

5-3-2019

Monks and the Church's Obligation for the Poor

Toan Phan

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, tphan001@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Phan, Toan. 2019. Monks and the Church's Obligation for the Poor. *Obsculta* 12, (1) : 28-36.

<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol12/iss1/4>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Toan Phan

Father John Tan Toan Van Phan is Cistercian monk from Vietnam at Our Lady of Divine Grace Abbey. He earned his Masters of Divinity at Pope Saint John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, Massachusetts. He is now in his first year at the School of Theology pursuing a Master of Theological Studies. This paper was originally intended for a course on Catholic Social Teaching. The main concerns of this paper focus on how monastic life responds to the Church's teaching on 'the option for the poor.

MONKS AND THE CHURCH'S OBLIGATION FOR THE POOR

Thought the monks have different and distinctive vocation in the life of the Church as the Fathers of the Council of the Vatican II declared in *Perfectae Caritatis*: “The principal duty of monks is to offer a service to the divine majesty at once humble and noble within the walls of the monastery, whether they dedicate themselves entirely to divine worship in the contemplative life or have legitimately undertaken some apostolate or work of Christian charity.”¹ However, as the member of the Body of the Church, the monks unite with the Church in her mission to serve humanity “whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will,”² since the human being is a reality of both soul *and* body. The Church wishes to serve with this single end: “that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life.”³ Thus, thought live within the walls of the monastery, monks have the same obligation as other religious brothers and sisters in the Church to serve all human beings.

In this article, I will display some aspects of contemplative life and show how contemplative life, in the light of the Rule of Saint Benedict, performs within the apostolate of Catholic Social Doctrine.

Historical Context

Monks, from a historical point of view, were the first religious to live in community. In the first half of the fourth century, the desert areas of northern Egypt were populated by colonies of hermits, whose sayings (*dicta*) were gathered together in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Some of these hermits gathered around themselves groups of disciples, and gave rise to the Pachomian cenobitical communities, characterized by a strong, and sometimes harsh, discipline. During the fourth century in Asia Minor, cenobitic life developed under the guiding influence of St. Basil, based on the notion of community as the Church and Body of Christ.⁴

1 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 9.

2 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 3.

3 John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 13.

4 See. Robert Lous Wilken, *The First Thousand Year, A Global History of Christianity*, Yale University Press, 2012, 99-105; William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 17-18.

In the west, monasticism appears with many variations in most countries during the fourth century.⁵ In the sixth century, Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c.547) established cenobitic monasteries for monks in the West. He wrote a rule for his monks and “his rule built upon previous monastic rules and reflects the wisdom and the experience of the tradition that he inherited.”⁶ From the eighth century on, however, Benedictine monasticism prevailed in the West and Saint Benedict is honored as the father of western monasticism.

Monks or nuns who follow the Rule of Saint Benedict live in solitude to seek God through prayer, listening to the word of God and work. Their motto is “*Ora et Labora*,” prayer and work. Their guide is that “nothing is to be preferred to the love of Christ.”⁷

A Vocation of Solidarity

Though living in solitude, they are not strangers to the life of the Church and the lives of their brothers and sisters. But through their solitude, they are in solidarity with the Church and with the world. For the Trappist monk and writer, Thomas Merton, “true solitude separates one man from the rest in order that he may freely develop the good that is his own and then fulfill his true destiny by putting himself at the service of everyone else.”⁸ Elsewhere he wrote, “Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God.”⁹

When we unite with God we also unite with others. The root of separation is sin. As is written in the Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church, “the consequences of sin, insofar as it is an act of separation from God, are alienation, that is, the separation of man not only from God but also from himself, from other men and from the

5 The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, see. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_profile_en.html.

6 Charles J. Healey, S. J., *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction to the Heritage*, Saint Paul, 1999, 85.

7 *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1981, 4:21.

8 Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1955, 248.

9 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplative*, A New Directions Book, 1961, 53.

world around him. ‘Man’s rupture with God leads tragically to divisions between brothers. In the description of the ‘first sin,’ the rupture with Yahweh simultaneously breaks the bond of friendship that had united the human family.’”¹⁰ In solitude, contemplatives reconcile this division by union with God through constant prayer and penance, by the oblation of self and the offering of a sacrifice of praise. In this way contemplative life becomes “a mysterious source of apostolic fruitfulness and blessing of the Christian community and for the whole world”¹¹ as Blessed John Paul wrote: “In solitude and silence, by listening to the word of God, participating in divine worship, personal asceticism, prayer, mortification and the communion of fraternal love, they direct the whole of their lives and all their activities to the contemplation of God. In this way they offer the ecclesial community a singular testimony of the Church’s love for her Lord, and they contribute, with hidden apostolic fruitfulness, to the growth of the People of God.”¹²

In their solitude contemplatives do not isolate themselves from others simply to seek their own quiet comfort but in order to be “open to creation and history, to the acknowledgement of adoration and constant praise of God in the world and its history, and the echo of a life of solidarity with one’s brothers and sisters, especially the poor and the suffering.”¹³ Thus the Church sees contemplative life as the heart of the world and of the Church: “If contemplatives are in a certain way in the heart of the world, still more so are they in the heart of the Church.”¹⁴ This is the core of solidarity.

In particular, contemplatives manifest their essence of solidarity to all by respecting human dignity and caring for the poor.

10 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*, USCCB Publishing, Washington, D.C., 2004, n. 116.

11 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 7.

12 John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 8.

13 *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life* [Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, 4-7 March 1980], n. 5.

14 *Venite Seorsum*, III, AAS 1969, 681; see. *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, n. 15.

Respecting Human Dignity

The scriptural basis of Catholic Social Doctrine emanates from that verse in Genesis which unequivocally states: “Man was created in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1: 26-27). This truth is the reason the Church works so hard to defend human dignity. For the Church, this message “contains a fundamental teaching with regard to the identity and the vocation of the human person.”¹⁵ Created in the image and likeness of God, human beings are endowed with dignity and the capability of knowing themselves, of loving others and of recognizing God’s creation. “Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. Further, he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.”¹⁶ Therefore, the Church rightly demands that all human beings must respect one another’s dignity.

In his Rule, Saint Benedict commands that the abbot must treat his brother monks, whether coming to the monastery from a life of freeman or slave, in the same way. He wrote: “The abbot should avoid all favoritism in the monastery.... A man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk, except for some other good reason.”¹⁷ Likewise, he teaches that welcoming guests to the monastery is a very important expression of charity and respect of human dignity. He sees all guests, whether they are rich or poor, good or bad, free or slave, as the embodiment of Christ. Therefore, they should be welcomed as Christ himself. He wrote: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, thus the abbot and his monks should welcome them with all the courtesy of love.”¹⁸

15 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*, USCCB Publishing, Washington, D.C., 2004, n. 36.

16 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*, USCCB Publishing, Washington, D.C., 2004, n. 108.

17 *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 2: 16, 18.

18 *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 55: 1,3.

Throughout history, even to today, monasteries of the Benedictine family (All those that follow the Rule of Saint Benedict) have been seen as “islands of hospitality.” Although monks and nuns do not engage in the social activities that promote human dignity in the way that their religious brothers and sisters of active orders and congregations do, by treating guests who come to their monasteries with profound respect whether their guests are rich or poor, good or bad, free or slave, they give powerful witness to the mission of the Church in acknowledging and protecting human dignity.

Care for the poor

Human person is a whole, body and soul. We need both material and spiritual “food” in order to become a healthy person. It follows that the mission of the Church toward the poor must satisfy both their material and spiritual needs. Compendium identifies the Church’s mission for the poor: “The Church’s love for the poor. . . concerns material poverty and also the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty. . . the Church teaches that one should assist one’s fellow man in his various needs and fills the human community with countless works of corporal and spiritual mercy. ‘Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God’”¹⁹

The Church’s fundamental option for the poor is most certainly not a foreign notion to monastics, for: “In solitude where they are devoted to prayer, contemplatives are never forgetful of their brothers and sisters. If they have withdrawn from frequent contact with them, it is not because they are seeking their own quiet comfort, but to share more universally in the fatigue, sufferings, and hopes of all humanity.”²⁰

An option for the poor is an obligation to all Jesus’ disciples for he loved the poor. In his Rule, Saint Benedict gives strong instruction to the monastery cellarer that “he must show every care and concern

19 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*, USCCB Publishing, Washington, D.C., 2004, n. 184.

20 (VS III) (*The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, n. 28).

for guests and the poor, knowing for certain that he will be held accountable for all of them on the day of judgment” (RB 31:9). For this reason, every monastery includes in its budgeting concerns provision for monetary gifts offered in a variety of ways: for the personal needs of individuals or families such as for rent, medicine, fuel and education; to poor monasteries or parishes in different parts of the world; to charitable organizations such as a local food pantry or group homes.

The real help of contemplative communities, however, is their privilege to share with others from a store of spiritual food. Contemplative life has no soup kitchens to satisfy the hungry but they are themselves “soup kitchens for the soul,” satisfying a deeper hunger. A monastery is the “house of God”²¹; it is “the dwelling-place of his unique presence, like the Tent of Meeting where he is met day after day, where the thrice-Holy God fills the entire space and is recognized and honored as the only Lord.”²². Therefore, traditionally, each monastery has a guest house to welcome those who want to spend some time on retreat. Every monastery is a quiet place where anyone who desires to pray can come to offer a prayer to the Lord. This is the strong desire of the Church for contemplative life: “In the regions where monasteries exist, the vocation of these communities is to further the participation of the faithful in the Liturgy of the Hours and to provide necessary solitude for more intense personal prayer.”²³ Contemplative monasteries also offer spiritual direction and the sacrament of penance and many other spiritual needs to anyone in need.

Contemplative life enriches the Church’s mission and all God’s people by the prayers and penance of the monks and nuns who live it. “For they offer to God an exceptional sacrifice of praise, they lend luster to God’s people with abundant fruits of holiness, they motivate this people and by their hidden apostolic fruitfulness they make this people grow.”²⁴

21 The Rule of Saint Benedict, 31:9.

22 Verbi Sponsa n. 8.

23 Catechism of the Catholic Church, An Image Book Doubleday, New York 1995, n. 2691.

24 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 7.

The document, *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, states: “Their contemplative life, then, is their primary and fundamental apostolate, because it is their typical and characteristic way in God’s special design to be Church, to live in the Church, to achieve communion with the Church, and to carry out a mission in the Church.”²⁵

Therefore, even though they live in solitude, contemplatives are always in solidarity with the Church and with those who are suffering from discrimination or hunger. As members of the Mystical Body of Christ, contemplatives are subject to the same requirement to serve other human beings as their more active religious brothers and sisters do, but in a different way. To conclude, I would like to quote Thomas Merton to show how even though living in solitude, contemplatives still stand in solidarity with all human beings: “Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and a member of mankind. Every Christian is part of my own body, because we are members of Christ. What I do is also done for them and with them and by them. What they do is done in me and by me and for me. But each one of us remains responsible for his own share in the life of the whole body. Charity cannot be what it is supposed to be as long as I do not see that my life represents my own allotment in the life of a whole supernatural organism to which I belong. Only when this truth is absolutely central do other doctrines fit into their proper context. Solitude, humility, self-denial, action and contemplation, the sacraments, the monastic life, the family, war and peace – none of these make sense except in relation to the central reality which is God’s love living and acting in those whom he has incorporated in his Christ. Nothing at all makes sense, unless we admit, with John Donne, that ‘No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.’”²⁶



25 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 26.

26 Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, xxii-xxiii

Bibliography

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Verbi Sponsa: Instruction on the Contemplative life and on the Enclosure of Nuns*

(http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_profile_en.html)

Vatican II, *Decree On the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis)* (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html)

The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life: (Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, 4-7 March 1980) (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_12081980_the-contemplative-dimension-of-religious-life_en.html)

John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*,

(http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html)

The Rule of Saint Benedict, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1981

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D. C. 2004

Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1955

Charles J. Healey, S. J., *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction to the Heritage*, St. Paul, 1999