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Beyond Settling Down

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Stability is not a word which is in common usage among young adults who, having graduated from the University, have often not settled down in a particular place. Often it is something which people ask of us, or which we long for, but which is simply not part of our current reality. Of course, there are pressures which work both for and against seeking stability, but oftentimes young adults feel cut off from the seemingly stable societies which surround them, although these too are less stable than they were a century ago.

It's easy to list some of the pressures which keep people from 'settling down' – entry-level jobs or volunteer positions are usually intended to be inhabited for one or two years. Educational degrees keep one moving from place to place proving the varieties of areas in which one needs to demonstrate competency. Our culture itself is becoming more fluid and less rooted: family and friends are scattered around the country or even the world, but are joined by cellular networks and video conferencing, so there is much less of an impetus for settling in a particular place. Furthermore, many of our former regional cultures are dissolving their differences into one undifferentiated whole, leading to a society in which most places are rather interchangeable. With the abundance of cheap travel and communication, it is easier and easier to travel continually, and we want to experience it all.

Of course, there are also pressures which encourage settling down. There are those pressures which push towards settling down for its own sake: often from family or friends who want one to settle near them. There are also other pressures which, if acceded to would push one towards settling down, such as the many pressures to marry and have children.

Over the last decade, I have been involved in a variety of conversations with other young adults regarding their place in contemporary society. I lived for a year in an intentional community which is located in central Washington State, and at which the majority of people are in some state of transition. I was also involved with the North American Young Adult Consultation (NAYC) of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and was a delegate to both the LWF's World Youth Consultation and the LWF Assembly in 2003. I worked with graduate students at Saint John's School of Theology in Collegeville, Minnesota, and managed a residency program in Salt Lake City, Utah.

In the course of these many experiences, I have heard other young adults searching for a sense of stability in their current situations. Many are involved in academic life or work which is valuable, but which resists settling down in the traditional ways, at least for now. This work is important for both their further lives: they are working, gaining experience, reflecting on that experience in advanced degrees or training, or working with the poor, volunteering with NGOs, or undertaking parish work. All of these choices necessitate a certain instability of location.

My own life also serves as an example of the search for stability and its difficulty: After graduate school, I sought stability in the monastery but after three years determined that my calling was not to that life. Now I live thousands of miles from friends and family because my life and work root me in Salt Lake City, at least for now. Utah is the seventh province (six US states and one German *Bundesstaat*) I have lived in since I left my parents' house. No two members of my immediate family live in the same state, and though I live in Salt Lake City, the preponderance of my important relationships is with people who live many hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away. With the exception of my three years in the monastery, it would be difficult to find a time since 1997 that I have lived at the same address for more than one year. Because we are incarnate people, such instability can also lead to an instability of heart. Out of my many conversations with other young adults, I have heard a deep longing for stability amidst the, often necessary, instability of life. This is a longing I know well, for it also lives in my heart.

In considering this often-repeated longing, I have become deeply convinced that there must be a certain stability which can transcend 'settling down' in the traditional ways. Stability must be possible, albeit more difficult, for those who must be transient. In this paper I will consider what the monastic tradition and the careful reflection which has come out of the monastic and oblate tradition,

and explore what such careful thinking on stability can offer to such as my many acquaintances across the country. Because many of the people I have met are deeply committed to the Church, they have often described their longing for stability in terms of a disconnect from to the traditional parish structure. Because of this, I will also consider how this stability beyond settling down might relate to the Church's structures and outreach to young adults.

The early monastic tradition valued stability very highly; to some extent the monk was marked by the cell more than the habit, and the stability of the cell was the crucible in which the monk was expected to grow in love of God. This stability has grown into a variety of forms which are more and less obviously linked to the early ideal of stability in the cell. This development has taken three major directions which are represented in the literature: Cistercian, Benedictine, and Oblate. Of these, the largest category of reflectors belongs to the Cistercian tradition, the tradition of the three which has most emphasized local stability. Not surprisingly, there is also somewhat of a body of literature considering what stability might mean for the most mobile of the three: oblates. Representatives of the Benedictine tradition proper provide a different understanding of stability than is found in either the Cistercian or the Oblate tradition, and one which has much to say to people beyond its bounds.

Cistercian, Benedictine, and Oblate Reflections on Stability

The general thrust of most Cistercian considerations of stability is an emphasis on perseverance in the order. This will usually mean perseverance in one place, but this is not always the case. Cistercian tradition allows for monks to be moved from one house to another as is required by the needs of the order. Augustine Roberts, in a pair of articles, outlines the juridical aspects of this vow from a Cistercian understanding.[1] These articles, while they overlap somewhat in the information contained, do compliment each other. The earlier article, which appeared in *Cistercian Studies*, is somewhat more simple in its articulation, but is also more beautiful and homiletic in its elocution, and so it provides a needed counterpoint to the

more juridical tone of the later article, which seeks to articulate stability by means of the ways in which one can offend against stability. The earlier article also provides more biblical exegesis, which is very helpful.

The notion of stability which Roberts posits is of stability within the order and stability of heart within the monastic way of life[2]. He draws a sharp distinction between enclosure and stability; although he does not wish to do away with enclosure, he sees enclosure not as stability, but as a servant of it which encourages stability of heart. He writes,

> According to St. Benedict, remaining in the enclosure of the monastery is something different from stability. The former refers to physical separation from the world and pertains rather to conversion of life, whereas *Benedictine stability refers to being a permanent member of the group of persons who live within that enclosure.* Stability is something *personal.* It is interpersonal communion or, to put it better, it is perseverance in this communion, that is to say, in the dynamism of renunciation and conversion to the love of Christ that constitutes the heart of the monastic community.[3]

Robert's article, written from a Cistercian perspective, and therefore assuming enclosure, both accepts that tradition and points beyond it to the true meaning of stability. In doing so, it defines stability in a remarkably similar way to that offered those whose practice of it appears most different.

Another Cistercian considering the meaning of monastic stability, one who attempts to provide a definition more grounded in its spiritual aspects, is Michael Casey. In this article, he begins with the discussion on this vow found in the *Constitutions and Statues of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (1990).* His seven headings, which he distills from this document, speak first to the practices of stability, and then of the fruits which grow from stability well kept. These practices are: Aggregation

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[1]   Augustine Roberts. "The Meaning of the Vow of Stability." *Cistercian Studies* 7 (1972). pp.256-269. Also: "Cenobitic Stability." in *Centered on Christ: An Introduction to Monastic Profession.* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1979, 1993), 106-131.

[2]   He also refers to this as stability in the community (p. 258 of the *Cistercian Studies* article), but then later clarifies this language by preferring to discuss stability in terms of "Love of the Order" in the article in *Centered on Christ* (124-131). This love of the order, while not specifically stability in itself, (particularly not *stabilitas cordis,* or stability of heart), is a necessary condition for growing in stability, through "loving the monastery and the order as they are, not only as they should be" (127, italics removed).

[3]   Roberts. *Cistercian Studies.* 257-258. (italics his)

obsculta

to the Local Community, Localization, Commitment to Practice, and Perseverance in Practice. Their fruits are Stability of Mind, Trust in Providence, and Love of the Brothers[4]. It is not accidental that the progression is to Love – the entire Benedictine rule has as its goal a movement towards an expanded heart (Prol 49) which overflows with love for God, the community and the Abbot/ess (Ch 72).

As was pointed out earlier, while the Benedictine and Cistercian traditions of stability are somewhat different —Benedictines are stable within a community, rather than within the order, and generally have somewhat more permeable cloisters on a daily basis than members of Cistercian houses— they speak similarly about the goal of stability and both differentiate stability itself from the practices which seek to foster it.

Ambrose Wathen adds the notion that stability is necessarily linked to obedience in an article in *Monastic Studies* entitled "Conversation and Stability in the Rule of Benedict". He states, "stability has the idea of perseverance, determination and firmness of intention; but not merely of intention, also of action, i.e. obedience to regulations"[5]. To link stability with obedience is to underline the fact that stability does not just have to do with locality, but with persons, that is, with being in community come what may. "Stability is localized in this particular monastery. And by promising it the monk becomes a member of the community, i.e. is inserted into community life."[6]

This personal emphasis – that one is inserted into a community and its life – is underlined in an article by Adalbert de Vogüé entitled "How Ought Novices To Be Formed in Stability Today." Although he gives little advice on the question which forms the title of this article, one piece of advice which he does give is,

> To conclude, it is without a doubt good to keep before out eyes and to put before the novices' eyes the great examples of stability with which the monastic history is filled. From his fortieth to his ninetieth year, half a century, John of Lycopolis remains in his recluse's cell. Dwelling on the Nile's bank, Sara passes sixty years without glancing

at the river out of curiosity. A celebrated anecdote, reported a little differently by Sulpicius Severus and Cassian, claims that two brothers remained forty years with out the sun's seeing the one eating or the other getting angry.[7]

While at first glance de Vogüé seems to be confusing stability and enclosure, on closer scrutiny it is clear that he is speaking of what he calls "stability in virtue"[8] — monastic life which has borne fruit in stability of heart, which is, in turn, borne witness to in practice. Furthermore, by his advice to keep the great monastic saints before the eyes of newcomers and members of the community, he is recommending a practice which serves to keep the community stable in its relationship to the wider monastic community through time. One must not only come to live with and love the community present, but also with those who have gone before, and those who will come to seek entrance to the community after oneself. Stability means coming to deal with not only present reality, but the roots of that present as found in history, and the future which will inevitably follow, for one has promised to remain.

Oblates' and others who do not live a monastic life in community have also contributed to the reflections on stability, which we will consider. This vision of stability can be particularly helpful for our consideration of stability for those who have not joined religious communities and are unlikely to do so. One oblate, whose reflections on stability are helpful to our present discussion, is Gerald Schlabach, an oblate of St. Andrew's Abbey in Cleveland, Ohio. Schlabach claims that, "to live *any* kind of serious Christian life in our age may require the subtle but stubborn form of countercultural resistance that Benedictines know as stability."[9] Again, at first glance, his argument seems to be calling for a form of enclosure, although he uses the language of "staying put". However, he is not really asking if Christians ought to stop moving, but rather if they might be caught in motion which is frenetic and frenzied, rather than considered and necessary. He asks,

[4]   Michael Casey. "The Value of Stability" *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 31.3 (1996), 289.
[5]   Ambrose Wathen. "Conversion and Stability in the Rule of Benedict." *Monastic Studies* 11. (1975), 35.
[6]   *Ibid.*

[7]   Adalbert de Vogüé. "How Ought Novices To Be Formed in Stability Today?" *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 36.3 (2001), 314-315.
[8]   *Ibid.*
[9]   Gerald W. Schlabach. "Stability Amid Mobility: The Oblate's Challenge and Witness." *American Benedictine Review* 52.1 (March 2001), 5.

In an obsessively mobile society, one wonders whether Christians can be the body of Christ together at all if we will not *slow down, stay longer* even if we cannot stay put indefinitely, and take something like a *vow of stability*. Slow down, because what many call postmodernism may really be hypermodernism. Stay longer, because there is no way to discern God's will together without commitment to sit long together in the first place. A vow of stability, because it is no use discerning appropriate ways to be Christian disciples in our age if we do not embody them through time, testing, and the patience with one another that transform good ideas and intentions into communal practices.[10]

Notice that the emphasis, again, is on community: being formed into the Body of Christ through common life in discernment. By committing oneself to a place, one is both in truth and in effect committing oneself to the people who are in that place. Should they have some measure of stability, then there comes to be a real commitment to a community which can grow and seek to become more fully Christ's body together.

Another writer who considers what stability might have to say to those who do not make formal vows in a monastic community is Paul Wilkes in his article "Stability – a sense of where you are"[11] This article does not have the emphasis on commitment to places and people in quite the same way as does that from Schlabach, instead, it is focused more on what stability might have to do with the mobile individual. Certainly this has an impact on how those individuals would relate to the communities in which they live, however, he places much more emphasis on what stability might mean for the individual internally, rather than as lived out by a group of people. He writes:

What is more important than walls and signs forbidding entry – as we see in monasteries – is the interior cloister. For this is the place where God truly dwells, where we dwell in unity with him – even though we may fight such terrifying intimacy. Finding a perfect geographical space is often not possible. Inner space awaits our bidding. The interior cloister sets our soul on solid ground so that we might not frantically thrash about, diffusing our energies, and fail to see the graces that abound for the soul wholly present. At times, our path or such graces are often obscure. But the interior cloister, that place of solitude and silence, summons us to enter into this holiest of holy places when God awaits us.[12]

This vision, while lovely and true if nuanced properly, could also lead to an unhealthy *apatheia* which is not the necessary detachment from the sinful attachments to fleeting wealth, health, and comforts, but the sinful fleeing from others to seek peace in oneself apart from others — a form of narcissism which disguises itself as a search for God. This is not what Wilkes is suggesting, of course, but his emphasis on the interior and the personal may be heard in this way by our individualist, narcissistic society. The interior cloister that he describes ought be sought with others in common life, as is suggested by Schlabach. This balance is taken up by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his celebrated book *Life Together*. He admonishes communities that they can only love each other if that love flows out of a love of God in Christ; if the community is bound only in the fallible love of humans for each other, then it will —and should— dissolve.[13]

One interesting theological question which arises in several of the articles written on this topic is the question of the stability of Israel as a wandering people. In an address to the *Monastic Institute of Federation of Americas 1973*, Aelred Kavanagh addresses the stability of the wandering Israelites in terms of

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10 *Ibid.*, 6.
11 Paul Wilkes. "Stability – A Sense of Where You Are" *Benedictines* 54.1 (2001: Spring/Summer), 22-35.

12 *Ibid.*, 27.
13 This is one of Bonhoeffer's key themes, to which he often returns. Here is one very clear statement to this effect: "Perhaps the contrast between spiritual and human reality can be made most clear in the following observation: Within the spiritual community there is never, or in any way, any 'immediate' relationship of one to another, whereas human community expresses a profound, elemental, human desire for community, for immediate contact with other human souls, just as in the flesh there is the urge for physical merger with other flesh … Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them. As only Christ can speak to me in such a way that I may be saved, so others too, can be saved only by Christ himself. This means that I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love." Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together*. trans. John W. Doberstein.(New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954). This does not mean that communities will not have genuine human love within them, but it does mean that this cannot be the driving force behind them, or they will soon collapse.

obsculta

fidelity.[14] Stability for the nomads is stability of trust —that is, faith— in the God who "brought [them] out of the land of Egypt with such great power and with so strong a hand."[15] Kavanagh combines this with a consideration of the *conversatio* (which he depicts as growth) of these nomadic peoples, to describe "a process of development which is grounded in a fidelity which is not sterile but which contains within itself the seeds of growth."[16] As a people of nomads, their stability is not found in worship in one place, as it would for the Baals, but in fidelity to the God who is faithful to the people.

This biblical theme is picked up and expanded in the Gospel of John. The *Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist*, an Episcopalian monastic order located in Cambridge, Massachusetts and in Cowley, England, stresses this theme of John's Gospel.

> The beloved disciple did not hide from the suffering of Christ at Golgotha but took his stand there with Mary. By being steadfast together at the cross, enduring all that others found unbearable, they remained in Jesus' love. If we abide in that perfect love shown on the cross we will receive the grace to face together all that we are tempted to run from in fear. Christ's gift of enduring love will be at the heart of our life as a community, as it was in the new family which he called into being from the cross when he gave Mary and John to one another as mother and son.[17]

The abiding love of Christ, in which he is faithful to the Father's call to bear the weight of human sin through the kenotic acceptance of death on the cross, becomes the gift of faith which makes our faithfulness possible. In the paradox of faith, we cannot have faith without being first steadfast in the one who calls himself the vine and us his branches, yet it is through our faith in him that we are given the gift of steadfastness which allows us to abide in him. At our baptism, which the Church has always likened to the crossing of the Red Sea, we are not only joined to Christ, but also to the People of God journeying like the Israelites in the desert with all the Christians baptized before us. Abiding in Christ, then, is abiding in the people whom Christ has also called, to continue to faithfully respond to the call to remain stable in Christ, and to grow in fidelity to him.

Stability for Today's Young Adults

I began this consideration by outlining the problem of articulating what Christian stability might look like among young adults who are not able to settle down in the traditional ways. In light of what we have seen so far, then, it remains to set out how the monastic traditions of reflection on stability can speak to such a need. In order to consider this, I will consider four stabilities which may form the stability of a given person: Stability of place, of community, of faith, and of heart.

Stability of place is certainly what most people would immediately think of, but it is often not available to many young adults for many of the reasons that listed in the introduction. However, it is something which can be appropriated to some extent. As Schlabach points out, one who cannot stay forever can often stay longer, and move slower. It is sometimes possible to choose where one will go when such a transition is required, and one may be able to choose a place where one already has lived, or has significant connections. One author who describes this kind of homecoming is Kathleen Norris, who writes of coming to know herself and her family by moving somewhere she had never lived, but where her family had deep roots: the Dakotas.[18] Because humans are embodied persons, places have deep impact on us, and the local cultures which persist can only be known slowly, by living in them over time. To live somewhere over time is both to be formed by the place, and to form it to oneself.

A more available form of stability which we might seek is stability in community. As the world becomes not only more mobile but more interconnected, it becomes possible to remain connected to people on a regular basis over great distance. Several years ago I was living in a remote community in the Pacific Northwest, one of my college housemates was living in Columbia, South Carolina, and the other in Chicago. Despite the

[14] Aelred Kavanagh. "Fidelity and Growth: The Dynamics of Israelite Monotheism" abstracted in "Monastic Institute of Federation of Americas 1973" by Ambrose Wathen. *American Benedictine Review* 25. 1974. 246-286.

[15] Exodus 32:11 NAB

[16] Kavanagh, 273.

[17] *The Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist.* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997.), 5.

[18] Kathleen Norris. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography.* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993).

fact that I had no access to email or phones, we maintained contact by writing letters which would circulate among the three of us. Now that I have returned to life "on the grid" we try to talk often, and all gather together for Thanksgiving each year. This annual celebration has become a grounding point for me on a par with my family gathering for Christmas. It is in these settings that we are able to continue old discussions (and arguments) and to know ourselves through those we know best. It is through community that we often see ourselves reflected, both our strengths and our faults – and not being present to those we know is a form of hiding from ourselves. Because of this, many chose their location not based on which job will give them the higher salary, or better benefits, but because there were people important to them in one place or another. This seems like it should be an obvious choice, but many of us come from professional families which assume that location is determined by our vocations as teachers, pastors, or physicians, rather than those as friend, child or sibling.

Something ought be said about relationships and stability. In a culture in which relationships are expected to flower and fall, often in quick succession, and with the expectation of little responsibility, stability calls people to take their commitments seriously. Stability in the monastic tradition is closely related to obedience, which is traditional language for marriage as well; husbands and wives are expected to be obedient to each other. Gerald Schlabach states this explicitly when he states,

> my wife, to whom I have made my most stable vow, *is* my abbess. . . . after eighteen years of a marriage that we dedicated to Christ's service, my wife is the one person in the world who is best positioned to confront my illusions, test my hopes, call me to hospitality, remind me to 'regard all the utensils and goods of [our household] as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected' (RB 31.10-11), and generally, gently, nudge my life unto the Lord. To imagine any stability that neglects obedience to this relationship would invite self-deception, that most tenacious obstacle to conversion of life.[19]

The family is the most stable portion of many people's lives. It is a shame that this is not true for all people, but much of this instability comes directly from not being willing to be obedient to each other, wives to husbands, husbands to wives, children to parents, and parents to children. Stability requires letting go of some of my pet projects and desires for the sake of the other; it requires love.

The advent of modern communication also changes the ways in which we can remain stable in relationships, in both positive and negative ways. The difference between my communication with my college housemates now and when we were writing letters is more than just the form. Though none of us is in the same place we were in 2002, we are just as far away as we were (Now: Utah, Washington State, Iowa). Despite our distance, we are in communication more often now than before. Our interactions are both regular and often concerned with the little things of life as email, text messages and Facebook tend to encourage. This kind of interaction is the stuff our lives are made of. We know the little things which together form the big ones. On the other hand, when we were writing our round-robin letters, the longer, reflective form encouraged deeper thinking and conversation not unlike the late evenings over a drink that had frequently occurred in our senior year living room. Our Thanksgiving gatherings and the less-frequent extended phone calls can also fill this need, although it may be a while between such conversations. It seems to me that both of these forms of communication are what happen when we live with others and that both are necessary for real friendship. As we persevere in friendship, both little, daily knowledge and more sustained reflection contribute to the self-gift which is itself the path to the good zeal practiced in love.

Faith is another area in which stability is a necessary, if difficult, virtue. This does not mean that our faith ought never change, or that we may not grow in our understanding or our trust of God. However, it does mean that radical departures which do not grow out of our faith ought be examined. It also calls us to stability in a faith community – both on the local level and as one travels. Generally speaking, one's roots in a particular rite or church community are not something which ought to be shed easily. Even when one travels there is continuity and stability with those with whom one is in communion. This is often more complex than the fairly simple rules of which church body is in communion with which other. Culture certainly plays a role. Stability in the community of faith means that we deals with

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19 Schlabach, 18-19.

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our traditions in both their strengths and weaknesses, and don't angrily storm out when we does not get our way. Although someone minght be called to join another communion for one reason or another, and the community which one is leaving ought support that when it is a real vocation, leaving out of anger or spite ought be seriously questioned. Stability means that we are often stuck with people who are difficult, even when the grass may seem greener in another ecclesial paddock. This is as true of parishes as it is of churches. The parish where I happen to be might not be the most friendly, or liturgical, or even orthodox – but stability would call me to careful discernment of how I might help that parish, and how I might be being called to grow by them.

Stability in faith also means that we must persevere in the practices of our faith, both liturgical (like attendance at the services of the church and private prayer) and everyday (like the call to hospitality or good stewardship of resources). These practices, including taking care with our time, with our belongings and with each other help us become, over time, more fully the people we were created to be and in small ways aid the coming of the reign of God.[20]

Of course, the goal of all stability, both monastic and secular, is stability of heart. We come to know and are known by a particular community in a particular place or within a particular ecclesial expression and so come to be formed more fully into children of God. Stability of heart which grows in us through our other forms of stability is stability in the love of God which allows us to journey without capsizing, to trust in that love which sustains us even when it may seem impossible. This stability is difficult to describe fully, as it relates differently in each situation, but is the confidence of one who has been tested, sustained by God through the community, through gifts of the Spirit, and through prayer, and has come to trust that God will provide what is needed. It ends up looking very much like the faith to which Jesus continually calls his disciples, which he describes as the opposite of fear (cf. Mt 8:28, 14:3, Mk 4:40).

For those of us who seem very instable in our society, particularly those young adults who are not going through the process that used to be expected, and which is known as settling down, stability is still an important piece of a Christian life, though it may need more work than in previous generations. Stability found through stable community, through stability of faith, perhaps through stability of place, and leading to true stability of heart can be sought, even though its forms have changed in our more mobile, technological society. This is not to say that such stability will necessarily come easily, or that our society is well equipped to promote stability. On the contrary, our society promotes instability and fluidity, always looking for the next big thing. Stability may call us to counter-cultural decisions, such as not taking a promotion for the sake of remaining in a particular place or with particular people. Stability in faith certainly will call people to resist the contemporary drive to always seek something new, whether that is some new magic formula of prayer or meditation or spiritual practice, or some self-help plan which will give meaning and purpose to any life. Stability in community will call us to dispense with the assumptions of our society that people are easily replaced, that relationships ought to be disposable, and that one can be free from the responsibilities towards another which community or particular relationships impose. As we seek a stability of life which promotes a stability of heart, we trade much of our independence for love, and are called to follow in the way of the cross. It is appropriate that one of the early and perduring images of the monastic life lived well is martyrdom: bearing witness with one's life for the sake of others and for the sake of the Gospel. As we seek our own stability of heart, it will call us to allow ourselves to die in bigger and smaller ways for the Gospel, but we are freed to do so by of our hope that God will "bring us all together to eternal life" (RB 72:12).

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[20] While it is somewhat outside the scope of this paper, those interested in further consideration of such practices as should read: Dortothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher, 1998). There is also an associated series of book-length reflections on various practices of Christian life.