beings, the believer gains freedom from the compulsions that enslave."[44] As one Cistercian theology student aptly expressed it a generation ago: „Only the one who no longer seeks himself, who has become utterly alone and in his abandonment listens only to the voice of the Other who calls—only he can encounter another 'I'."[45]

In the Cistercian spirituality, this mystical union was cultivated and interpreted through the lens of love, compassion (*compassio*), and the monastic theological understanding of the biblical image and likeness

39 Baumgartner, *Pasztorálpszichológia*, 486.

40 Fejérdy, *Clairvaux-i Szent Bernát krisztológiai tanítása beszédei alapján*, 58.

41 Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica sermones*, 37. n. 1. – PL 183, 1401.

42 Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica sermones*, 37. n. 6. – PL 183, 1403.

43 Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistolae*, 78. n. 13. – PL 182, 82.

44 Baumgartner, *Pasztorálpszichológia*, 473.

45 Eifried, A liturgia: élet, 12.

of God, following the legacy of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint-Thierry, and Aelred of Rievaulx.[46]

46 Fejérdy, *Clairvaux-i Szent Bernát krisztológiai tanítása beszédei alapján*, 37.

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Deificari in otio
Deification in Contemplative Stillness

The expression *deificari in otio* is the central thesis of Saint Augustine's *Epistula 10* to Nebridius, and it recurs later in his treatise *De vera religione* and in numerous other writings. The term *otium* also appears in the *Confessions*, and in Augustine's later works (circa A.D. 404–424), it is increasingly employed as a soteriological metaphor.[1] It perfectly describes the atmosphere and orientation of his contemplative spirituality and way of life (cf. Ep. 10,2).[2]

The biblical foundation of *deificatio* is found above all in the Apostle Paul, particularly in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, where he writes that the faithful are to be transformed (μεταμορφόομαι) into the image (εἰκών) of Jesus Christ: "We are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18). According to Robert Rakestraw, the phrase "into the same image" (τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα) signifies that fallen humanity is reintegrated and restored through its deification. [3] The concept of theosis (θέωσις) was developed in the tradition of the Church Fathers, becoming a key element in theological debates concerning the divine nature.[4]

The verb deificari, a Latin passive infinitive, means "to be made godlike" or "to be deified." This does not indicate human action but rather a passive, grace-filled transformation—an act received as a gift. In this way, one of the central theological motifs of Augustine is expressed: the primacy of divine "gratia" over human will. The verb was also employed by other Church Fathers, such as Saint Athanasius and Saint Ambrose, particularly within the patristic framework of oikonomia (οἰκονομία), understood as participation in the divine life (theosis).[5] In Augustine's theology, the notion of deificatio is present, albeit with caution, in the sense of "glorification" or "likeness to God" (cf. *Conf.* X,6,8; *De Trinitate*).

1 Meconi, *The One Christ*, 133.

2 Trapé, *Szent Ágoston*, 124.

3 Copan, *Transformed into the same Image*, 226.

4 Copan, *Transformed into the same Image*, 228.

5 Copan, *Transformed into the same Image*, 224.

The phrase in *otio* means "in repose," or "in contemplative stillness." Here, *otium* does not signify secular idleness—as it originally referred to a Roman soldier's leave time—but rather the state of the contemplative soul. Augustine also employed the expression otium sanctum, which appears repeatedly, particularly in *De civitate Dei* (e.g., XIX,19), where it denotes the state of ultimate beatitude and the contemplative nearness to God. Otium connotes peace, silence, and contemplation, as opposed to negotium (activity, business, the noisy world). Augustine sought to realize a divine community through the disciplines of study, asceticism, and communal worship.[6]

Man cannot redeem himself; it is God who transforms him—and this transformation occurs not in noise, but in a vigilant inner stillness and attentiveness; not grasped by reason, but received by the heart, always in reliance upon grace. "I longed so ardently for the freedom of quiet" (*libertatis otiosae*) (*Conf.* IX,3,5), Augustine writes—an expression that, for him and for us who follow in his footsteps today, does not signify withdrawal from the world, but rather the inner order discovered through grace, and the peace found in God. For this reason, the Augustinians did not retreat into the isolation of mountains, valleys, or forests, but remained in urban environments: their spirituality was not one of flight from the world, but of inward attentiveness and the search for God, which could be practiced anywhere.

For Augustine, libertas always refers to liberation from sin and union with the will of God; otium, in turn, is the realm of spiritual tranquility, where one detaches from the sensual world, turns inward, and becomes immersed in the contemplation of God. This is the life of the "inner man" (*homo interior*) (*Conf.* X,6,8).

Through deificari in otio, the contemplative person becomes a participant in the divine life, just as in baptism and in the state of grace one receives divine filiation (cf. Jn 1:12; 2 Pet 1:4: "partakers of the divine nature"). In this process, the soul is inwardly shaped and transformed through the contemplative life. While Saint Augustine does not frequently use the verb deificare, the trajectory of his thought is nevertheless clear: because of sin, man has become alienated from himself and from God, but by grace and righteousness he is able to return to God. This transformation through love is the renewal of the inner man in the image

6 Meconi, *The One Christ*, 85.

of Christ (*De Trinitate* XIV,8,11). "Deus fit homo, ut homo fiat Deus" – „God became man, that man might become God." While this formula does not originate with Augustine, it is implicitly present in his writings, especially in the Confessiones, De Trinitate, and De civitate Dei. He repeatedly emphasizes that the ultimate goal of the human being is not self-realization, but union with God: "our heart is restless until it rests in you." (*Conf.* I,1)

According to Georges Folliet, Augustine found the source of the maxim deificari in otio in proposition 32 of Porphyry's Sententiae.[7] As the term becomes increasingly associated in Augustine's works with the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ, it gradually sheds its Neoplatonic connotation and becomes a Christian expression of gracious participation in the divinity of God,[8] and of the life lived with a renewed heart and mind in God.[9] "This external and internal detachment is the source of that firm joy which can be compared to no other joy." (*Ep.* 10,2)

In my view, Augustine's contemplative life was both a grace-filled and therapeutic process rooted in his sinful self-image—in which the only remedy for human frailty was found in the contemplation of God. The individual phases of this process—not in chronology, but in a systematic way—can be discerned in the introspective writings of the Confessiones, and from them one may outline a general therapeutic protocol of spiritual healing.

Saint Augustine's first insight concerned the nature of sin, and his first step was to turn his attention inward, toward his own inner spiritual workings: "my inner self discovered this" (*Conf.* X,6,9). In the concept of the ego interior—the inner man as willful, commanding, and judging—Augustine, albeit indistinctly, was able to intuit what later psychology would define as the "ego," and he also perceived the connection between sin and self-will.

He did not attribute his faults to external causes or project them onto others, but rather acknowledged and internalized his personal brokenness: "My sins are my own doing" (*Conf.* X,4,5); "It was I who willed it, I who did not will—it was I, I, I!" (*Conf.* VIII,10,22).

Throughout the *Confessions*, the bitter dynamic of inner spiritual strug-

7 Meconi, *The One Christ*, 83.

8 Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 157.

9 Meconi, *The One Christ*, 88.

gle and the powerlessness of the will to change emerges, revealing the hopeless struggle of repeated failure and renewed effort: "I burned, sighed, wept, was tormented" (*Conf.* IV,7,12). "If as many opposing natures were in us as there are conflicting wills, then we would not be two but many" (*Conf.* VIII,10,23). Augustine here speaks only of the struggle between good and evil, yet with his genius he anticipates what psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli later articulated in the 20th century: that subpersonalities operate within the human person and must be harmonized. "It is repugnant when any part is not in agreement with the whole" (*Conf.* III,8,15).

In exploring his inner world, Augustine realized that God is not to be found outside, but must be encountered spiritually—„more inward than my inmost self" (*interior intimo meo*, *Conf.* III,6,11). The deepest and most comprehensive dimension of this inner realm—the soul—is memory. From this insight, Augustine came to see that it is divine grace manifest in the inner man that alone is able to penetrate the human soul with the quality of divinity, thereby healing it from the sickness of passions and self-will: "You melted my sins away like ice" (*Conf.* II,7,15); "You broke the bonds that held me fast" (*Conf.* VIII,1,1).

Not struggle, nor willpower, nor human effort is capable of transforming the personality and its operations—only the transforming grace of God. And this grace does not act by force, but through gentleness, reconciliation of opposites, and the harmonization of what is fragmented. Spiritual struggle is an introverted movement whose goal—after the battle is surrendered—is peace, tranquility, and contemplation. The monk knows that both alienation and unity take place within the human person, and this is clearly discernible in Augustine's spiritual dynamic. He turned inward, into the landscapes of his own soul, and after the battle against self-love and ego-centeredness, it was God who brought all things to unity in his heart.[10]

"With gentle discipline you persuaded me (...), You smoothed me, leveled the mountains and hills of my thoughts, straightened what was crooked in me, dulled what was sharp" (*Conf.* IX,4,7). This spiritual acceptance, reconciliation, stillness, and attentiveness led Saint Augustine to discover the path of spiritual ascent: "With my soul shall I rise to you" (*Conf.* X,7,11).

10 Kaczynski (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Monasticism*, 586.

The decisive element in Augustine's spiritual life was his turn inward and the attentive focus upon the interior self, along with the discovery of otium—that quiet yet vigilant contemplative state in which the soul became open to receiving God: "I meditated and moved toward renewal" (Conf. IX,4,10). Saint Hippolytus of Rome expressed it this way: "You will become a companion of God and a co-heir with Christ; you will no longer be a slave to desires or passions, and sickness will no longer consume you. For you have become divine... God has promised to clothe you in these things, for you have become divine and were begotten unto immortality." (c.255, W), 5.153.[11]

At this stage, Augustine—filled and touched in his entire being by the indwelling presence of God—sought to turn away from what is lower and ascend to what is higher: "I burned with longing to fly up from earthly things to You" (*Conf.* III,4,8). It was his spiritual experience that led this psychologist of grace to the realization that the happiness, meaning, and true identity of human life lie in union with God (*deificatio*): "Your God is the life of your life" (*Conf.* X,6,9). When he reached contemplation and entered into a personal spiritual communion with God, this divine presence became his most defining experience: "My mind, for a moment of trembling awareness, came to what Is" (Conf. VII,17,23); „I would not exist, if You were not in me" (*Conf.* I,2,2); "whatever You fill, You fill completely with Yourself" (*Conf.* I,3,3). This inner fullness and lived experience is what drew and impelled Augustine to the monastic life. "And behold, You were within me, but I sought You outside" (*Conf.* X,27,38).

Deificari in otio is the innermost experiential reality and atmosphere of the monastic life, through which the contemplative brother's life is inwardly transformed into the image of Christ. He is filled with the presence of God, and thus the human character is reshaped toward the divine character.[12] The daily living, deepening, renewing, cultivating, and sharing of this mystery with the brethren and with the members of the Church is the twofold and complementary vocation that constitutes one of the most beautiful services of Augustinian spirituality. "The love of truth seeks the tranquility of contemplation (*otium sanctum*), while the obligation of love accepts the burden of apostolic activity (*negotio ius-*

11 Bercot (ed.), *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 200.

12 Finlan, *The Background and Contents of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 60.

tum)." (*Civ. Dei* XIX.19)

Thus, through *deificari in otio*, the monastic experience becomes the spiritual engine of the Church and one of its most precious treasures. In this way, the monastic life becomes a powerful force of pastoral ministry.[13] The contemplation of monks and the eschatological character that flows from it serve to protect, renew, and guarantee the charismatic dimension of the Church amidst the tide of secularization, which threatens the Church's very identity.[14] The stronger the process of secularization, the greater the need for the monastic experience. Monasticism must become a means of spiritual recharging and renewal within the Church—a center of transformation both for the self and for the world, a true school of *deificari in otio*.

13 Trapé, *Szent Ágoston*, 137.

14 Kaczynski (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Monasticism*, 587.

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Therapia vulneris peccati apud sanctum Augustinum
The Therapy of the Wound of Sin in Saint Augustine

The most common Old Testament word for sin is *chata* (אָטָה), which, however, does not literally mean "sin", but rather something like „to miss the mark." Dove vividly renders the true meaning of the expression: "like a traveler who gets lost, multiplying his steps, and becomes distant from his goal; or like a weather-beaten ship in the storm zone of a raging hurricane, when neither sun, nor moon, nor stars can be seen…"[1]

The New Testament expressions appear in the same sense throughout the Gospels. *Hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) is the most frequent technical term for sin in the New Testament, a term originally coined by Aristotle for Greek tragedy.[2] He reflected on the notion of sin as follows: "To miss the mark is easy, but to hit it is difficult. Thus it follows that evil is characterized by excess and deficiency, while virtue is defined by the mean."[3]

Saint Augustine's unique conception of evil—and therefore of sin—opens an interpretative framework that makes it possible to understand the process of sin, repentance, purification, elevation, and healing as a path of spiritual and grace-filled therapy.

Augustine taught that sin is not a substance, that is, not an independently existing thing, but merely the absence or deprivation of good and of life: "Whatever is, is good. So the evil, the origin of which I was seeking, cannot be a substance. For if it were a substance, it would be good." (*Conf.* VII,12,18) Since God is good and perfect, evil means the absence of all that is. This "non-fullness" is to be understood as the subjection of existence to the predetermined and necessary limits of time, space, decay, and death—or more scientifically, to *entropy*. Thus, non-fullness becomes an existential reality: as deprivation, lack, pain, and fear.[4]

1 Dove, J., *The Vindication of the Hebrew Scriptures*, 103.

2 Paulson, R., *Sin and Evil: Moral Values in Literature*, 36.

3 Aristotel, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.6, 1106b.

4 Yannaras, *The Mistery of Evil*, 125.

This understanding of Augustine was later echoed by St. Maximus the Confessor, who wrote: "Evil is nothing else than the voluntary rejection and privation of the things that God has given to rational nature... Just as sight and the eye exist, while blindness is not a substance, but the loss of a truly existing eye." (PG 90, 253A) Likewise, Didymus the Blind of Alexandria declared in his Second Treatise Against the Manichaeans: "What is the quality of evil? In no way does it possess the quality of substance." (PG 39, 1088C) [5]

Augustine not only demythologized evil, but also realized that the source of evil is his own will. One is not drawn into sin by external forces, but only by the lowly desires arising within the soul itself. "God created me with free will; if I have committed sin, it is I who have committed it, for no one forced me to do so." (*En. in Ps.* 31,2,16) Such an admission was revolutionary in the ancient world saturated with superstition, in which every misfortune had its external cause, or even its own deified agent within the pantheon of pagan gods. The spiritual person embarks on the bumpy path of self-knowledge when he finally stops running away from mistakes, errors, and even sins, when he no longer blames others, no longer projecting onto others that which it refuses to face in itself, no longer seeking justification or absolution—but dares to gaze into the mirror of reality and say: "Yes, it was I who erred. I am the one who did this wrong."

"What then is evil? […] It is the perversion of the will, turned away from You, O God, the Supreme Substance, towards the lower things. The will casts out its inward self and swells outwardly." (*Conf.* VIII,16,22) The "psychologist of grace"—gifted with prophetic insight—intuitively grasped the dynamics of the ego's defense and self-preservation mechanisms in his own psyche: namely, the projection mechanism by which the self externalizes those qualities it cannot or will not accept as its own. At this stage of Augustine's spiritual therapy, he was able to reverse this projection—bringing it back to himself—and thus to identify with his own responsibility and to face the problem within. When our attachment to inferior emotions, judgments, thoughts, and desires loosens, the consciousness becomes capable of objectifying them to some extent. This begins the process of opening and purification. In such moments, the personality orients itself toward higher spiritual states—if we may

5 Yannaras, *The Mistery of Evil*, 131.

put it this way, it "levels up"—and begins to ascend toward higher-order values.[6] "...for sins, only our own will is responsible." (*De lib. arb.* III, 216) The connection between will and deficient action is thus a decisive step: it reveals that sin and volition are inseparable. Augustine clearly recognized that the soul and the will are one and the same: the very self, which either wills or does not will.[7] His approach was fundamentally subjectivist, in the best sense: he described the reality of evil as an interior condition—within the framework of intentionality, personal guilt, and moral responsibility. Sin thus became a structural element of the human psyche,[8] an action directed by the self, a denial and absence of fullness.[9] But precisely because he did not deny his own interior deficiencies—rather, he was able to confess them before God—he retained them in his conscious awareness. Through this awareness, they became objectified; and thus he came to view his own self not merely through the ego, but from a higher plane of awareness, recognizing and integrating those interior tendencies with spiritual clarity.

"Evil, being a lack, lies in the manner of acting, for there exists no evil nature." (*Civ. Dei* XIII,8) In other words, sin appears as a distortion of thought and will—a spiritual illness. A condition of lack calls for replenishment and fulfillment, just as the hungry eat and the thirsty drink to ease the absence of food or water. Saint Augustine's psychologically sensitive interpretation of sin opens the way for understanding the state of sin as a spiritual disorder, one that cries out for therapy and healing — similar to how one might seek psychological therapy after a trauma in order to restore the healthy functioning of the soul.

"It was I who willed, it was I who did not will—I, I myself! Neither was my willing complete, nor my not-willing complete. So I fought with myself, and was scattered from myself…" (*Conf.* VIII,10,22) Self-recognition, insight, and admission are indispensable tools of conscious awareness. This is more than mere penitence. Augustine was revolutionary not only in his understanding of self-knowledge, but also as a forerunner of the later Descartesian "cogito argument", for he was perhaps the first to articulate that on the path toward God, man must come to know—and

6 Wilber, *Integrál meditáció*, 81.

7 Trapé, *Szent Ágoston*, 171.

8 Matthewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 55.

9 Yannaras, *The Mistery of Evil*, 126.

indeed can know—the contents of his own consciousness.[10] As my dear friend Dániel Németh and I expressed during a long walk and conversation yesterday: self-knowledge most often consists in discovering what we are not. In this regard, I align myself with the *apophatic* or "negative theology" favored by the Church Fathers, which offers a more faithful account than positive assertions—assertions that are invariably bound by anthropomorphic limitations.

We do not come to know the reality of God through philosophical or theological theories, but by participating in His self-realization through His works, and by entering into personal relationship with Him.[11] According to Sacred Scripture, God is love (1 Jn 4:8); He is the God of love (2 Cor 13:11), good and merciful (Rom 11:32), forgiving (Eph 4:32), gracious (2 Thess 2:16), long-suffering (Lk 18:7), generous (Rom 12:6; 2 Cor 6:1), true (Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18), perfect (Mt 5:48), almighty (Lk 18:27), and the list could go on.

Yet all these are qualities that pertain to humans and to the human world. But qualities only exist in relation to their opposites: we can only speak of "goodness" if there is something to which it stands in contrast. Any given attribute immediately implies its opposite. If we speak of goodness, we are at the same time—implicitly—speaking of evil; for if there is no possibility of comparison, the term „good" becomes meaningless. Good can only exist in contrast with evil. One who cannot be evil, strictly speaking, cannot be good either. Therefore, whenever we attach a human quality to God, we risk going astray. God is neither good nor evil in the human sense, but rather whole—complete (cf. Mt 5:48)—embracing all qualities without opposition or contradiction. In the biblical tradition, this wholeness is often translated as "perfection," yet as we have just seen, this cannot refer to moral or qualitative categories in God. Biblically, perfection means lacking nothing (πλήρωμα); in Hebrew, *mlo* (אלמ) signifies *fullness*, *being filled* to the brim. All other attributes may best be understood as qualities projected by man onto God, reflections of our own highest ideals. "The human qualities of God are nothing more than human spiritual capacities raised to the level of perfection."[12] These attributes reveal that man can only receive and comprehend God to the

10 Carruthers, *The Opacity of Mind*, 26.

11 Webster, *Confessing God*, 87.

12 Vanyó, *Theologica Graeca*, 19.

extent that he is able to think of Him in human concepts.

I am thus compelled to admit that in truth we know very little about God—and it is precisely this unknowing that drives us, as human beings, to give God some form of appearance, to attribute qualities to Him, to declare what He desires or wills, what He is like, and what must be done to fulfill His will. Yet let us consider: can perfection, can fullness, even possess a will?

For someone to will something, there must be a lack—and from that lack arises a desire for what is missing. That is, one must not yet possess what one desires or wills. But the Full, precisely because it is full, lacks nothing; and therefore, there can be no desire or will within it, since in its totality it already contains everything. There can be nothing that must still be attained or acquired. Fullness and desire are mutually exclusive categories. Thus, the perfect God cannot possess will in the same way that human beings do, constantly desiring this or that. "There are no gaps in Him to be filled, no potential waiting to be realized."[13]

It is precisely because man suffers lack that he is capable of yearning for what is higher. His privation propels him spiritually toward fullness. In the teaching of Saint Augustine, God's assisting grace (*gratia actualis*) and man's ever-present free will are not in opposition but mutually complementary: „Free will is not abolished by grace, but strengthened, because grace purifies the will, and the purified will freely loves righteousness." (*De Spir. et litt.* 30,52)

"Augustine understood evil's challenge in terms of two distinct conceptual mechanisms, one ontological and the other anthropological. Ontologically he defines the concept of evil as simply the privation of being and goodness. Anthropologically he defines human wickedness in terms of original sin, and sin as fundamentally the perversion of the human's good nature – created in the imago Dei – into a distorted and false imitation of what it should be."[14]

In a similar way, the most important aspect of self-knowledge is when—following in the footsteps of Saint Augustine—we confess our own qualities and faults, our personality traits, inclinations, and desires before God in an apophatic manner, face to face, and then come to observe them as objects. This shift to an external perspective enables the

13 Gál, *Az örök élet reménye*, 56.

14 Matthewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 75.

emergence of an inner distance between these traits or operations and our observing, contemplative consciousness. This gives rise to the realization that, although these thoughts, feelings, desires, and instinctual drives occur within us, we are not identical with them. We no longer say: "this is me."[15] A key movement in spiritual growth is when what once was the subject becomes the object in the next phase of the soul's development.

"From a perverted will, desire was born; and when I gave in to desire, it became habit; and since I did not resist the habit, it became necessity." (*Conf.* VIII,5,10) When one acts wrongly, wickedly, or sinfully, what occurs ontologically is the denial of a good act—an ontological defection—since the action is incomplete; the evil will is in fact a deficient or faulty will.[16] Until the believer reaches such a level of objectifying interior differentiation, until he is able to perceive his inner dynamics as objects of contemplation, he remains at the mercy of these psychic processes and interior compulsions—forced to suffer them as subject. "The soul is tossed about wildly and in confusion… it is disfigured by errors and distorted opinions." (*Conf.* IV,15,25); "Foolish man, you who blindly suffer the condition of human life! (...) I was feverish, I sighed, I wept, I was tormented—I had no rest, no reflection." (*Conf.* IV,7,12)

The contemplative traditions are, in part, concerned with the formation of awareness and with apophatic self-knowledge.[17] Saint Augustine recognized the importance of objectifying certain aspects of the self and refusing identification with them: "You would desire to be transformed so that those temporary emotions—burned and engraved into you by love of temporary things—would vanish." (*De lib. arb.* III,72); "…to be freed from what you do not want to be." (*De lib. arb.* III,64)

At this point in his journey, Augustine had already begun to adopt an objectifying perspective. He no longer identified with the passions and desires that had previously characterized him and over which he once suffered helplessly. A distance opened up between his sense of self and the perceived and experienced lower psychic processes occurring within him. He consciously began to disengage himself from these inner contents and movements. He now rightfully asked: "Who am I—and what am I?" (*Conf.* IX,1,1)—for he was already aware of what he did not wish

15 Wilber, *Integrál meditáció*, 66.

16 Matthewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 78.

17 Wilber, *Integrál meditáció*, 218.

to be in himself. He already knew who he was not; he simply could not yet fully articulate who he was. Saint Augustine was well aware that his person and essence were more than the emotional and desire-driven processes taking place within him—processes that had caused him so much inner turmoil. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, if one does not know the true character of God, he cannot know himself either.[18] Augustine was deeply aware that his true identity and Self could only be discovered in God.

"Return to your heart, you transgressors, and cling to Him who made you!" (*Conf.* IV,12,18) "He dwells deep within the heart—but the heart has wandered away from Him." (Conf. IV,12,18) Augustine turned toward his own heart—not in an emotional or sentimental sense, but in a movement of full openness and transparency toward God. "Behold my heart, O God, behold its depths! Look within…" (*Conf.* IV,6,11) When he became capable of laying bare his heart—offering all his thoughts, intentions, and emotions to God without denial or rejection, and at the same time becoming inwardly conscious of them—then God's assisting grace could become truly effective within him. That grace became operative only after a prior turning away from lower-level contents of consciousness and their objectification—a process which can be called, in doctrinal terms, purification, and in ontological terms, self-transcendence. Saint Augustine broke away from his instinctual desires, his tormenting sexuality, and his sins by becoming conscious of them and then choosing no longer to identify with them. Only then could God's grace become active in the pure heart (*mundum cor*). Once again, we are witnessing that Augustinian principle whereby the synergy and harmony between divine grace and human free will plays a decisive role.

"...let them seek You—and behold, You are already in their hearts, in the hearts of those who make confession before You." (*Conf.* V,2,2); "How foolish are they who search for God with outward eyes, when He is to be seen with the heart! As it is written elsewhere: seek Him in the simplicity of heart. For the pure heart is a simple heart. And just as this light can only be seen with pure eyes, so too God is not visible unless what sees Him is pure." (*De serm. Dom. in monte* I,2,8)

As the heart was purified, and the person turned away from inferior desires, and higher desires gained strength within, the presence and love of God came to fill both heart and consciousness. As I have noted elsew-

18 Matthewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 119.

here, I wish to underscore here as well: this divine reconciliation is far removed from any act of willful struggle. It is much more akin to the biblical concept of katallagē (καταλλαγή) and katallassō (καταλλάσσω): both meaning *reconciliation*, *peacemaking*, *the end of hostility*, *the restoration of harmony*.

Augustine expressed it in these words: "You tamed me through inward urging… You leveled me…"
(*Conf.* IX,4,7) The Latin *stimulus* refers to a firm, even harsh internal prompting—an inner drive or pressure—which, though often used in negative contexts, here appears as a positive pedagogical element in Augustine's spiritual formation (*internis stimulis*). The verb *complano* means "to make level," „to flatten," and in this context reflects the irresistible power and formative action of God. The image conjures the proud human being—exalting himself in his own might and grandeur—as a mountain that is brought low by God's power and made to blend into the surrounding landscape (*me conplanaveris humiliatis montibus*). God's strong, at times painful, inner urgings brought about a positive reorientation in Augustine's psychic structure and spiritual life. While Saint Augustine approached human sin from a legal-anthropological perspective, nonetheless — for the reasons above — we may rightly regard him as the first "spiritual therapist of sin." As the contemporary theologian and dogmatician Oliver D. Crisp puts it: „Christ's reconciling work has to do with its appropriation by a particular individual and the subjective change the person undergoes as a consequence."[19]

As the soul and consciousness transcend their former state through the cooperation of grace and free will, the person becomes capable of reversing the inner trajectory of distortion caused by sin. This is what we properly call the path of Christian spirituality, the way of the soul. "Truly pure is the one who strives toward God and conforms himself to Him alone." (*Beata v.* III,18) The motivation of the soul comes from the manifestation, love, and presence of God. Spiritual joy fills the heart (i.e., consciousness) and draws the soul of the God-seeking person toward Him.

"I moved forward in meditation toward renewal: from there flowed toward me the sweetness that emanates from You—and You gave joy to my heart." (*Conf.* IX,4,10) The word renovatio precisely expresses the

19 Crisp, *Participation and Atonement*, 68.

therapeutic character of spiritual formation, since it signifies restoration, or healing from the wounds of sin. Like the Apostle Paul, Augustine uses this term to describe the inner renewal wrought by redemption: "Renovari autem spiritu mentis vestrae" ("to be renewed in the spirit of your mind" – Eph 4:23) Here, *renovari* is the Latin rendering of the Greek ἀνανεόω. In Augustine, *renovatio mentis* thus becomes a way to describe both bodily-spiritual healing and inner rebirth and purification.

The phrase "You gave joy to my heart" (*dederas laetitiam in corde meo*) expresses spiritual joy, serenity, inner brightness, and emotional fullness—laetitia. This transcendent joy is the counterpart to what Saint Paul calls: „gaudium in Spiritu Sancto" – "joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17) While there is a stylistic distinction between *gaudium* and *laetitia*, both express divinely-originating joy, manifested by the soul under the influence of grace.

The next phase of Saint Augustine's spiritual therapy is the fulfillment of contemplation, in which the positive aspects of healing manifest in the fullness granted by God's presence. Augustine recognizes his Creator as his personal physician: "You, the healer of my soul" (*Conf.* X,3,4), medice meus intime.

Contemplation leads to the discovery of a transcendent unity beyond dualisms, desires, instincts, and short-term will. "For there is not a single thing […] that would have attained stability except through a certain unity." (*Lib. arb.* III,237) The experience of contemplation is always that of wholeness, totality, universal unity—an effect of God's presence: "The soul, through the body that belongs to it, strives persistently and eagerly toward unity." (*Lib. arb.* III,235) Encountering this unity grants the contemplative a glimpse of eschatological fullness and hope: "You are Being itself, unchanging, and in You is our rest." (*Conf.* IX,4,11) In a certain sense, fullness becomes objectified within the contemplative, opening him to further and deeper experiences of the plenitude of God. The contemplative is saturated and permeated with the awareness of unity, with the nearness of God within: „His constant love strengthens and stabilizes him, and his reward will be the very being he sought." (*Lib. arb.* III,73) This experience of unity reaches completion and becomes capable of completely filling the contemplative: "To remain in Him is for us the greatest and most original good."
(*Lib. arb.* III,131); "The soul has found wisdom and is immersed in its

contemplation." (*Beata v.* IV,33); „I was absorbed in the contemplation of Your work…" (*Conf.* VII,21,27) The most important fruit of this state is the arrival of undisturbed inner peace. What follows is the verberatio cordis—the *wounding of the heart*[20]—which, in Augustine's legacy, became a symbol of religious life, especially among Augustinians, signifying the highest stage of contemplation and their total dedication: "You pierced our hearts with the arrows of Your love." (*Conf.* IX,2,3)

In this brief reflection, I have sought to show how Saint Augustine's ontological understanding of sin and the path of purification described in the Confessions outline the possibility of a therapeutic spiritual path—one that unites his theology of sin with his personal experience. This, in turn, allows us to reverse the logic of privatio boni, and sketch the inverse movement of recovery from sin, a path we might name: *plenitudo boni*—the fullness of the good. Thus, the most adequate answer to sin understood as a state of lack is the school of contemplation, which fills the void and endows the soul with the fullness of the good in God. "God dwells in everyone who is happy (...) God dwells in him, and therefore he enjoys God." (*Beata v.* IV,34)

20 Müller*, Aszkétika és Misztika II.*, 265.

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Visio monachi de saecularizatione Secularization through the Eyes of a Monk

In this brief chapter, I do not intend to investigate the causes of secularization, as they appear to me exceedingly complex and far-reaching. Rather, I wish to offer a personal monastic reflection. As a monk, my concern lies not in analyzing external secular influences, but in asking what the believing person can do for the sanctification of life: how one may fill their life with grace, and how grace may become fruitful in the ordinary flow of daily existence.

The term secularization is rooted in the Latin word saeculum, which denotes a temporal age or epoch. Its Greek equivalent is aiōn.[1] Its opposite is aeternum, eternity. The distinction between the two reveals a fundamental orientation: one concerns itself with temporal goods, the other with that which is eternal. As temporal categories, these two Latin terms indicate whether a person thinks in terms of short-range temporal time, or within the timelessness of God who transcends space and time. Thus, the secular and the aeternal human conditions occupy two opposing ends of the same existential spectrum:[2] the one radically of this world (saecularis), the other radically ordered toward the heavenly reality—toward the „City of God," as Saint Augustine defined it.

Remaining with Augustine, in Book XI of the Confessiones, he offers a profound interpretation of time: "It is You who made the past and the future; You who set them in motion through Your eternal present." (*Conf.* XI,11)

The past no longer exists in itself—it becomes part of the present, shaping the very moment in which we turn toward the future, which likewise does not yet objectively exist, but is already partially present in the now. Past, present, and future are not discrete realities; they are only accessible through the consistency of the present moment, and through the actions enacted therein:[3] "Your eternity's high present precedes all

1 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 264.

2 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 265.

3 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 56.

past things and surpasses all that is yet to come." (Conf. XI,13)

God perceives every moment of time as a moment of action—each is simultaneously present to Him. His eternal present contains all time within itself. To participate in the aeternum, in that which is eternal, means to ascend beyond the constraints of space and time. Contrary to Plato's notion of a static, timeless eternity, the eternity of God concentrates the fullness of time into a single living instant.[4] We may only enter into this mystery through personal communion with God. "Your eternal present precedes all times, and timeless time has never existed." (Conf. XI,13)

In the monastic sense, Christian faith is a path of self-transcendence—a passage from the temporal form of human existence toward a spiritual life rooted in the eternal.[5] Its antithesis is secular existence, which, remaining with Augustinian terminology, may be defined as *privatio transcendentiae*—a deprivation of transcendence. Such a life is fixated on self-assertion, immediate gratification, and consumption; it is characterized by self-display, narcissistic self-expression, and self-love, even to the forgetfulness of God. The opposite of Christian self-transcendence is what we may call absolutio sui ipsius—the absolutization of the self.

It must be acknowledged—even at the risk of reiterating a commonplace—that in the context of modern society, the supernatural as an intelligible and real dimension is often absent or estranged from the horizons of daily life for large masses of people. It is all the more remarkable, then, that the group least studied by contemporary science is precisely this vast multitude of secular individuals.[6]And yet, globally, the category of "non-believers in God" now ranks fourth in demographic size after Christianity (2 billion), Islam (1.2 billion), and Hinduism (900 million).[7]

If we regard the monk as the authentic witness of the aeternitas, then the manifestations of saecularitas can be relatively clearly delineated—not merely as a turning away from God, but also as the expression of a mode of organizing life and being. Without claiming exhaustiveness, I offer here several key examples.

4 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

5 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 44.

6 Dobbelaere, *Secularization:An Analysis at Three Levels*, 141.

7 Zuckermann, *Society without God*, 96. Note: According to the latest research, people who do not belong to any religious group now constitute the third largest group in terms of population. Source: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/religiously-unaffiliated-population-change/

The devaluation of religion and the abandonment of spirituality. This is often accompanied by various accusations leveled against religion: "Churches have the reputation of promoting irrelevant values, and of not promoting and even of preventing the realization of relevant ones."[8]

The abandonment of the Christian faith generally entails a convergence of four interwoven social and emotional dimensions: (1) intellectual doubt or rejection concerning the truth of a system of belief; (2) moral critique—an outright rejection of the lifestyle of a religious community; (3) emotional suffering—grief, guilt, loneliness, despair; and (4) estrangement from the community.[9]

Included in the manifestations of secular life is also the neglect of the natural order—not only in matters concerning biological sex and the structure of creation, but also in forgetting that the Earth's resources are finite. The ideology of so-called "sustainable development" is therefore a fatal illusion, condemning humanity to self-destruction. This includes the unchecked growth of the global population, the increasingly disproportionate distribution of goods, the destruction of forests, and comprehensive environmental devastation, which—through global warming—appears to be hastening the arrival of the great and dreadful Day of Judgment for the entire planet.

Let us now consider our personal complicity. Overconsumption is a secular vice, for it is not necessity but instant gratification, impulse, social status, or self-reward that motivates it. Throwing away leftover food, excessive accumulation of household goods or clothing likewise fall under this category.

Also secular is the absolutization of the present moment: the rejection of the past, of former cultures and accumulated human experience, of the wisdom of previous generations, and of millennia-old traditions. It entails the privatization of the future, the evasion of responsibility, and a disregard for the good of generations to come. This is the logic of the "YOLO" culture ("you only live once")—living only for the present, guided by reckless, sensation-driven choices.

Another product of secularization is the cult of technology, efficiency, profit, and accumulation—placing them above all else; the demand for constant online presence, and the total structuring and exploitation of time.

8 Dobbelaere, *Secularization:An Analysis at Three Levels*, 141.

9 Enstedt – Larsson – Mantsinen (szerkk.), *Handbook of Leaving Religion*, 310.

We must also include the glorification of the self: self-expansion, image construction, obsession with physical appearance, the fetishization of brands—especially fashion and cars—and all forms of self-assertion that come at the expense of others. Here belongs also the idolatry of health, the cult of eternal youth, plastic surgery, the "biohacking" or "body hacking" subculture. Accompanying this is the flight from death, the tabooing of mortality, the discrimination and marginalization of the elderly, and the reduction of death to a medical inconvenience.

Included here is also the phenomenon of planned obsolescence. There is no longer any sustainable design; long-lasting products have become either unavailable or unaffordable for the average person. The aim is rapid depreciation and constant replacement. As the saying goes: "If it's not made in China, it's a counterfeit." This is especially true in the domain of communication and information technology—indeed, in the entire technological sector. One has the sense of being forced into an unbearable pace of competition, a race in which one has no desire to participate, and from which there is no exit.

The secularization of thought and intellect consists in the exclusion of God, death, eternity, sin, responsibility, and commitment from public discourse, and the replacement of religion with self-help strategies, personal empowerment techniques, and market-based individual preference.

In truth, I believe we are all affected by secularization, even though we strive to live as believing Christians. To some extent, in one way or another, we have all been infected, and likely without even realizing it. So what can we Christians do to reduce the influence of secularization in our own lives? How can we sanctify our lives more effectively?

The answer is not complicated. First of all: moderation (*temperantia*)—let us not consume or use more than we truly need. Let us pursue simplicity (*simplicitas*), which means valuing practical utility over brand or social prestige, and surrounding ourselves with objects and tools that are durable and repairable. Let us practice care for creation (*custodia creationis*), striving to leave the smallest ecological footprint possible and to reduce our energy consumption. Let us seek to avoid selfishness by cultivating obedience (*oboedientia*), resilience, and a form of selfless self-discipline that enables us to place the good of others before our own. Let us not flee from transience, death, suffering, or pain—these are intrinsic to the human condition and must not be evaded (*memento mori*).

Let us be fully present in our actions and locations, consciously inhabiting the present moment without the urge to possess it (*otium sanctum*). Let us strive for contemplation and learn to internalize the truth that time does not belong to us; it cannot be possessed.

A life oriented toward the Eternal seeks to be simple, obedient; humble, yet resilient; earthly, but not worldly; contemplative, yet rooted in reality. This is what true sanctification means.

In this spirit, I wish to propose an anti-secular Christian manifesto, addressed especially to members of the Nordic Catholic Church. This is not a binding rule, but a monastic recommendation—a way to reduce the presence and power of secularization in our lives. It is a sort of guide for Christian living, one that draws deeply from the cultural and spiritual soil of the first millennium of the Church.

Manifesto against the Secular Culture
(Manifestum contra culturam saecularem)

1. Against the idolatry of the present: cultivate awareness of eternity. Do not live as if only the now matters. Recognize that time is a gift, and every moment opens into God's eternal reality. Seek regular and personal communion with Him. "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (Ps 90:12)

2. Against overconsumption: practice moderation and simplicity. Do not acquire everything you desire simply because you can afford it, and do not discard what is no longer new. What is unnecessary for you may be a gift for someone else. That which you repair, you preserve as part of God's creation. "If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that." (1 Tim 6:8)

3. Against the cult of self-fulfillment: embrace self-transcendence in Christ. Do not strive above all to be „yourself," but rather become the one whom God calls you to be. Your true identity awaits you in Christ. "That God may be all in all." (1 Cor 15:28)

4. Against the world of speed, profit, and efficiency: choose contemplation and patience. Do not rush through life; avoid haste and restlessness.

Eternal realities unfold quietly, slowly, and gradually by the grace of God and in hiddenness. Contemplation is not inactivity—it is abiding in God's presence, the most precious communion. "They listened to me and waited in silence for my counsel." (Job 29:21)

5. Against the idol of individual freedom: value obedience and community. Do not seek freedom in asserting your will, but in serving the truth. In your brother, Christ speaks to you. "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." (Mt 16:24)

6. Against the worship of the body: live in temperance. Do not idolize youth, strength, or appearances. The body is mortal—but God loves beyond death. Remember that you are dust, and destined for eternity. "Heirs of God and coheirs with Christ—if only we suffer with Him, so that we may also be glorified with Him." (Rom 8:17)

7. Against the world's wastefulness: protect creation and live in gratitude. Do not live as though the Earth belongs to you. Know that you are a guest here, called to gratitude and responsibility. The garden you tend belongs to God. "Then the LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." (Gen 2:15)

8. Against isolated spirituality: pray in community and attend the Eucharist. Do not live your faith without God's people, for that is a path toward spiritual isolation. For the contemplative soul, everything points to God. "All the believers were united together." (Acts 2:44)

Throughout the centuries of Christianity, the monastic life has consistently stood as a faithful witness to the aeternum.[10] Many religious orders were founded precisely with the purpose of bringing an intensified faith closer to the people of their time—especially to those drifting away from God. As a monk, I believe that the most authentic response to saecularitas is not ideological opposition, but the lived witness of a genuinely Christian way of life, and a sincere commitment to God. In light of all the above, I am convinced that each of us can do much to reduce the presence of secularization in our own lives and in our surroundings. In my

10 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 144.

humble opinion, this silent personal testimony bears more lasting fruit than any strategic program or newly established organization. The Kingdom of God has always been present within the saeculum, permeating it with its own gracious reality (cf. Lk 10:9). Things were neither better nor worse in antiquity than they are today. We cannot escape the saeculum, but we can influence it. And though this influence may be modest, it is not insignificant.

"You cannot be a proper Christian by stepping out of the saeculum. This ascetic withdrawal reflects only spiritual pride, and the false belief that you can win salvation by your own efforts. All valid Christian vocations are those of ordinary life, or production and reproduction in the world. The crucial issue is how you live these vocations. The two spheres are collapsed into each other."[11]

Charles Taylor introduced the notion of the "Nova Effect," describing the phenomenon whereby what was once a privilege reserved for the social elite—namely, radical individualism—has become a widespread social reality in the twentieth century. What only someone like Henry VIII could do in the sixteenth century, anyone can now do with ease: divorce, abandon their faith and their Church—without scandal. Whereas such an act once caused a schism, today it merely elicits a shrug from the neighbors; it has become ordinary.

We now live in a cultural and religious dynamic in which an almost infinite variety of spiritual, religious, or ideological options are simultaneously accessible and coexist on equal footing. The formerly cohesive worldview framework has disintegrated, and in its place, everyone constructs their own personal, tailor-made belief system. Society encourages individuals to „find their own path," to pursue personal fulfillment, and to „mind their own business."[12] Everyone is now building a "do-it-yourself" worldview—partly Christian, partly Eastern, partly psychological, and so forth. This has given rise to a new kind of pluralism, a societal imperative that makes it impossible to be "believing by default." One is expected to acknowledge that other faiths are just as legitimate and true as one's own—otherwise, one becomes socially incompatible. You must accept that others believe differently, and that their convictions are equally valid. Faith has thus become relativized and subjected to the

11 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 266.

12 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.

prevailing norms of society. This fosters continuous self-reflection and spiritual doubt. Alongside this development, new spiritual forms have emerged: New Age ideologies, mindfulness movements, esotericism, alternative communities, Pentecostalism and experience-driven Christian denominations, and an ever-proliferating number of independent sects and groups.

In such a cultural environment, Christianity—which approaches the human person entirely through the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—appears less and less as a desirable or attractive option. This is because it connects man to God fundamentally through suffering and inner transformation by faith. This difficulty is further compounded by the fact that many churches have become deeply entrenched—dogmatically and pastorally—in what may be called a "hyper-Augustinian juridical-penal framework."[13] With all due reverence toward the great Saint, such a paradigm has become off-putting and alienating for modern people. It conveys a vision of salvation shaped predominantly by guilt, judgment, and legal categories—rather than by grace, transformation, and communion.

"Christianity is inconceivable without sacrifice, without the possibility of some positive meaning to suffering. The Crucifixion cannot be sidelined as merely a regrettable by-product of a valuable career of teaching."[14]

According to the traditional doctrine, the fallen and damnable mass of humanity (*massa damnata*)[15] must pay a heavy price—yet this price has been exacted by God upon His own Son. In the view of Saint Augustine, even with Christ's sacrifice, the vast majority of humanity is still destined for damnation. A Christian message built upon this teaching can easily alienate many,[16] as it often appears cruel, insensitive, and lacking in compassion. Fortunately, as Old Catholics—whose theological lineage is more closely aligned with Eastern Orthodoxy—we are not dogmatically bound to the doctrine of original sin. It is worth considering that, according to contemporary scholarship, the doctrine of original sin did not originate with Augustine himself, but likely infiltrated the wider Church's

13 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 651.

14 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 651.

15 Csizmár, *Szent Ágoston tanítása az eleve elrendelésről*, 103.

16 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 652.

dogmatic tradition through the influence of the Encratite movement.

"Both the doctrine and the practice seem to have first appeared within encratite groups, and the presence of such groups in Christian communities is attested as early as the start of the second century, if not the last decades of the first."[17]

The centuries-long debate surrounding the "Augustinian" doctrine of original sin may in fact be decisively reframed in light of its heretical Encratite origins.[18] It may be worthwhile, then, to shift the emphasis of our hamartiology so that sin is communicated not as a tragic, burdensome legal condition, but rather as a disorder to be healed—a spiritual disease requiring therapy and transformation. On this point, I refer the reader to my essays Deificari in otio and Therapia vulneris, in which I demonstrate that Saint Augustine experienced his own spiritual elevation and turning away from sin as a kind of interior healing process, a path of grace and transformation.

Traditional, community-based religious cultures have been severely weakened. Modern societies prioritize autonomous personhood; each individual defines their own worldview, morality, and way of life (Taylor's "buffered self"). Today, distrust in institutional religion continues to grow—fueled by mounting scandals, systemic rigidity, and alienating ecclesial structures. In many cases, people do not reject God—they reject the Church.[19] Phil Zuckerman, in his book Society without God, explores the realities of unbelief and secularization. He studied the "godless" societies of Sweden and Denmark through nearly 150 interviews with their citizens. Zuckerman identifies three main reasons for the religious decline in these nations: " a lazy church monopoly, secure societies, and working women"[20]

People still believe in some form or another, yet they no longer desire to belong to institutional religion. The Church is often perceived as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and inattentive to individual needs. Consequently, personal spirituality has taken precedence, frequently becoming entirely detached from any formal confession of the Christian faith.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the kind of ecclesial structure we

17 Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin*, 196.

18 Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin*, 197.

19 Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 10.

20 Zuckerman, *Society without God*, 117.

are building. Alongside Saint Paul's traditionally hierarchical vision of the Church (cf. 1 Cor 16:16), we must also consider the profoundly biblical, Johannine image of a horizontal ecclesiology—one that resonates more deeply with the contemporary human condition and requires no theological compromise: "I am the vine; you are the branches" (Jn 15:5).

Western Christianity often presents the faith as an intellectual and dogmatically articulated moral system, rather than as a personal relationship with God or a spiritual journey. The spiritual dimension of seeking is obscured behind legal and theological formulas, which hinder authentic connection. Thus, although the modern person bears what Charles Taylor describes as a "nova effect"—a spiritual longing—they rarely encounter a transformative experience within Christian churches. Another disadvantage of dogmatic language is its alienating effect regarding the sacraments. The mysteries of faith often fail to resonate with the psychological and existential vocabulary of our age. For many—especially the young—the Christian message appears simply "unintelligible." It may be time to consider the intentional development of a theological "low church" language, one designed for use among the faithful, which reflects the contemporary vernacular. This is not a matter of compromising doctrine, but of ensuring that the Christian message remains accessible and does not drift further from lived human reality.

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