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## **Benedictine Communio: A Gift for the Church?**

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## BENEDICTINE COMMUNIO: A GIFT FOR THE CHURCH

Michael Leonard Hahn, O.S.B.

Benedictine monastic communities are often identified as “schools of communion.” Surprisingly, however, the word *communio* does not appear in the Rule of Benedict to describe life in community.<sup>1</sup> The concept of *communio* entails the full participation of all members and co-responsibility in community. The fellowship (*koinonia*) of the first Christian community (Acts 2:42) is an early example of *communio* in the church. And, while Benedict does not use the word *communio* itself, the meaning of *communio* is found throughout the Rule. Looking beyond the Benedictine context, many theologians have recognized the theological potential of *communio* for defining ecclesial relationships. The essential unity and equality among all the Christian faithful stems from Trinitarian *communio*. Accordingly, ecclesial relationships reflect the communal life of the Trinity when distinctions among the faithful do not entail subordination of one person under another. The popularity of so-called “communion ecclesiologies” has only grown more pervasive in theology since the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops declared communion ecclesiology to be the “central and fundamental idea” of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>2</sup> As Dennis Doyle explains, “communion ecclesiology represents an attempt to move beyond the merely juridical and institutional understandings by emphasizing the mystical, sacramental, and historical dimension of the Church. It focuses on relationships....It emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the Church universal and local churches.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> *Communio* occurs in chapters 38 and 63 with respect to Holy Communion. All other occurrences of *communio* are adjectival, i.e., “the common Rule of the monastery,” or “held in common,” using forms of the word *communis*. *Communio* is not used for “community,” which is instead termed *congregatio*.

<sup>2</sup> The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod, “The Church in the Word of God, Celebrates the Mysteries of Christ for the Salvation of the World,” II.C.1. An English translation of the final report is available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/08/world/text-of-final-report-adopted-by-synod-of-bishops-in-rome.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>3</sup> Dennis M. Doyle, *Communio Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 12.

*communio* is a compelling starting point for theologians who seek, for example, to preserve unity in diversity and diversity in unity, affirm the equal dignity of all the faithful, recognize the variety of charisms in the church, or develop collaborative structures for ecclesial organization and leadership.

More recently, however, several theologians have raised concerns that ecclesiologies based on the concept of *communio* tend to produce an overly idealized understanding of the church. For instance, Nicholas Healy argues that “communion ecclesiologies, whether conservative, liberal, or liberationist, exhaustive or not, avoid any substantive consideration of the sinfulness of the church.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, communion ecclesiologies, according to Healy, “result in a more or less idealized account of the church that is too readily open to ideological and theological distortion.”<sup>5</sup> In response, Healy discourages a “blueprint approach” to ecclesiology, which uncritically applies a concept such as *communio* to the actual life of the church. Similarly, Neil Ormerod warns that communion ecclesiologies, as a result of over-emphasizing the ideal and neglecting the concrete reality of the church, “tend to paper over tensions and conflicts, and when they arise, those who ‘cause’ them can be accused of ‘breaking *communio*’ with the church at large.”<sup>6</sup> Accounts of church life that emphasize the full participation, equality of membership, and shared responsibility without adequate attention to specific church structures and practices where this ideal is not fully realized, Ormerod contends, “can effectively mask the real power relations that exist within the church.”<sup>7</sup> To be sure, *communio* remains a potentially valuable source for theology. Yet, the concerns that Healy and Ormerod raise about its tendency to idealize ecclesial life must be considered if *communio* is to reflect the actual experience of the church. What assistance can Benedictine monastic communities as schools of communion provide?

An episode between the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and Mount Saint Benedict Monastery (Erie, Pennsylvania) provides a case study for considering *communio* anew in light of Healy and Ormerod's concerns.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, “Ecclesiology and Communion,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3 (2004) 274.

<sup>5</sup> Healy, “Ecclesiology and Communion,” 274.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Ormerod, “A (Non-*Communio*) Trinitarian Ecclesiology: Grounded in Grace, Lived in Faith, Hope, and Charity,” *Theological Studies* 76 (2015) 455.

<sup>7</sup> Ormerod, “A (Non-*Communio*) Trinitarian Ecclesiology,” 456.

In 2001, the Vatican congregation issued an order to Sister Christine Vladimiroff, O.S.B., then prioress of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, to forbid one of her members, Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., from participating in a conference of Women's Ordination Worldwide. From the beginning, Vladimiroff maintained that the essential question was not about women's ordination, but "about the Benedictine tradition that allows the community and prioress to make decisions with the members without outside interference."<sup>8</sup> The practice of authority and obedience in the context of Benedictine *communio*, Vladimiroff explained, stands in contrast to the Vatican's order. According to Vladimiroff, "We as Benedictines believe that our obedience.... is very relational.... There is a lot of prayer and talking it out.... We don't see obedience as a line-staff structure where somebody gives an order and then it's carried out."<sup>9</sup> Vladimiroff ultimately decided to refuse the Vatican congregation's order to forbid Chittister's participation at the conference. In a statement explaining her decision, Vladimiroff wrote, "My decision should in no way indicate a lack of communion with the Church. I am trying to remain faithful to the role of the 1500-year-old monastic tradition within the larger Church."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, this case study does not "paper over tensions or conflicts" or "mask the real power relations that exist within the church." As such, it provides fertile ground for considering *communio* that avoids an idealization of church life that Healy and Ormerod rightly warn against.

Thus, rather than beginning with a theoretical understanding of *communio* and then applying it to the life of the church, this essay begins with an actual experience of the church struggling to live *communio*. The first and second parts of this essay respectively will review the correspondence between the Vatican congregation and Vladimiroff. It will become clear that the Vatican's letter and Vladimiroff's response each emphasize different aspects of *communio*. Since Vladimiroff's response appeals to the Benedictine monastic tradition, the third section of this essay will consider features of the Benedictine practice

<sup>8</sup> Caryle Murphy, "Nuns Stand Up to Vatican on Obedience Issue," *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Murphy, "Nuns Stand Up to Vatican on Obedience Issue."

<sup>10</sup> Christine Vladimiroff, O.S.B., "Press Statement Regarding Deliberations with the Vatican," July 2001, obtained from Mount Saint Benedict Monastery. The text of this statement is also available online at: <http://womensordinationworldwide.org/dublin-2001/2014/2/2/statement-of-benedictine-prioress-sr-christine-vladimiroff>

of *communio* in the Rule of Benedict.<sup>11</sup> The purpose is not to give a full account of the Rule, but to cull insights from this particular tradition that can serve to inform the wider church's practice of *communio*. Thus the final section of this essay will propose a renewed understanding of authority and obedience grounded in the Benedictine practice of *communio*.

#### Letter from the Vatican

Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., a solemnly professed member of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery (Benedictine Sisters of Erie) since 1957, was invited to be a keynote speaker at the international conference of Women's Ordination Worldwide in Dublin, Ireland (29 June – 1 July, 2001). According to their website, Women's Ordination Worldwide was founded in 1996 and "is an ecumenical network of national and international groups whose primary mission is the admission of Roman Catholic women to all ordained ministries."<sup>12</sup> Chittister is a popular speaker and widely published author known for her advocacy of social justice issues, especially issues that affect women. Chittister also served as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in 1976.<sup>13</sup> While some hail Chittister as a modern prophet as a result of her consistent appeal for church reform, others see Chittister as a dissident. Needless to say, accepting an invitation to speak on the subject of women's ordination strengthens both impressions of Chittister.

In March, a few months before Chittister was scheduled to speak at the conference, Sister Christine Vladimiroff, O.S.B., then prioress of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, asked to see Chittister. Vladimiroff had received a letter from the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The letter was addressed to Vladimiroff and signed by Archbishop

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981). This translation will be used throughout the text unless otherwise noted.

<sup>12</sup> <http://womensordinationworldwide.org/>

<sup>13</sup> Vladimiroff served as president of LCWR in 2004. Chittister and Vladimiroff are the only two Benedictines to serve as president of LCWR.

Piergiorgio Silvano Nesti, then the secretary of the congregation.<sup>14</sup> The letter concerned Chittister's participation in the conference of Women's Ordination Worldwide; which Nesti wrote would only "cause scandal, further dissent, incite hatred towards the Apostolic See and the person of the Roman Pontiff and, indeed, even deceive the faithful and others into thinking that the definitive teaching of the church is open to alteration."<sup>15</sup> Vladimiroff shared the letter with Chittister. Asked about the contents of the letter, Chittister said, "The letter was clear. It ordered me not to go and threatened punishment if I did. There was no invitation for further discussion. No request for more information. No appeal to review my talk."<sup>16</sup>

The Vatican congregation never communicated with Chittister directly. Since the letter from the congregation was addressed to Vladimiroff, it was Vladimiroff who was "officially and explicitly directed...to forbid and prohibit Sr. Joan Chittister by way of a formal precept of obedience from participating in this gathering in Dublin."<sup>17</sup> According to Tom Roberts, quoting the letter to Vladimiroff from the Vatican, Vladimiroff was responsible for:

conveying to Chittister "the aforementioned serious concerns of this Dicastery and the grave ramifications, not excluding a just penalty, of sustained contempt for and rejection of the Church's authoritative teaching concerning the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood in the Catholic Church but also with actively preventing her from attending this conference."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Tom Roberts, *Joan Chittister: Her Journey from Certainty to Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 161. The initial letter from the Vatican as well as all subsequent correspondence between the Vatican and Vladimiroff is sealed in the monastery archive by order of Vladimiroff. My request to access the archives was declined by Sister Anne Wambach, O.S.B., the current prioress of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery. Wambach helpfully directed me to the above biography of Chittister by Roberts. Wambach confirmed that Roberts' account is an accurate portrayal of the correspondence between the Vatican and Vladimiroff. Vladimiroff's decision to keep her correspondence with the Vatican private is itself a source of controversy. Roberts explains that Vladimiroff and Chittister did not agree on how to respond (168). Vladimiroff engaged the Vatican and responded to canonical concerns privately. Chittister viewed Vladimiroff's response as a "capitulation" to the Vatican. Roberts is careful to avoid idealizing Benedictine community as he explains that "Vladimiroff's handling of the confrontation with the Vatican, her determination to keep correspondence secret, and the reaction against that by some members of the community bared other, deeper rifts over leadership style and the direction of the community. She was elected for a second time in 2002, but the turmoil in the community never abated" (177-178). Vladimiroff died in September 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Roberts, *Joan Chittister*, 161.

<sup>16</sup> Joan Chittister, interview by author, 30 March 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Roberts, *Joan Chittister*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts, *Joan Chittister*, 161.

It was not only Chittister who faced penalty if she persisted in her intention to participate in the conference. The letter also warned of "appropriate punishment" for Vladimiroff if she neglected to forbid Chittister's participation.<sup>19</sup>

Two magisterial texts were referenced in the letter to Vladimiroff. The Vatican claimed that Chittister's participation in the conference would be in opposition to *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (22 May 1994), the apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II on reserving priestly ordination to men alone. In this apostolic letter, John Paul maintains that "the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the magisterium in its more recent documents."<sup>20</sup> Thus far John Paul reaffirms the teaching of *Inter Insigniores* (15 October 1976) approved by Pope Paul VI. Yet, a new urgency is detected in John Paul's 1994 apostolic letter. He laments that "at the present time in some places [women's ordination] is nonetheless considered still open to debate."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, "in order that all doubt may be removed," John Paul explicitly declares, "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."<sup>22</sup> The second text referenced in the letter to Vladimiroff was *Ad tuendam fidem* (18 May 1998), another apostolic letter of John Paul issued *motu proprio*, which warns of "just punishment" for those who contradict a teaching that is to be "definitively held."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Roberts, *Joan Chittister*, 161.

<sup>20</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," 4, available online at: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html)

<sup>21</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," 4.

<sup>22</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," 4. That the judgment of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is to be "definitively held" became itself a source of controversy. On 28 October 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, added to the controversy by writing that the teaching of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* belongs to the deposit of the faith and, thus, requires "definitive assent." The text of Ratzinger's statement is available online at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curial/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19951028\\_dubium-ordinatio-sac\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curial/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19951028_dubium-ordinatio-sac_en.html). For more on John Paul II's appeal to the ordinary universal magisterium, including in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, see: Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Ordinary Universal Magisterium: Unresolved Questions," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 447-471.

<sup>23</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Ad tuendam fidem," available online at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_motu-proprio\\_30061998\\_ad-tuendam-fidem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_30061998_ad-tuendam-fidem.html). In an accompanying explanatory note, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarified that "the doctrine that priestly ordination is reserved only to men" is an example of a teaching which is to be "definitively held" because of its "connection with revelation by a logical necessity." For this text, see "Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio fidei*," 11, available online at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_1998\\_professio-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1998_professio-fidei_en.html). For a helpful analysis of both, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Ad tuendam fidem: An Emerging Pattern in Current Papal Teaching," *New Theology Review* 12 (1999) 43-51.

Notwithstanding the clear order to the contrary and warning of punishment, Chittister attended the conference in Dublin. On 30 June 2001, Chittister delivered the keynote address of the conference titled "Discipleship for a Priestly People in a Priestless Period."<sup>24</sup> When asked about her decision to attend the conference, Chittister said, "My decision didn't come from a rebellious soul. I'm perfectly happy to live a life of obedience, but when I'm told that I can't think, that I can't pursue questions, I can't do that."<sup>25</sup> After Chittister's participation at the conference, *National Catholic Reporter* sought a response from the Vatican congregation, which directed questions to the Vatican Press Office. In response, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, then the Vatican spokesman, said, "The Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life believed that the participation of the two female religious in the women's ordination conference would not be opportune without the permission of their superior generals. The congregation has not taken—in this case—disciplinary measures into consideration."<sup>26</sup> Thus, despite earlier warnings, Chittister was not disciplined for participating in the conference and neither was Vladimiroff. The Vatican did, however, subsequently order an apostolic visitation of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery.<sup>27</sup>

#### Vladimiroff's Response

The only publically available communication by Vladimiroff is a press statement, which explains her decision to refuse the Vatican's order to forbid Chittister's participation at the conference in Dublin. In the first part of the statement, Vladimiroff describes the process that

she followed to reach her decision. The process reflects the Benedictine practices of dialogue, counsel, and prayer. Not only did Vladimiroff initiate dialogue with Chittister, but she explains that she also sought dialogue with the Vatican, "I spent many hours discussing the issue with Sister Joan and traveled to Rome to dialogue about it with Vatican officials."<sup>28</sup> After listening to the concerns of both Chittister and the Vatican congregation, Vladimiroff explains how she pursued counsel from a wide variety of voices, "I sought the advice of bishops, religious leaders, canonists, other prioresses, and most importantly, my religious community, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie."<sup>29</sup> Finally, Vladimiroff writes, "I spent many hours in communal and personal prayer on this matter."<sup>30</sup>

Vladimiroff's statement explicitly expresses her intention to remain in full communion with the church while at the same time remaining faithful to the Benedictine tradition. In the most theologically significant part of the statement, Vladimiroff appeals to a Benedictine understanding of authority and obedience to justify her decision:

There is a fundamental difference in the understanding of obedience in the monastic tradition and that which is being used by the Vatican. Benedictine authority and obedience are achieved through dialogue between a member and her prioress in a spirit of co-responsibility, always in the context of community.<sup>31</sup>

According to Vladimiroff, the practice of authority and obedience within Benedictine monastic community is grounded in the relationship among members. Both Chittister and Vladimiroff consistently maintained that the actual conflict with the Vatican congregation was not about the question of women's ordination but rather the underlying question of how authority and obedience are understood and practiced. In an interview after the conference in Dublin, for instance, Chittister described the difference between monastic obedience and military

<sup>24</sup> The text of Chittister's keynote address is available online at: <http://womensordinationworldwide.org/dublin-2001/2014/2/2/joan-chittister-osb-discipleship-for-a-priestly-people-in-a-priestless-period>

<sup>25</sup> Joan Chittister, interview by author, 30 March 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Patty McCarty, "Nuns Firm under Fire," *National Catholic Reporter*, 13 July 2001. The other woman religious referenced in the statement is Myra Poole, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, who invited Chittister to speak at the conference.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, *Joan Chittister*, 174. The visitation occurred during December 2001 and was conducted by Archbishop Daniel Buechlein, O.S.B. and Mother Mary Clare Millea. No obvious consequence resulted from this visitation. At the time of the visitation, Bishop Donald Trautman, the local bishop of Erie, said, "The Benedictine sisters in Erie are faithful, active, prophetic people, and they have never been a problem to me during my twenty-two years of shepherding God's people here...Sr. Joan herself is a prophetic voice, and the church needs prophetic voices. I've never had to confront her on any doctrinal issues" (175). It should be noted that, contrary to the practice of ecclesial subsidiarity, the Vatican never consulted Bishop Trautman in their correspondence with Vladimiroff nor was Trautman consulted about the visitation. For more on ecclesial subsidiarity, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 126-129.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement."

<sup>29</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement."

<sup>30</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement."  
<sup>31</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement."

obedience, saying, "Benedictines see authority as relational."<sup>32</sup> In the same interview, Vladimiroff responded similarly, "We are looking at obedience from the position of people who live in [the Benedictine] tradition, and the Vatican is looking at it from a tradition of canon law. The norms are different."<sup>33</sup>

Closely related to the relational nature of authority and obedience is the practice of dialogue. In response to the Vatican congregation's claim that Chittister's involvement at the conference would be a source of scandal to the faithful, Vladimiroff writes, "I think the faithful can be scandalized when honest attempts to discuss questions of import to the church are forbidden."<sup>34</sup> Genuine dialogue, on the other hand, requires an honest attempt to listen to as many voices as possible. If wisdom resides throughout the community, then no one is exempt from the give-and-take of dialogue including those who are leaders and exercise authority. The role of the religious superior is not to silence opposing views but rather as Vladimiroff states, "to be a center of unity and a guide in the seeking of God."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the catholicity of the whole church is expressed when the diversity of its members finds a voice. As Vladimiroff concludes:

Benedictine communities of men and women were never intended to be part of the hierarchical or clerical status of the Church, but to stand apart from this structure and offer a different voice. Only if we do this can we live the gift that we are for the Church.<sup>36</sup>

In Vladimiroff's statement, we find key features of the Benedictine practice of *communio*, especially the relational and dialogical character of authority and obedience. To what extent this particular understanding of authority and obedience can be a gift to the whole church will be considered in the final section of this essay. But first we will look to the Rule in order to locate the foundations of Benedictine *communio*.

<sup>32</sup> McCarty, "Nuns Firm under Fire." For more on the relational notion of authority, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Power and Authority in the Church: Emerging Issues," in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 87-111.

<sup>33</sup> McCarty, "Nuns Firm under Fire."

<sup>34</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement."

<sup>35</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement." 127 of the 128 solemnly professed members of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery added their signature to Vladimiroff's statement.

<sup>36</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement."

## Communio in the Rule of Benedict

As we have already noted, Benedict does not use the word *communio* in the Rule to describe community life. Yet, the meaning of *communio*, particularly the participation of all members in community and the sharing of responsibility, is found throughout the Rule. This section on the Rule is intentionally selective. Even if space allowed for it, an analysis of the entire Rule is not necessary to show that *communio* informs the basic structure of Benedictine monastic community. My limited objective in this section is to demonstrate that Vladimiroff's response is consistent with the foundations of Benedictine *communio*. Already in the first three chapters of the Rule, we find support for Vladimiroff's claim that "Benedictine authority and obedience are achieved through dialogue between a member and her prioress in a spirit of co-responsibility, always in the context of community."<sup>37</sup> Thus, with the assistance of a recent commentary on the Rule by Sister Aquinata Böckmann, O.S.B., we will focus on the particular understanding of authority and obedience in the context of Benedictine *communio*. Böckmann's commentary is especially helpful as we attempt to present an understanding of *communio* that is informed by the concrete experience of life in community. This perspective, Böckmann notes, "has the advantage [of remaining] near the 'earth' and its reality."<sup>38</sup> In order to cull insights from the Benedictine tradition, therefore, we will review the first three chapters of the Rule, which embody the heart of Benedictine *communio* as a "listening community."

Chapter one of the Rule on "The Kinds of Monks" introduces a Benedictine understanding of obedience. Benedict quickly notes that the Rule is intended for cenobites, namely, "those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot" (RB 1.2). Cenobite, from the Greek roots *koinos bios*, connotes community life. Indeed, community life is the unique feature that distinguishes cenobites from the other types of monks. Anchorites are engaged

<sup>37</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement." There is a specific appeal to a relational account of authority in RB 71. For more the practice of mutual obedience and, in particular, how RB departs from RM, see Columba Stewart, O.S.B., *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 58-60. The horizontal aspect of authority and obedience is also the focus of Thomas Seville, "Considerations of Leadership in Light of the Rule of Benedict," in *Faithful Improvisation: Theological Reflections on Church Leadership*, ed. Loveday Alexander and Mike Highton (London: Church House Publishing, 2016), 111-126.

<sup>38</sup> Aquinata Böckmann, O.S.B., *A Listening Community: A Commentary on the Prologue and Chapters 1-3 of Benedict's Rule*, ed. Marianne Burkhard, O.S.B., trans. Matilda Handl, O.S.B. and Marianne Burkhard, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), viii-ix.

in “the single combat of the desert” (RB 1.5). Sarabaites disregard the authority of the community in favor of their own will and, consequently, are described by Benedict as “the most detestable kind of monks” (RB 1.6). Gyrovagues, who are “worse than sarabaites,” never commit to one community (RB 1.11). Böckmann explains that the core of the first chapter is the need for obedience, which is found in the description of sarabaites.<sup>39</sup>

The Rule describes sarabaites as, “Two or three together, or even alone, without a shepherd, they pen themselves up in their own sheepfolds, not the Lord’s. Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy” (RB 1.8). Sarabaites resist authority and obey no one but themselves. However, enclosed in their own sheepfold, they are not free. As Böckmann explains, “Here the emphasis is on the insight that no shepherd is leading the individual sarabaites out of their enclosure; they are locked into themselves. The door is not just closed—they are firmly locked in.”<sup>40</sup> Sarabaites, obeying only their own will, become enslaved by their desires. Cenobites, in contrast, obey proper authority. And, paradoxically, their obedience leads them to freedom. The key to this relationship between obedience and freedom, however, hinges on how authority is understood and exercised. As Böckmann emphasizes, “the cenobites are in the sheepfold of Christ and have placed themselves under Christ, the good shepherd. The abbot is his representative. Their fold is open...so that the shepherd can lead them to freedom.”<sup>41</sup> Benedictine obedience, therefore, is ultimately obedience to Christ. As a result, the abbot possesses no authority apart from Christ, which Böckmann views as Benedict’s way of chastening the abbot’s exercise of authority.<sup>42</sup> Freedom in Christ, we learn from the first chapter of the Rule, is the final touchstone for evaluating the exercise of authority in community as well as the ultimate aim of obedience.

<sup>39</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 107.

<sup>40</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 106.

<sup>41</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 107. For more on the role of abbot as representative of Christ, see Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary* (Kalamazoo: MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 68-74.

<sup>42</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 164. The final judgment of the abbot (RB 2.39-40) underscores this point, according to Böckmann, “Here we see the abbot as one among brothers who is on the way and as such is also the shepherd of his flock, who on the one hand represents Christ. On the other hand, his own fragility is both cause and reason for dealing mercifully with the weaknesses of the brothers.” The eschatological emphasis throughout the Rule, in addition to chastening the abbot’s authority, also reminds the community of their need for continual renewal.

Chapter two of the Rule on the “Qualities of the Abbot” is above all concerned with the unity of the community, which the abbot is responsible for safeguarding.<sup>43</sup> Every member of community, “whether slave or free,” Benedict writes, “are all one in Christ and share alike in bearing arms in the service of the one Lord, for God shows no partiality among persons” (RB 2.20). That the need for unity is brought to the fore in the Rule suggests that Benedict anticipates a variety of characters who will seek admission to the monastery; it would otherwise not be necessary to charge the abbot with preserving unity. It is equally significant that Benedict applies a pastoral image to illustrate the abbot’s responsibility. The opening and concluding verses describe the abbot as a shepherd who lovingly guides the flock entrusted to his care (RB 2.7-10 and 2.32-40). The goal is not rigid uniformity, but genuine unity, and this is not an easy task. One monk has described it thus, “shepherding the saints is like herding cats.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the challenge lies in the fact that a monastic community, similar to the church at large, is diverse in its membership. Diversity, however, is not necessarily a threat to unity. While it is the abbot’s responsibility to make certain this is true, the source of unity remains Christ. As Böckmann affirms, “Experience seems to have proved that without Christ the unity of a monastic community in its diversity is not attainable.”<sup>45</sup>

Not only do members come to the monastery from various backgrounds, but Benedict assigns special roles within the monastery to certain members. Yet, a consequence of the underlying unity among members is that positions of authority and rank in the community are of relative importance in contrast to the fundamental equality in Christ. Böckmann writes, “We are all slaves, servants of Christ. Each one has the same Lord, we are his. The diverse origins and distinctions do not constitute a basic difference among persons because all are given for service.”<sup>46</sup> Structures to ensure community organization may

<sup>43</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 119. For more on the role of the abbot in fostering communion and especially how RB departs from RM on horizontal relationships, see Armand Veilleux, “The Abbatial Office in Cenobitic Life,” *Monastic Studies* 6 (1968) 3-45.

<sup>44</sup> Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., “The Monks of St. John’s File in for Prayer” in *Swift, Lord, You Are Not* (Collegeville, MN: St. John’s University Press, 2003), 80.

<sup>45</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 144.  
<sup>46</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 145.

be necessary, but they are not absolute. They serve a higher purpose as Columba Stewart, O.S.B. describes:

Like all human community, this new order requires a degree of organization. Benedict recognizes that human beings need to know where they stand, both literally and figuratively. A community is not an undifferentiated mob, but like a family there are roles and places. With his system of rank, Benedict acknowledges that basic sociological principle without importing the oppressive versions of hierarchy and rank characteristic of secular societies. But he does not stop there: while normal interactions need the safety net of structure and protocol, there is a higher order to which all of us are called, that of charity, in which we transcend all superficial distinctions and relate in mutual recognition of the Christ in the other and in ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

Thus we discover in the Rule an early attempt in the life of the church to reconcile the mandate for unity with the reality of difference.

Chapter three of the Rule on “Summoning the Brothers for Counsel” reveals the collegial nature of authority and offers a vision of co-responsibility. Although Benedict admits that not all business of the monastery is of the same importance, Böckmann emphasizes that in this chapter “the abbot is admonished to do *everything* justly, *all* in the fear of God, and *everything* with counsel.”<sup>48</sup> To seek counsel, then, is not an isolated event but is characteristic of authentic leadership. Yet, Benedict’s instruction is not only about sharing the wisdom of the community when making decisions. It is also clearly about sharing power. As Böckmann rightly notes, “information means power which is now being shared.”<sup>49</sup> The instruction to seek counsel results from the radical assertion that every member of the community—including the abbot—serves under the Rule. Benedict writes, “Accordingly in every instance, all are to follow the teaching of the rule, and no one shall rashly deviate from it” (RB 3.7). The intention of this verse, according to Böckmann, “is certainly to limit the abbot’s power; he, too, is under

the authority of the Rule.”<sup>50</sup> To be clear, the abbot retains a unique position within the community and possesses real teaching authority. Yet, this chapter tames the abbot’s power by placing it under the authority of the Rule itself.<sup>51</sup> In other words, those who hold authority in the community are recognized as having authority, not because of their office or power, but because of their exemplary fidelity to Christ and the gospel.<sup>52</sup>

At the conclusion of this brief survey, we note the consistency between the first three chapters of the Rule and Vladimiroff’s response to the Vatican congregation. Vladimiroff’s statement emphasizes the relational and dialogical character of authority and obedience, the necessity for dialogue, and the importance of preserving unity. We have observed these same practices in the initial chapters of the Rule. In Benedict’s comparison of cenobites and sarabaites in chapter one, we find an understanding of authority and obedience that maintains freedom. The unity of community, as we learn in chapter two, is not threatened by its diversity nor does the diversity of the community diminish the essential equality of each member. Finally, in chapter three, we see the fundamentally relational character of authority and obedience through practices of shared information, shared accountability, and shared governance. Of course, some readers may object at this survey of the Rule as overlooking instances where Benedict emphasizes the sole authority of the abbot. In response, no interpretation of the Rule can deny the unique authority that Benedict gives the abbot. Similarly, that the Vatican congregation possesses authority over religious congregations is beyond dispute. The focus of this study is rather how authority ought to be exercised. Maximalist interpretations of the abbot’s authority must answer for the conditions that Benedict places on the exercise of authority as we have found in the first three chapters of the Rule. Taking into account these features of the Benedictine practice of *communio*, we will next consider how this particular understanding of authority and obedience can be a gift to the whole church.

<sup>50</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 192.

<sup>51</sup> A similar point is made in *Dei Verbum*, n. 10, concerning the relationship between the teaching office of bishops and the word of God. According to *Dei Verbum*, bishops serve under the word of God. The full text is available online at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

<sup>52</sup> Stewart, “Pedagogy in the Rule of Saint Benedict,” 12.

<sup>47</sup> Columba Stewart, O.S.B., “Pedagogy in the Rule of Saint Benedict,” 16. International Conference on Benedictine Education, Santiago, Chile, 2007. The text is available online at: <http://www.b-e-net.org/study/2007.shtml>

<sup>48</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Böckmann, *A Listening Community*, 181.



## A Renewed Understanding of Authority and Obedience

The English monk Sebastian Moore, O.S.B., recalls a story about Ambrogio Ratti to illustrate a familiar model of authority and obedience. Prior to his election as Pope Pius XI in 1922, Ratti worked in the papal library. One day, the current pope, Benedict XV, asked Ratti to serve as his representative in Poland. Ratti objected and offered ample reason for his demurral. When the pope asked Ratti when he could depart, Ratti responded that he would be ready to leave by the next morning. This story, Moore claims, illustrates an understanding of authority and obedience that has "dominated the Catholic mind."<sup>53</sup> Our case study of the Vatican congregation and Mount Saint Benedict Monastery suggests that this understanding is not completely absent in the church today. Thus, as we pursue a renewed understanding of authority and obedience in light of the Benedictine practice of *communio*, we cannot overlook critical questions about how power actually operates in the church. What constitutes the legitimate use of power? Must obedience entail the loss of power? Is genuine dialogue possible while real power differences exist? How can unity be preserved (or restored) when confronted with conflicts of power? As we consider these questions, we hope to avoid both "a false autonomy that rejects all authority and a 'blind obedience' that abandons all moral responsibility before the will of those in power."<sup>54</sup>

We begin with the premise that authority in the church is best understood as legitimate and trustworthy power. Authority is legitimate power when the one who exercises it has the right to do so. In our case study, Vladimiroff possesses legitimate power in her role as prioress as Archbishop Nesti does in his role as secretary of the Vatican congregation. But authority is also trustworthy power, and this second feature underscores the relational nature of authority beyond the power that comes with a particular office. This two-fold understanding of authority allows us to recognize, on the one hand, Vladimiroff's legitimate power as prioress and, on the other hand, why she decided that ordering a member to do something against their conscience is a violation of trust. The recent work of Sandra Schneiders helpfully distinguishes between the legitimate exercise

<sup>53</sup> Sebastian Moore, O.S.B., "Change in Focus" in *Authority in a Changing Church*, edited by John Dalrymple (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 2-3.

<sup>54</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., *Buying the Field*, vol. 3 of *Religious Life in a New Millennium* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 364.

of power and coercive power; simply put, "coercion, the exercise of 'power-over' another against their will, is not authority."<sup>55</sup> Schneiders instead offers a definition of authority that includes:

the right to be heard and heeded, a right that places a claim on the hearer for some kind of appropriate response. Authority in its primary and strongest sense is the rightly exercised intellectual, moral, or spiritual influence of one person on another person.<sup>56</sup>

When we respond to authority in the church, is it principally because of the person's office or position? Or is it, as Schneiders suggests, because our experience has taught us that this authority is trustworthy and, therefore, should influence our thoughts and actions? Benedictine monastic communities provide an environment where members form trusting relationships with each other (including with those who hold positions of authority) as they live, pray, and work together. Adopting this Benedictine practice, every effort should be made to foster trusting relationships within the larger church. Yet, since forming personal relationships with those in authority is not always possible, structures of accountability and venues for regular dialogue can help to ensure that power is trustworthy.

Our response to authority brings us to the question of obedience and, more specifically, whether obedience demands the surrender of power for the one who obeys. We begin by returning to Vladimiroff's claim that "there is a fundamental difference in the understanding of obedience in the monastic tradition and that which is being used by the Vatican."<sup>57</sup> Vladimiroff regarded the letter from Archbishop Nesti as a direct command to obey (and carry out) his decision that Chittister be forbidden to participate at the conference in Dublin. In contrast, the preliminary chapters of the Rule suggest that obedience is ultimately obedience to Christ and is, therefore, not opposed to individual freedom. Moreover, the Benedictine practice of obedience is mutual and always in the context of relationship. The relational dimension of obedience is at the heart of Judith Schaefer's proposal of "obedience-in-communion." Seeking to reimagine ecclesial relationships, Schaefer's

<sup>55</sup> Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 436. For more on the distinction between power-over/power-with, see Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 134.

<sup>56</sup> Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 436.

<sup>57</sup> Vladimiroff, "Press Statement."

model offers a valuable alternative to a narrow understanding of obedience as simply following orders (illustrated in the opening anecdote about Ambrogio Ratti). Ecclesial relationships sustained by “obedience-in-communion,” on the other hand, require that:

Each person within the relationship listens; each offers respect; each must work toward mutuality, and each gives freely of herself. The purpose of the vowed relationship and the goal for which it yearns is communion, a communion of heart and mind that seeks participation in God’s glory now and in the future.<sup>58</sup>

Although the focus of Schaefer’s work is vowed religious life, the model of “obedience-in-communion” contributes a more robust understanding of obedience to be practiced throughout the church. In place of passive and reductive understandings of obedience that are overly juridical or unidirectional, Schaefer defines obedience as “attentive discipleship,” which requires “faith-filled listening, discerning, and responding to the multiple calls of God present in one’s life.”<sup>59</sup> This understanding of obedience seems consistent with Vladimiroff’s decision to seek counsel, her ongoing effort of dialogue with both the Vatican congregation and Chittister, as well as her fidelity to the Benedictine tradition. Nevertheless, by not accepting the Vatican’s order in the end, was Vladimiroff disobedient? In considering this question, it is valuable to recall the view expressed by Cardinal Suenens shortly after the Second Vatican Council, “Obedience is not primarily a response to a command or to a discipline. It is born of a fundamental need of the human person who can only be fulfilled in finding his true place in relation to others.”<sup>60</sup> Is this not also the spirit of Benedict’s invitation in the initial chapters of the Rule?

The final test of any understanding of authority and obedience is how successfully it promotes unity in the church, that is, how successful it is at maintaining *communio*. In our case study, the Vatican’s letter emphasizes the juridical dimension of *communio* whereas the relational nature of *communio* undergirds Vladimiroff’s response. Not

<sup>58</sup> Judith Schaefer, O.P., *The Evolution of a Vow: Obedience as Decision Making in Communion* (Berlin: Lit, 2008), 163.

<sup>59</sup> Schaefer, *The Evolution of a Vow*, 164.

<sup>60</sup> Léon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *Corresponsibility in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 173.

an either/or proposition, the essential question concerns the ecclesial center of gravity, whether it is juridical, or theological and relational. Without a juridical element, maintaining *communio* can become lax or disorganized. Yet, is the juridical element the only starting-point for promoting *communio* or its most vital expression? For example, a monk’s relationship with his abbot includes a juridical dimension. The abbot possesses the power of jurisdiction and governs the temporal and spiritual affairs of the community. But the preeminent expression of *communio* remains the common worship of the community and the celebration of the Eucharist at the same altar. The juridical element is necessary, yet it is realized within, and subordinate to, a more robust sense of *communio*. As Francis Sullivan affirms, “Hierarchical authority is related to ecclesial communion as a means to an end: it exists in order to promote and maintain ecclesial communion.”<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, since *communio* entails the full participation of members and co-responsibility, Sullivan rightly proposes that “the exercise of hierarchical authority will meet the requirements of an ecclesiology of communion to the extent that it promotes the participation in the life of the Church of all its members, according to the gifts and capacities of each.”<sup>62</sup> What other requirements are necessary for the exercise of authority to foster *communio* in the church? Given our study of the Benedictine tradition, the following questions should be considered by those who exercise authority in the church:

- Is this decision my responsibility or is there a more local authority who should decide this question following the principle of subsidiarity?
- Is the decision-making process collegial? Who else shares responsibility for this decision? What counsel have I sought? Am I encouraging dialogue or silence?
- Have I discussed the issue with those who will be affected by this decision? Does this decision have the potential to empower those who obey it? Does it have the potential to enhance their freedom in Christ?
- Is the objective of this decision uniformity? Or will this decision allow for unity-in-difference?

<sup>61</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., “Authority in an Ecclesiology of Communion,” *New Theology Review* 10 (1997): 24.

<sup>62</sup> Sullivan, “Authority in an Ecclesiology of Communion,” 24.

- How will this decision be expressed, primarily pastorally or juridically?
- What structures of accountability are in place to ensure my power remains trustworthy?

### Conclusion

The case study of the Vatican congregation and Mount Saint Benedict Monastery reveals the benefit of beginning with the concrete reality of the church for ecclesiologies based on the concept of *communio*. By learning from our experience, we are less likely to construct an overly idealized account of church life, and a more critical appropriation of *communio* ecclesiology is possible. More specifically, the case study presents a particular understanding of authority and obedience from the Benedictine practice of *communio*. Vladimiroff hoped that this “different voice” would be a gift for the whole church.<sup>63</sup> Since Benedictine monastic communities exist within the church — indeed, in communion with it — this ancient approach toward authority and obedience is already part of the church’s treasury. But if a wider practice of authority and obedience as relational and dialogical empowers more of the faithful to participate in the life of the church — this indeed would be a gift.

<sup>63</sup> Vladimiroff, “Press Statement.”