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**Saint Benedict and family life**

**An original reading of the *Rule of St Benedict***

*We do not speak great things: we live them*

**St Cyprian**

**Translated by Liam Kelly**

# The Rule of Saint Benedict for Family Life Today

Don Massimo Lapponi OSB



## 1. Work

### 1.1 Domestic work

*The brothers should serve one another. Consequently, no one will be excused from kitchen service unless he is sick or engaged in some important business of the monastery, for such service increases reward and fosters love.*

The Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 35

As in all the points we will examine subsequently, here it already seems that for St Benedict manual labour is de facto a spiritual commitment, because humble domestic service – in this case in the kitchen – means the exercise of fraternal charity, a triumph over selfishness and one’s own laziness, the imitation of the obedient and suffering Christ. Applied to family life, this teaching of St Benedict is not just a practical norm for easing a mother’s domestic work, sharing out the burden on all family members: more than this, it is a most powerful educative means by which children – but of course adults, too – learn not through words but facts what the practice of fraternal love means and acquire, through the daily exercise of it, the virtues of charity, diligence, patience, care and precision. Without this integration, catechetical lessons serve little purpose. There should be no need to emphasise what a positive influence this practice should have – and others we will talk about soon – on mutual affection and understanding – across the generations – and family stability.

### 1.2 Professional work

*If there are artisans in the monastery, they are to practice their craft with all humility, but only with the abbot’s permission. If one of them becomes puffed up by his skilfulness in his craft, and feels that he is conferring something on the monastery, he is to be removed from practicing his craft*

*and not allowed to resume it unless, after manifesting his humility, he is so ordered by the abbot.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 57

On this point, too, the teaching of St Benedict can be invaluable for family life. In fact the *Rule* recalls the fundamental principle that what counts most is not professional ability or an academic degree or status in society, but humble awareness of one's own poverty before God and readiness to sacrifice oneself and one's own interests or pleasures for fraternal service. In this light, housework can be more a source of blessings for those who carry it out and for the whole family than the most brilliant professional work, even if this brings – at least apparently – greater financial benefit. In fact these benefits could be seriously compromised by the lack of humility and charity, by the subsequent lack of mutual affection within the family, by the mistaken scale of values placed before young people in the course of their education. St Benedict does not let himself be captivated by the prospects of greater economic benefit or social prestige: what counts for him is the good of souls and the fraternal harmony that derives from it. A wise abbot once said: 'We don't need professors, we need monks.' Likewise, it could be said: we don't need professional people, but mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, who in social life, too, must not be simply 'professional'. It should be added, then, that in all aspects any profession merits being humbly subordinated to the true good of souls.

### 1.3 Creative work (art and craft)

*He will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 31

To illustrate this point – as others we will see elsewhere – we must bear in mind the centuries-old Benedictine tradition. If St Benedict never speaks of art, down the centuries his monks' monasteries have always been characterised by art-craft production linked to the daily life of prayer and work. Liturgical books were decorated with splendid miniatures, vestments were made with wonderful embroidery, the vessels for the altar provided an opportunity for goldsmith work, the wooden choir stalls were artistically embellished, to say nothing of the works of architecture, painting, sculpture concerning churches, chapels, cloisters, ambulatories and areas of common life. To these specifically artistic expressions one can add lesser craft-type activities, such as sewing, darning, making chocolates, etc. In all these the ordinary and extraordinary care for worship and order within the house, which is often expressed in domestic work, receives a spiritual and aesthetic inspiration which originates from the monks' human and religious consciousness and adds a new element to the already highlighted advantages of manual labour. Förster observed that carefully dusting a porcelain statue one learned to treat one's neighbour with gentleness and respect. If to this is added the commitment, often very arduous, to instil into the material and objects in use a sensitive expression of one's own creativity and love for a human and religious aesthetic ideal, then work becomes at the same time both highly educative, as the domination of the soul over the body and the perceptible world, and source of intimate joy for oneself and others. From what has been said one can understand the harm caused by the almost total disappearance of art and craft work from the daily life of families and its replacement by purely cerebral abstract work of scholastic study, by professional activity outside the house and by games and entertainment based on electronic devices and television spectacles passively soaked up for hours. Among young people today one notices a material and

mental untidiness which is easily corrected by diligent commitment to manual and handiwork activity. I would like to add that without a doubt the current decline in beautiful art is due to a large extent to the lack of that family art-craft basis we have spoken about, and which no academy can replace.

At this point it is superfluous to emphasise how much the real family could learn, in this area, from the Benedictine tradition.

## **2. Rest**

*All the monks will sit together immediately after rising from supper. Someone should read from the Conferences or the Lives of the Fathers or at any rate something else that will benefit the hearers, but not the Heptateuch or the Book of Kings, because it will not be good for those of weak understanding to hear these writings at that hour... On arising [in the morning] for the Work of God, they will quietly encourage each other, for the sleepy like to make excuses.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapters 42 and 22

The *Rule* and Benedictine tradition anticipate times for common recreation after lunch and supper, to relax from the efforts of the day. For St Benedict the time of relaxation after supper becomes a time for spiritual reading, followed by the concluding prayer of the day – Compline – and by rest at night, which of course is regulated by precise times. A set time is given for getting up in the morning, too, and this happens very early, especially in the summer.

To apply these habits to family life one could remember three points: the evening is a time of relaxation to be dedicated, before rest at night time, to reading and activities which reinvigorate the spirit; at a set time – not too late – everyone should retire to rest; from when they are small, children must get used to getting up early without indulging in laziness.

We notice how these norms today are completely disregarded: the evening is easily given over to noisy and exhausting activities and entertainment, often away from the home and late into the night; common times for rest at night do not exist; when they can children and adults are both capable of sleeping until lunchtime and beyond. In this it is absolutely necessary to go against the grain: spiritual and physical needs demand it. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Alphonse Gratry wrote a marvellous reflection entitled *Evening and Rest*, which has lost none of its currency. Here are some excerpts:

“The employment of our evenings, the right use of our evenings, is surely a serious and practical question... It is here, if at all, that we must be ready to break with our present habits... What of our evening conversations, our social gatherings, our games, our visits, our theatre-goings?... ‘Surely’, it will be said, ‘it is rest’. I say that it is not rest. What brings dissipation does not bring rest. The body, the mind, the heart, worn out and, as it were squandered, sink, after one of these ill-spent evenings, into a heavy, unrefreshing slumber, which brings us but little benefit, for the life-forces which had been too widely dissipated have now neither time nor strength to renew themselves in their sources... Most undoubtedly we must have rest, and in these days of ours true rest is even more lacking than hard work... It is no less because we do not rest than because we do not work that we are so barren... Repose is, I take it, life

drawing itself together and resteeeping itself in its well-springs... Life ought to be made up of toil and rest as the succession of time on this earth is made up of day and night... Rest, moral and intellectual, is a time of intercourse with God and with our fellows and of joy in such intercourse... Nothing conduces to true repose so powerfully as music, so only it be genuinely music. Musical rhythm gives regularity to our vital activity. It does for the mind and heart, perhaps even for the bodily powers, what sleep does for the body. Sleep restores to its fullness and calm that rhythm which governs the beating of the heart, the circulation of the blood, the heaving of the breast. True music is closely allied to prayer, as it is to poetry. Its influence recalls us to ourselves, straightaway restores in the soul its flow of feelings, lights, and impulses<sup>6</sup>. Like prayer and like poetry it guides our thoughts towards Heaven, the home of rest... Your evening's rest should be an intercourse of mind and soul, an effort in common towards truth in some form or another, for instance, by the study, not too laborious, of course, of some branch of science. It should be an effort towards the beautiful by means of the arts, an effort towards the love of God and man by prayer. Sow, in this way, seeds of light and of holy emotions for the sleep which is coming. God himself will have care to foster them in the soul of his sleeping child.”

It is important to note that modern biology confirms completely what Graty wrote about the body's rest: all the strong stimuli that the organism receives during the day provoke continual responses from the cellular system, with mistakes and imbalances that nightly sleep has the task of correcting and harmonising. Lack of adequate nightly

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<sup>6</sup> In the course of the day professional and school work and too much dissipation divert attention away from the superior inspirations and ideals of life and one remains focussed on immediate concerns. It has to wait until the time of evening relaxation to re-awaken the soul's greatest horizons and the most profound and truest aspirations. So during the day the sun's bright light gives us the illusion that our earth is everything. But when the sun disappears and the stars appear we see that the earth is a small element in an immense universe of stars.

sleep causes premature ageing. This behaviour extends also to the infra-human sphere and, in the eras preceding the development of animal life, allowed, by the alternation of day and night, the development of the vegetable world.

From what has been said one could postulate rules which establish, for the evening hours preceding nightly sleep, a substantial decrease in the use (which must not be neither exclusive nor daily and indiscriminate, but planned and moderate) of the television and videos or DVDs – with programmes to be watched possibly together – and above all the search for a communion of spirit among family members through dialogue, sharing of thoughts and art – especially music and poetry – and prayer together.

### **3. Meals**

*If anyone does not come to table before the verse so that all may say the verse and pray and sit down at table together, and if this failure happens through the individual's own negligence or fault, he should be reprov'd up to the second time. ...For nothing is so inconsistent with the life of any Christian as overindulgence. Our Lord says: Take care that your hearts are not weighed down with overindulgence. ...Reading will always accompany the meals of the brothers.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapters 43, 39 and 38

The teaching that a family should take from the *Rule of St Benedict* on this point could be summed up in the following four points: 1. The meal must be preceded by prayer together; 2. as far as is possible everyone should respect the set times and be present

from the opening prayer; 3. in eating and drinking sobriety and Christian mortification must be respected; 4. silence and reading during the meal is not appropriate for a family, which is not a religious community, but that does not take away from the fact that the meal must be a time of human and spiritual communion between those present – as was the custom in all traditional cultures – especially today, when work and study commitments keep members of the family apart for practically the whole day. That is why use of the television must be excluded at mealtimes and stimulating conversation between everyone should be encouraged. That will be so much easier if, as it is said above, the work in the kitchen, the work of service, washing up and re-arranging things does not fall on the shoulders of one person, but is charitably shared among everyone.

One should not forget that very important element for enlivening the joy of the meal together: the quality of the cooking and improvement in the culinary art. This, too, is something which has not been lacking in monastic life and it also comes under the previous discussion about the educative value of handiwork.

In this regard it is appropriate here to make some reference to the problem of diet, notably changed in recent times both in terms of quality and quantity. The abandonment or reduction in domestic work, the general lack of love for the home and working with one's hands, the alienation from nature and the mass urbanisation, the spread of consumer models offered by highly industrialised foreign societies and advertised through incessant and invasive publicity, the subsequent oblivion of traditional Mediterranean foodstuffs and other similar factors, have all influenced this change, a change which provokes significant concern about the physical and mental

health of the new generations and the unhealthy relationship which is established with creation. This has given rise to globalised, uniform cooking, lacking in any natural relationship with the primary production of food. Often young people and adults, men and women, impatient at having to spend their time in the art of cooking, opt for so-called *fast food*, with the consequence of regularly taking in artificial food harmful to the body. In addition there is excess in quantity and chaos in times for eating, due to widespread lack of moral self-discipline, something considered outdated and inadmissible in modern civilisation.

Contrasted to these serious distortions, which must not at all be undervalued, are first of all the three “principle ingredients” formulated by experts in healthy diets: *authenticity, seasonality and territoriality*, that is care to have food not adulterated far from its origins, to have food in season and produced in the area where one lives. In addition, as has already been highlighted, it is necessary to review, especially for this matter, domestic and work with one’s hands, love for the home, the value of time spent therein, self-denial and rhythms necessary for a commitment which requires patience and precision. We repeat again that the involvement of all the members of the family will make a mother’s work more effortless and will be educative for everyone. Finally, it is necessary to rediscover, for our society, too, the importance of austerity, sobriety, mortification, times of fasting: all things which confirm the topicality of the *Rule of St Benedict*.

#### **4. Clothes**

*We believe that for each monk a cowl and tunic will suffice...also a scapular...Brothers going on a journey...their cowls and tunics, too, ought to be somewhat better than those they ordinarily wear.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 55

Already at the time of St Benedict the monks had a habit which distinguished them from the secular clergy, but St Benedict is concerned above all with the poverty of the religious, who must have nothing that is non-essential. However, we note that the *Rule* is also concerned about propriety, above all when travelling. Subsequent Benedictine tradition, represented in this aspect especially by the Cluniac movement of the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century, developed the solemnity of choral dress for the liturgy. Thus the scapular, which originally was a very simple monastic habit, became an artistically designed habit, adapted for the most solemn liturgical celebrations.

We note first of all, therefore, that St Benedict does not leave to chance this particular aspect of daily life, but lays down precise norms. Indeed this is a teaching to follow. Adapting, then, the Benedictine tradition to the circumstances proper to family life, one can emphasise on the one hand the need for sobriety and renunciation of excessive luxury – and today also extravagance and indecency, thus resisting the very strong pressures of fashion and commercial propaganda – and on the other care for an appearance which is truly expressive of the intimate character of the person and the family. In this perspective the fashion magazines of the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth are not just a valuable lesson in dress sense, but also a true school of spirituality.

## 5. Going out

*Brothers sent on a journey will ask the abbot and community to pray for them.*

*All absent brothers should always be remembered at the closing prayer of the Work of God.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 67

Monastic life presumes a close communion with one's own community, life and all its needs. For St Benedict there is no room in such a community for the individualism and asocial and selfish indifference which unfortunately are so widespread today. Even without following the rigours of the Benedictine norms which regulate monks' absences in view of their spiritual good, to be attained through obedience and diligent charity towards the brothers, a family could imitate the Benedictine spirit by reminding its members to favour life in the family over outside activities. As we have hinted, domestic life, if well ordered, demands care for everyone's daily needs and the maintenance and improvement, aesthetic, too, of the surroundings which for the most part is lacking in external activities – professional, scholastic or entertainment – and which is highly instructive for the formation of character, social and artistic sense. For this one could imagine not rigid norms which encourage general respect for schedules, coming back in the evening not too late and above all concern on everyone's part for the fraternal conduct of life in common. The aim is not to cultivate family selfishness, but on the contrary to educate family members in a charity which is not theoretical, but practical, getting involved in the exhausting tasks demanded by mutual service, the foundation of every true social activity. Personal experience has taught me that in a monastery and in the countryside social awareness develops more than in the family and in the cities. To provide an eloquent example. When I was in Rome in a family

the city was so full of noise that any sound left me indifferent and I continued to think my own thoughts. Coming into a monastery in the countryside at the start I continued to act in the same way: if I heard a bang or an unusual noise I paid no attention. But I was called to one side and told off because I was taking no interest in what was happening. Thus gradually I learned to be always more attentive to the environment in which I live and to the needs of the house, of people, of the life in common.

## **6. The surroundings**

*The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced. Then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, because this is not at all good for their souls.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 66

The abundance, quality, and lay-out of the surroundings depends on the choices made by whoever establishes a family, or also by the inheritance of the family of origin. Often the choices are strongly conditioned by economic scarcity or difficult or even sometimes tragic situations in our cities. At any rate, as far as is possible, the founders of domestic co-existence should bear in mind the fact that it is above all in the surroundings of the home that the truest life of the family members does or should develop. *Truest* in the sense that very often a profession or studies make us concentrate on an aspect of reality abstractly isolated from the integrity of life. So the medical analyst will be concerned about blood, the cashier about receipts, the banker about cheques, the academic about a particular science, etc. It is obvious that these are, so to speak, fragments of life which should relate to the whole. But this whole

should be found above all in domestic life. The surroundings of the house therefore must encourage the diligent presence of family members with their pragmatism and pleasantness. Possibly every family member, or every contingent nucleus – spouses, little boys, girls – should have their room and in the room find attractive surroundings as an habitual residence and principle place for their own activity.

Here it is appropriate to point out the keenly felt problem today about energy conservation. In this regard there is a lot that can be achieved through choices made at the time of building or initial adaptation of the building. Without going into particular operational details, for which a technical expert should be consulted, let us bear in mind the opportunity to use solar and wind energy and the thermal properties of wood and other natural or synthetic materials. Sometimes specific choices also involve a change in one's own life habits and often demand more austere conduct, for example in the use of water, foodstuffs or different sources of energy, fostered by a deepening moral and religious understanding.

In the second half of the 1960s, purely for ideological reasons linked to the then prevailing obsession with collectivism, there spread like wildfire the centralisation of sources of energy. Huge sums of money were spent, completely unwarranted, in order to achieve, in the massive urban built-up areas, heating and other central services, eliminating independent burners in individual apartments. Every family had to pay its quota and the timing and temperature of the heating supply depended on the decisions made by a central administration. The result was that the apartments closest to the source of energy were bursting with heat while those furthest away were often not sufficiently heated. In addition, the only way to reduce the excessive heat was by

turning off the radiators in the individual rooms – but naturally the fuel continued to burn, with enormous waste. I still have haunting memories of the suffocating and unnatural heat of big city apartments.

Traditional Catholic doctrine has opposed this collectivist way of thinking by the principle of subsidiarity, according to which every lesser body must freely carry out its tasks without being suffocated by larger organisations, which have the sole duty of intervening to help the lesser body when it is unable to fulfil all its tasks. This doctrine arises from trust in human freedom, when it is guided by justice and charity, and by making the most of the irreplaceable capacity of the inner dynamism of every person: it is only from the sanctified spiritual life of each person, and only from that, that a re-birth of society can come about.

In this perspective one can understand how important is the relative autonomy, and if possible a certain isolation, too, of individual dwellings and their services, not only for saving energy, but also for encouraging the development of that individual initiative from which can only come the commitment of moral fraternity, for which today there is such a pressing need, and which is instead suffocated by collectivism.

## **7. Furnishings**

*Whoever fails to keep the things belonging to the monastery clean or treats them carelessly should be reprovved. If he does not amend, let him be subjected to the discipline of the rule.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 32

To be practically adapted to the purpose for which it is destined and at the same time be pleasing and attractive, every room must be equipped with appropriate furnishings and fittings. The aesthetic aspect of furnishings is very important, determined also by the decorative elements. That involves not just a choice in buying furniture, but also care on the part of everybody in the family for order and cleaning. The work commitment dedicated to it – which, as has been said, must be justly and charitably shared among everyone – has great educative value, both because it contributes to creating a sense of responsibility for the communal house and for one's own room, but also because it gets one used to physical effort, sacrifice, precision, a sense of justice and charity as well as an aesthetic sense. This last aspect – to which great importance must be given – can be very much increased if someone is dedicated to creating with their own hands furniture and artistic ornaments for the house. The fragmentation of professional work, the abstract nature of mental work, the mechanisation of modern industrial activity, can be greatly compensated by creative and artistic manual activity exercised in order to embellish one's own house.

## **8. Tools**

*In order that this vice of private ownership may be completely uprooted, the abbot is to provide all things necessary: that is, cowl, tunic, sandals, shoes, belt, knife, stylus, needle, handkerchief and writing tablets. In this way every excuse of lacking some necessity will be taken away. ...Anything more must be taken away as superfluous.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 55

As regards the quality and quantity of the tools, for work and relaxation, a family will not regulate itself precisely in conformity with the vow of poverty proper to the consecrated life, but a certain similarity with the dispositions of the *Rule* could be useful from different points of view. First of all, a Christian family must, at any rate, avoid luxuriousness, waste, and superfluousness. The current widespread tendency to fill children's rooms with an enormous amount of various toys and trinkets is really harmful for the character formation of little children. It fosters in them comfort, excitability, greed, and selfishness. But St Benedict can suggest to us most of all that choices are made with a clear purpose in mind: of course we must ensure that a child – and not just the child, naturally – finds in his/her room a dwelling suitable for a healthy life of human contact, of play, work, study, and rest. For all these things a balance, achieved with the greatest simplicity and wisdom, must be struck, too, with the use of electronic gadgets, today unfortunately indiscriminately accepted as part of children's belongings without any criteria of screening. In contrast to this harmful habit one must suggest the following consideration: the child finds him/herself at an age of initial development, in which all his/her neuro-cerebral apparatus is in the stage of formation. In this situation he/she has absolute need of contact with the real world, characterised by the experience of difference, importance, effort, cold, warmth, a living relationship with inanimate and animate nature, and with people. All of this can in no way be replaced by a virtual world, which does not have the characteristics proper to reality. Therefore precocious and sustained involvement on the part of little children in the use of electronic gadgets – be they screens of various kinds, mobiles, headphones or other things – is quite harmful. Only when the human person is well integrated and rooted in natural and human relations, constitutive of a healthy personality, will he/she be able to enrich their own experience and that of others by

modern means of communication. In fact, to be able to communicate there is first of all a need to acquire a firm footing in the reality to communicate. Even at an intellectual level, to substitute activities proper to the mind – for example, mathematical calculations – with electronic replacements – for example, calculators – cannot but taint the development of intelligence. However, the abuse of the artificial world of electronics does not harm just children, but adults, too, even if less seriously. Electronics must always have a subsidiary, marginal and never essential or central role in human experience.

Having stated these principles, we can now draw up the following norms, negative and positive: 1. up to a certain age – to be established with expert advice – the use of electronic instruments must be reduced to a minimum, or eliminated completely. 2. for this a personal television in a room is to be banned, along with video-games, mobiles, headphones, etc. 3. after a certain age there can be reasonable use of some electronic gadgets: personally, I would exclude video-games completely. Watching television must always be moderate, not lengthy, or habitual, or solitary, but planned for useful circumstances and shared by the family. 4. use of a computer and its various functions, too, should be gradually introduced, with watchful control over time and the way in which a computer is used. But it is important to integrate these largely negative norms with some positive norms: 5. There is a need for serious re-evaluation of natural traditional instruments, of work and play, which enable a healthy development of muscular, cognitive and creative capacities. 6. once a child has acquired a correct relationship with reality and has got to like the natural instruments, experiencing the pleasure of exercising one's own physical activity, operational intelligence, possibly aesthetic creativity, too, then the new instruments can constitute

an excellent integration with natural activity, perfecting, streamlining and quickly communicating it to others. 7. the rediscovery of the beautiful things that our forefathers accomplished with their own hands and with natural tools, or at any rate more elementary tools which they had at their disposal, must re-establish a continuity with their work which has been artificially interrupted by infatuation with electronics.

The current tools in the home, and above all in children's rooms, must not therefore transform environments into "windows open to the world" – in fact that is not the world, but a monstrous misrepresentation - : instead they must be places where one's own life is lived, a life made up of true human relationships – not those of soap operas, which is an absurd abuse, morally harmful for all ages - , a life of playful activity, useful and creative work, of study, meditative silence, prayer, and rest of both soul and body.

## **9. The arrangement of the house**

*The house of God should be in the care of wise men who will manage it wisely...so that no one may be disquieted or distressed in the house of God.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapters 53 and 31

Moving on to look at the internal arrangements – although the distinction is not that precise – we will begin with the points listed last of all and which, in some way, fall within both areas, external and internal. The discussion will therefore be in close continuity with what has been developed in the preceding points.

### **9.1 A place for worship**

*The oratory ought to be what it is called, and nothing else is to be done or stored there.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 52

There are a variety of different situations about this point. The best – but definitely the rarest – is that of mostly very old houses in which there is a family chapel. Then there are houses which are large enough to allow a room to be dedicated exclusively for worship and prayer – this, too, is very rare. In the majority of houses one has to be satisfied with transforming, if need be, a room used for other things – a sitting-room or living-room – into a room for prayer in common, in which nevertheless it would be good that there is always present on one wall or in a corner a holy picture or other signs of devotion (kneeler, candlestick, etc.). The presence in a house of a place intended for worship is a strong reminder, if not indispensable condition, so that a family acquires the custom of praying in common. When I taught religion in primary schools I used to emphasise that there are two essential things for prayer: somewhere to pray and time to pray. Without these requisites prayer cannot have a real place in our lives and will usually become, in the best cases, a pious desire. Naturally, according to the words of the Gospel, each person's room will be a privileged place for private prayer – and what we have said before about the indispensable requisites so that one's personal room doesn't become "an open window on the world" devoid of silence and intimacy is essential, too, in considering the gospel invitation to pray in one's own room. But a suitable and appealing environment is also necessary for prayer in common. Here, too, one calls to mind everyone's care for cleaning and aesthetics – an element, as already suggested, which is not at all secondary, even less so in an obviously religious matter.

## 9.2 The library

*Besides the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments, the works read at Vigils should include explanations of Scripture by reputable and orthodox catholic Fathers... What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, besides the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil. For observant and obedient monks, all these are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues...During this time of Lent each one is to receive a book from the library, and is to read the whole of it straight through. These books are to be distributed at the beginning of Lent.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapters 9, 73 and 48

Given the times, one can't say that St Benedict's library was small! And obviously it was ordered. Naturally, however, a family today cannot conform literally to the prescriptions of St Benedict for his monks. But there is still much that can be learned from the *Rule*. First of all, the very existence of a library. Not all modern houses have one, or something that can be so called. A library in fact involves care and preservation of books. Instead, how often does it happen that books get lost, spoiled, loaned out and not returned? This is a great shame. In fact a few years after publication some books can no longer be found and, as experience has taught us, especially in our day, more recent does not necessarily mean better. Indeed, often the books of greater value are unjustly forgotten and are then rediscovered, perhaps after

centuries – isn't that what happened for example in the Renaissance? As well as this it seems that the manifold techniques for writing, printing and illustrating, which gave books a wonderful aesthetic aspect, with time have fallen into disuse and been substituted by more economic, but also aesthetically inferior systems – all this without taking into account the gradual decline of manual skill and therefore the whole art of iconography. In this situation one cannot recommend enough the preservation of books from other eras, sometimes even from just a few decades ago. Of course the same care is required for the best books today, books which tomorrow will no longer be available. The Benedictine tradition here can really teach us. But besides conservation the choice of publications is very important. Unfortunately it is often the case that books, journals, magazines, newspapers and comics of every kind can be found around the house without any responsible control. The moral tradition of civilised, not just Christian countries has always rightly denounced the incalculable damage caused by harmful media. It seems our times have forgotten, among other things, this teaching of humanity's wisdom, too. From experience I know how many young people have been negatively marked for life having found in their houses a book or newspaper with immoral passages or pictures, or having read, without adequate preparation, subversive writings of subversive propaganda. Even when one doesn't descend to the lowest moral and political levels, a house in which are present just magazines, sports papers or the most recent scintillating books of trendy literature and in which there are no classics of poetry and thought, cannot be but highly morally harmful for the children and young people who live there and spiritually soul-destroying for adults. On the contrary, the child who grows up surrounded by a well-ordered library of valuable books, further enriched with beautiful illustrations, simply by this is already at an advantage when it comes to life and school.

### 9.3 The space for work in common

*Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labour as well as for prayerful reading.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 48

The work referred to here is that craft and artistic work dealt with under n. 1.3 above. In many Benedictine monasteries, especially those of nuns, there is an area intended for this type of activity, which is often done in common. I like to compare this tradition to a family custom especially present in Denmark. In this country every well-off family has the custom of coming together at certain times of the day, especially on Sundays, to devote themselves to some creative activity, which might be drawing, embroidery, music or something else. In this way there is a time for relaxation and family union which also serves to cultivate a taste for beautiful things and each person's manual and mental abilities. It would be excellent if this custom would spread everywhere, thus taking time and energy away from the absolute empire of television, games, and electronic gadgets. Of course, in order to do that a suitable environment is needed, and it could be the same sitting-room, living-room used, at the appropriate time, for other purposes, too. As regards the activities to be done in these times of working together, some things have already been said. One possibility is considered in the next point.

### 9.4 Artistic adornment

*When they live by the labour of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 48

Spread throughout the Benedictine tradition everywhere we find love for one's own house and a care to embellish it in a way which on the one hand express the faith of the monks and on the other serves as a call to raise up souls, at every moment of the day, to thoughts of God. Beauty in fact always speaks to us of God, especially when it celebrates the humanity of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints. But a rightly well-known exhortation from St Paul broadens our horizon immensely: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (*Phil 4:8*). Exegetes interpret these words as speaking about not just the proper contents of faith, but about everything good and beautiful, in as much as everything comes from God. Therefore everything that can adorn the family home, and not just religious icons, should be present in every room in the home to make souls happy and raise up the thoughts of those who live there. If, to this end, it is necessary to cultivate taste and make an appropriate choice in buying decorative items, it would be highly desirable if the members of the family themselves decided to make with their own hands whatever ornaments are necessary. As has already been said, that would be very educative in developing the physical and mental abilities of children, young people and adults and would be a real source of joy and mutual integration.

#### 9.5 Devotional objects and images

*The first step of humility, then, is that a man keeps the fear of God always before his eyes and never forgets it.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 7

In a monastery there is a predominance of religious ornaments, while instead in the family home artistic decoration and images inspired by worldly life or family memories prevail. But in the family home, too, icons and religious objects should not be lacking, certainly not in the place set aside for worship, but not only there. A now sadly disregarded Catholic tradition is that of placing an image of Our Lady or the Holy Family above the bed of a married couple. The redemptive and exalting significance of this sign cannot escape reflection. But other sacred images and objects put in different places in the house could have similar significance. There was a time when an image of a Guardian Angel used to be put in a child's room. It has to be noted here that in recent years sacred – and secular – iconography has declined enormously, due both to the general decline in manual skill and a widespread perversion in taste. So it is necessary to make a careful choice in the acquisition of sacred, as well as secular artistic objects, and above all acquire, through the study of past examples, the necessary taste and manual ability to express in appropriate aesthetic forms one's own religious and human emotions. This is not all incidental: young and older people learn to know and experience the intimate meaning of religion – and life – and its mysteries more through the *Biblia pauperum* of iconography than through the catechism. For this, too, given the decline we have spoken about, the sense of the religious has disappeared even in infancy. Finally, let us remember that photography cannot replace creative handiwork, just as a soap opera cannot replace reading a book.

## **10. Prayer**

### 10.1 Prayer in common

*Therefore, we should praise our Creator for his just judgements at these times...and let us arise at night to give him praise.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 16

The Divine Office marks the entire monastic day. Thus prayer becomes the practice of life, incarnated in the Office recited or sung at different times of the day. The Psalms, hymns, invocations, which in the course of Christian history have enriched the Church's liturgy, often made more precious by their high poetic value, were not composed to remain closed in a book, nor to be performed in the theatre or at a concert, but to become entwined with everyday life: "Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Eph 5:18b-20*). Of course, the family cannot dedicate the same amount of time to prayer together as monks. However, it can try to imitate them at specific times of the day: in the morning, before meals, and above all in the evening before sleep. This prayer together is not to be done in a prosaic and sloppy manner, but must be enriched by an appropriate choice of texts and – as we shall see later – songs.

## 10.2 Private prayer

*Moreover, if at other times someone chooses to pray privately, he may simply go in and pray, not in a loud voice, but with tears and heartfelt devotion.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 52

All the members of the family, from the smallest to the oldest, should have great love for solitude with God. That can be encouraged by the presence of sacred images in the place of worship and in individuals' rooms, by an atmosphere of silence, by habits of reflection, study and meditation. The damage caused, in that sense, by a house full, rather than of sacred icons, but of posters and worldly, unseemly and vulgar photographic images and continually disturbed by pseudo-disco music, by the television always on and the noise of electronic gadgets, is obvious. To encourage individual prayer it is absolutely essential that individuals' rooms be protected from all this worldly invasion and be a place of silence, study, meditation and a place brightened by art and enriched by books of poetry, thought and prayer: the home of the soul, where each person can rediscover themselves after the dissipation and worries of the day.

## **11. Charity**

### 11.1 Charity within the family and mutual service

*This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 72

There shouldn't really be any need to recommend mutual affection within the family environment, since it is laid down by nature itself. But this is not the case, because

there cannot be true love without the crucifixion of one's own selfishness. Therefore it is necessary that right from the start little children must be educated, by the recommendation and example of parents and teachers, to overcome laziness, weakness, indolence, and gluttony and acquire the virtues of temperance, strength and justice. As already mentioned, it will be the habits of getting up early in the morning, sharing domestic work, sobriety in eating and drinking which create the indispensable prerequisites for charity experienced between family members. To that, of course, is added the practice of prayer together.

#### 11.2 Charity beyond the family

*You must relieve the lot of the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing...Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received; our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapters 4 and 53

Sometimes one hears talk of “monastic selfishness”, as if the cloister enclosed monks within the restricted environment of the interests of their own community. In many cases that has happened, but this was not St Benedict's aim, and nor was it the practice of monasteries when they seriously applied the teaching of the *Rule*. On the contrary, the Enclosure binds the monk to service of the fraternal life and submits him to obedience: that purifies him from selfishness and love of self and thus prepares him for the practice of all the good works. However, the exercise of these good works must be accomplished without the monk escaping the obligations of charity and justice towards the community of which he is part and from which he receives

continual support for body and soul. On the other hand, the good that can be accomplished outside within the framework of community life, co-ordinated by the Abbot, is worth more than what could be achieved individually. That does not mean a monk cannot come up with his initiatives, but he must submit them to the judgement of the superior, who has the duty of evaluating the talents of his monks and co-ordinating them with the needs of the fraternal life in mind<sup>7</sup>.

But just as sometimes there is monastic selfishness, unfortunately there is also family selfishness, when often people who are married focus exclusively on the concerns of their own family and, by word and example, teach children to do the same. To overcome this temptation, there must be an increase in the value of the virtues acquired through mutual service – about which a lot has been said and the importance of which cannot be exaggerated – and through the exercise of sobriety and sacrifice, for the needs of charity towards those outside the family and for all the problems in the society which surrounds us. Often it is precisely the widespread lack of virtues which human and Christian Benedictine wisdom calls us to practice which lie at the heart of so many individual and social evils. It will therefore be precisely these virtues, cultivated in a monastic or family community inspired by the *Rule of St Benedict*, which will bring relief to the sufferings of the world. Therefore parents are recommended definitely not to leave half done the moral formation of little ones, to put these little ones – with due discretion, of course – in contact with the wounds of

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<sup>7</sup> Over the centuries monks have undertaken a variety of roles, from missionary activity to charitable assistance, however always in faithfulness to the communal life, marked by choral prayer and mutual service. It must be emphasised that the Benedictines' greatest contribution to the Church and civilisation has been the dissemination among Christian peoples, by the example of their regular observance and their creations in the liturgical, artistic and cultural spheres, of diligence and piety incarnated in daily life, of the spirit of sacrifice and service, and of the elevation of intelligence and human and religious sentiment. How much these virtuous attitudes have contributed to the prosperity, material, too, of peoples is not difficult to understand. In particular, the role of female monasteries cannot be fairly assessed outside this perspective.

society and teach them to exercise the spirit of service they have acquired in the family for the benefit of the suffering and the disadvantaged.

## **12. Fraternal dialogue. The times and means of conversation and silence**

*The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger...The decision is rather the abbot's to make....Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on his part to settle everything with foresight and fairness. ...Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times, but especially at night.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapters 3 and 42

Today in families one laments the lack of time for dialogue between husband and wife and between parents and children. Often this lack is due to the too many useless commitments outside the home, to the disaffection for the surroundings and domestic work, to the too many hours taken up by the television or electronic gadgets. We have already said that mealtimes are sacred and that time must be devoted to fraternal communion, with respect for schedules and the exclusion of the television during meals. Likewise, reference has been made to the evening as a privileged time of rest and retreat from external concerns and noisy and worldly entertainment, a time of communion of souls in dialogue, through the sharing of thoughts and feelings, in prayer together. Opposed to this is the sadly almost universally widespread vice of poor use of the television, as an inescapable inevitability which must necessarily take up the best hours of the evening. Everyone can understand how irrational that is, but no one has the strength to oppose it. The family which instead wants to act according to saner principles should consider the evening use of television, videos or DVD, as

an exception, to be chosen when the benefit really outweighs the loss – that is, rarely – and not as the rule. As a rule the family must be free to devote itself to dialogue and to those playful or artistic activities which encourage dialogue. The joy of a creative use of intelligence in stimulating dialogue or in playful manual activity or in music, instrumental or vocal, or in the shared use of poetry is very different from the boring and taciturn passivity imposed by the television.

We note again that the habits of mutual service, humble self-surrender, sobriety and self-sacrifice which we have emphasised many times, constitute an indispensable and invaluable premise for fruitful and respectful dialogue between family members. The opposite must be said for habits of laziness, selfishness, hoarding, and arrogant obstinacy.

Finally, we note the importance of silence in the Benedictine *Rule*, and above silence after the final prayer of Compline. After relaxation, sharing and evening prayer, everything must be concluded in the silence of nocturnal recollection, when the world's lights are put out and infinite mystical little flames light up the dark face of the sky: the soul's sky, too, needs its stars, which consecrate the thoughts, feelings, and prayers with which the heart goes to sleep so that they may bear their mysterious fruit in the unconscious life of sleep.

### **13. Reading**

*Listen readily to holy reading*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 4

One could repeat here what was said under no. 9.2. We would just add that reading cannot effectively be substituted by the various forms of visual communication offered by modern electronic means. Reflection is one thing and imagination another. The prevalence of the latter is a very negative characteristic of the human person today and can be harmful for the balanced growth of the child. The physical reality of the book is also important, along with the opportunity to keep it and go back to browse through it on other occasions, even after some years. Knowing that that old friend the book is always available to repeat its wise words, which perhaps we have still not sufficiently understood or meditated on, or that with the passage of time and the enrichment of experiences reveal ever new meanings, provides some reassurance. If the children's room is not invaded by noisy electronic gadgets with their chaotic and incessant torrent of images, the young people will soon acquire a taste for good reading, enriching mind and heart.

#### **14. Study**

*The reason we have written this rule is that, by observing it in monasteries, we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life. But for anyone hastening on to the perfection of monastic life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection. What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? ...Are you hastening towards your heavenly home? Then with Christ's help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners. After that, you can set out for the loftier summits of the teaching*

*and virtues we mentioned above, and under God's protection you will reach them.*

### Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 73

St Benedict, having fled from Rome “*scienter nescius et sapienter indoctus*” (“knowingly ignorant and wisely unlearned”) because he was scandalised by the immoral life of students there, sought in monastic life a different school from that of academic institutions: the “school of the Lord’s service”. To grow in humility, charity and self-sacrifice is for him more important than growing in scholastic education. But the practice of the human and Christian virtues is also for him the foundation of true wisdom. In fact he does not disapprove of study, when it is directed to knowledge of God’s ways. In Chapter 48 of the *Rule* he wrote: “Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers should have specified periods for manual labour as well as for prayerful reading”. And of the Abbot he says that he must be “learned in divine law” (Chapter 64) and that “everything he teaches and commands should, like the leaven of divine justice, permeate the minds of his disciples” (Chapter 2). True wisdom, therefore, must flow from the commitment to a virtuous life and in turn must enlighten the path of virtue. But we have seen that for St Benedict virtue is exercised largely in the practice of the most humble services demanded by the communal life and fraternal charity. Moreover this communal life is not ordered to an earthly end, but rather to a spiritual one. In fact, many of the services demanded by community life concern the correct organisation and regular and fervent practice of liturgical prayer, good organisation of public and private reading, study of the Word of God and the patristic and monastic writings, and concern for a well-planned life of personal prayer. Even the most earthly observances are transformed by the *Rule* through the spirit of

imitation of the obedient and suffering Christ, who did not come to be served but to serve, and through the joyous oblation of self in love of God and fraternal charity. So what is learned through the recitation of the Office, meditation on Sacred Scripture and in prayer, is then put into practice in everyday life.

Subsequent monastic tradition had to develop enormously the masterly guidelines set out by St Benedict as the foundation of a culture not abstract and scholastic, but profoundly combined with the practical requirements of a personal and communitarian virtuous Christian life. It is obvious there is no place in a well-ordered Benedictine monastery for the dissolute or the scholar or scientist swollen with pride, contemptuous of the humble works demanded by community life and fraternal charity. In St Benedict's perspective – which is naturally that of the Gospel – the humble illiterate monk who sacrifices himself day and night for love of God and his brothers is wiser than the person with many academic degrees who is unhelpful and proud. But it is also true that the same community religious life requires the development of a diverse cultural activity. To be Christian monks it is necessary to read, meditate, declaim continually the Word of God and the writings of the Fathers, to recite the Psalms and inspired songs and hymns and the prayers of the Church for many hours during the day. From this stems the need to learn, teach, think, write, copy out, illuminate, compose, and then to sing and develop and enrich the melodic heritage and create a more appropriate musical script, and to build oratories, churches, chapels, libraries, spaces for the various services of monastic life and to adorn them with architectural, pictorial and sculptural art, to carve the wooden choir stalls, to make sacred vestments, to create liturgical and paraliturgical rites – out of which mediaeval theatre was born – etc. As I wrote elsewhere, “culture, thought, art, melody

which come to animate with a breath of poetry and inspire with a glimpse of heaven all the activities of a monk. Thus from simple everyday domestic work and the divine spirit which invigorates it spring great ideas, great plans for the salvation of the world, to be carried out without ever avoiding the daily sacrifice of fraternal life in community: nothing to do with abstract culture, so far from the life of the soul” proper to so much academic learning.

From this school was born the greatest Christian wisdom. Here I like to quote some wonderful phrases from Jacques Maritain about St Thomas Aquinas, who left the monastery at Montecassino to enter the new Order of the Dominicans and ended his not long life as a guest of the monastery at Fossanova: “He had to leave the house of the Blessed Father Benedict from whom, as a little oblate in a black habit, he had learned the twelve degrees of humility and of whom, as a Doctor, dazzled with ecstasy after the completion of his work, he asked hospitality in order to die. ...St Dominic had asked St Benedict for him in Heaven, because the Word of God had asked St Dominic for him, to entrust him with a mission to the Christian mind.”

The more modern Dominican Order was better able than the ancient Benedictine Order to adapt itself to the life of study of the great mediaeval universities, but the episode is symbolic: in order to be sane and not fall into abstractions even the highest and most developed intellectual life must draw its sap from humble service – “humble” comes from “humus” = earth - , from lived prayer, and from the practice of charity, and must not be content with lurking around university lecture theatres, but must return to the family and monastic homes to illuminate with the light of wisdom the life of work, prayer, anguish and hope of the simple faithful and all people.

It seems to me that the discussion up to now is very useful for a correct assessment of the function and value of study in the life of a family. First of all we note that there is a culture of the soul which is more important than academic life. Indeed, it should be the foundation and final purpose of every intellectual activity. That means that whatever is understood by the seemingly so poor expression “domestic work” in fact constitutes the richest foundation of every true culture. There is therefore nothing in fact unseemly and improper for a woman with an academic degree to devote herself full time to looking after the house and family<sup>8</sup>. In the same way, there is nothing discriminatory in recognising that not everyone is given to intellectual academic life, given that the energies of the intellect, the heart and will express themselves equally well, and often much better, through manual work, humble fraternal service, and self-oblation in charity. History teaches us the most sublime art often stems from this humble family activity, rather than from universities and academies. Then whoever is given to academic intellectual activity, from the preceding considerations should learn to draw inspiration for his/her studies from the daily practice of virtue and address to

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<sup>8</sup> This is an appropriate moment to speak about husband and wife working outside the home. Is it appropriate for both to work? Wouldn't it instead be advisable to re-think the modern trends which have taken the woman too much out of the domestic environment? It could be suggested that, rather than over-valuing professional work it would have been better to spiritually and culturally re-evaluate and renew domestic and family work. One hundred years ago Friedrich Wilhelm Förster wrote an extraordinarily valuable chapter on the issue – then already topical in the developed German society – from which we quoted some particularly significant passages at the start of this book. Unfortunately it is not too easy to find this book, but at any rate the details are: *Christentum und Klassenkampf: Sozialethische und sozialpädagogische Betrachtungen*, Schulthess & Co., Zurich 1908. Chapter VII focuses on the educative value of domestic work. The justification which is usually made for a woman's professional work is that one wage isn't enough. When circumstances effectively respond to this motivation, one could however think of a re-dimensioning of work outside the house – part-time – in such a way as to allow the woman to better fulfil her role at home. But the aforesaid justification is simply not persuasive: in fact often a woman's wage must then be, at least to some degree, paid to a child-minder. I don't believe it is possible to deny that in many cases the real motivation is the woman's desire to make her worth felt professionally, considering the studies she has followed, too. But it seems to me that on this point a radical re-thinking is necessary, based on the whole discourse which is going on in this area: for the promotion of the woman the best path is not indiscriminate access to professional work, but rather the spiritual and cultural transformation of domestic work and personal service.

it the whole of his/her intellectual life. More than one hundred years ago, Förster wrote: “So that man may never lose sight of the solid centre of life, that is the work around his own character, manifold knowledge must be stripped of its distracting and confusing influence, which is obtained by putting it in constant relationship with that centre! The rest is not educating the people, but corrupting it!” These considerations point out to us what a superior culture means and what should be the correct scale of values in the sciences: information technology, economics and commerce or the political sciences can certainly not aspire to the rank of guiding human culture! Let us remember that the most voluminous and complex part of the *Summa theologiae* is the second part, that is the part dealing with morality: the Angelic Doctor thus shows us that the science which for a long time has been the most important is the study of the human soul and all the others must be related to it.

### **15. Music and sacred and secular song**

*Brothers will read and sing, not according to rank, but according to their ability to benefit their hearers.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 38

St Benedict, following the custom of the most ancient form of monasticism, gives a central role, in the life of the monastery, to the choral recitation of the Divine Office. As is natural, in accordance, too, with St Paul’s exhortation quoted above (cf. no. 10.1), the Psalms and canticles were often sung. Moreover, the psalm by its very nature is poetry and song: therefore true prayer must be poetry and song. Subsequent Benedictine tradition has developed this aspect enormously, so much so that mediaeval monasticism was held in very high regard by society because of the

development and preservation of the ancient musical heritage. It was Benedictine monks in fact who invented musical script, which then became, with few modifications, what we know today – what enabled the Church’s liturgical melodies to be fixed in writing in a precise manner. That’s why mediaeval sacred chant – which largely takes up and develops that late Roman chant – is the oldest, vast musical repertoire that we know about with sufficient accuracy. It is known that the very names of the notes come from the initial syllables of the first six verses of the liturgical hymn for the feast of St John the Baptist – a sign of the ecclesiastical and monastic origin of western musical art. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries through the scientific study of codices, it was monks from the French Benedictine monastery of Solesmes who restored Gregorian Chant to its primitive purity from the changes it had undergone down the centuries.

In this case, too, we note that music is nourished in monasteries not as academic or concert study, but as something which is part of everyday life: you have to pray together, and therefore you have to sing, too, and sing well, and create music appropriate for an evermore elaborate and solemn liturgy, and you must hand that down, and therefore preserve, and therefore write in an evermore appropriate manner. In recent years, too, it has been noticed that, in the chaos of wild experimentation in liturgical music, generally Benedictine monasteries have known how to maintain a certain dignity, with the preservation of Gregorian Chant and a prudent openness to the best expressions of more modern music.

Already in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the German Benedictine Martin Gerbert, Abbot of the Monastery of St Blaise in the Black Forest, was bemoaning the decline in sacred

music, into which little by little in recent centuries had been introduced modern secular figured music, so much so that the sacred music was no longer distinguishable from it. To his eyes the change was so rapid and serious as to endanger the very purity of worship, “since Plato thought that not even the state could remain healthy if music was lost”.

This last observation reminds us of the important role of music in the life of the family. It is a matter to which very little attention is paid, without reflecting on the determining effect musical charm has on the profound unconscious of human life. The music which in recent years our young people abundantly feed on has degenerated more and more, along with the competition in ever more powerful and sophisticated sound systems and means of communication. The Benedictine tradition could offer many ideas to correct this dangerous situation.

We begin with the observation that music, by its natural disposition, must not be something belonging to a museum or concert hall, but should accompany our everyday lives, as happens, as far as liturgical music is concerned, in monasteries. In this the family could imitate the monks, animating the times for communal prayer with beautiful songs, chosen and arranged. But a lot more could be done: the entire range of human emotions could be nourished and educated through music and song. For the ancients, music was in fact a powerful teaching tool. Parents and children should obtain first hand an appropriate aesthetic formation so as to thus acquire unerring taste for the melodies and songs suitable for arousing in children the best human and Christian sentiments. In my opinion, a repertoire to be re-discovered and re-evaluated, including it within the weave of daily family life, is the most rich

heritage of popular Italian and foreign song, sacred and secular, and 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century opera, especially Italian. At one time certain songs were known by everybody: today, for the most part they have been usurped by the most vulgar compositions of television variety. In the field of religious music, too, often the latest most grating and ear-splitting improvisations prevail. A hundred years ago a wise author wrote that one experiences the world's complete pain in listening to the music which nourishes and delights our people. What should be done today? Here, too, it is essential to take a step back. In fact, the tradition of popular song and classical opera, with their overwhelming celebration of the loftiest and most loving human sentiments, implicitly Christian because the fruit of a centuries-old religious education, was not abandoned because it was no longer suitable to a new era, but simply for ideological and basely commercial reasons. When this heritage is re-proposed at the right moment, the human person and young people today are captured by it and feel that it responds to their truest aspirations.

Families, therefore, should learn to interweave moments of relaxation and work with beautiful songs from popular and classical traditions, and also an appropriate choice of modern songs, among which there is no lack of beautiful compositions – but it is not easy to find them in the chaos of commercial music.

“Wanting to recreate a beautiful and strong race”, Fr Paul Doncoeur wrote many years ago, “we promised ourselves to teach them again how to sing.” But, he added, “music, song without any connection to life are dead; they will not be pleasant for you and your effort will be neither fruitful nor lasting if you do not really imbue your life with music. ...The only picture of beauty, harmony, and joy which can make song spring

forth is that of the land of the good God, the road, the forest, the mountain and the field, the farm and the home.”

There is no doubt that our modern false and artificial life kills song, since, distancing the human person from nature, it dries up the secret and precious sources of the joy of living.

**16. Relaxation and the more traditional arts, modern means of amusement, artistic expression, communication**

*Let each one look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing.*

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 49

The *Rule of St Benedict* does not foresee times of relaxation or use of art, but the life of the monk, even if austere, contrite and always open to sharing the cross of Christ, is deep down a life of joy, in which “as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (The Prologue). Furthermore, St Benedict states that he does not want to set down “[anything] harsh, ...burdensome” (ibid.), despite the severity of the discipline which aims at correcting vices and preserving charity. It is no surprise, therefore, that subsequent monastic tradition accepted into the daily timetable times for recreation and play and broadly developed artistic activity. That must be imitated by a family which wants to follow the Benedictine spirit, also because, as has been hinted, common participation in playful or artistic endeavours greatly encourages spiritual communion and dialogue.

Just like art and craft, traditional games have the merit of engaging the physical and mental faculties of the human person without the screen of artificial energy. As already suggested, that is very useful and even indispensable for the development of the intelligence, creativity, manual skill and aesthetic sense of young and old. Furthermore, as was so poetically expressed by Fr Doncoeur, the human person needs real contact with nature and to exercise directly over it his/her own cognitive, appreciative and creative faculties. Sadly, the super-development of technology and electronics has distanced us evermore from this live experience of nature and has falsified our life, removing it from its genuine roots and artificially over-exciting it by evermore unreal and debase experiences of commercial propaganda. That does not mean that the most modern electronic developments, if well used, cannot offer new extraordinary opportunities for human action. The fundamental principle for the correct use of them, as already hinted, is the following: electronic means must never replace the reality of nature nor the natural use of human faculties. Therefore their place must never be first, but always second. That means that the human person must first have their experiences in direct contact with nature and other people and in the natural exercise of his/her own faculties – intelligence, physical effort, knowledge of reality and admiration of beauty, transforming diligence and artistic creativity, sharing with others life, thinking, and feelings – and only after having done all this will he/she be able, without risk and through modern electronic means, to broaden his/her now well-established faculties and communicate what he/she has learned, thought or achieved in the new dimensions of space and time. Obviously, this hierarchy not just of values but also chronology, implies, as has been suggested, both a prudent delay of a few years before approaching education through electronic means and, subsequently, moderate use of them, in such a way that their use is always integrated

with and never substitutes contact with real life. In this sense it would be important that young people and families in general use means of visual reproduction as largely as possible to create and transmit their own films of their own lives, work, and achievements in order to communicate them and share them with other family and cultural groups, even at a long distance. This and other similar experiences would have the great advantage of encouraging active creativity instead of passivity with regards to electronic means and at the same time would teach about making them tools for faithful communication of reality and not its falsification, as instead so easily happens in the world of communal information, advertising and soap operas. These latter, of course, if well chosen and not too often, can have a very valid teaching role. I say “not too often” because a film of true art containing a strong human message needs a lot of time to be taken on board through memory and reflection. But my decidedly negative opinion about electronic games has already been expressed earlier.

### **17. Friendship between a natural family and a monastic family**

*The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset.*

Rule of St Benedict, The Prologue

Doubtless many readers will object saying that the ideals presented here are very demanding and hardly practical without very much going against the grain and disturbing the predominant habits of life today. But, as I have observed elsewhere,

many families find themselves forced to radically modify their whole way of life following tragedies such as a son on drugs or in prison or a daughter abandoned by her husband. So wouldn't it be better to modify family life voluntarily with the aim of preventing, in as much as is humanly possible, such adversities rather than being forced to modify them afterwards in order to put things right? In my humble judgement, in fact, there is no doubt that many of these tragedies are due to the imbalances which the current situation, passively accepted by families, provokes in the formation at the developmental age. In current circumstances, in fact, as they grow up little ones often pick up strong neurological, mental, affective and moral inadequacies, and thus in adolescence and beyond find themselves unsuitable for a healthy social and married life, with all the tragic consequences that ensue. Opposing the urgent need for essential changes in current family life, therefore, with the usual reasons of impending work and lack of time seems like wanting to imitate an ostrich, which hides its head in order not to see things. One could ask: when tragedies then arise, what happens to the apparent benefits one thought to have obtained by frenetic work and lack of time?

But we would like to conclude, besides the exhortation to reflect seriously on what has been said in these pages, by inviting families who wish to make their own the teaching of St Benedict to embrace a stable friendship with a Benedictine monastery, male or female. In such a way everything that one tries to achieve in one's own house might be found, more complete and in some way transformed, in the monastic community and its home. In fact the monastery should become – as I have written elsewhere – “a centre of worship, school of sacred chant, model of everyday community life consecrated in work and prayer, through means of communication

with experiences of holiness, culture and art of past generations, workshop of craft and artistic creativity, an edifice in whose structure and art is incarnated in a more perfect way than can happen in a family home the raising up, exhausting but real, of every expression and every moment of individual and communal life in the light of God.”<sup>9</sup>

28 December 2008, Feast of the Holy Family

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<sup>9</sup> This invitation to embrace friendship with a monastery does not mean in any way to remove the family from its parish or geographic community. On the contrary: if we consider that the cultural change suggested here could only happen with some difficulty unless supported by other families pursuing the same ideals, it is obvious that one is not trying to remove the “Benedictine” family from the parish, but rather “Benedictinize” the parish itself, both involving neighbouring families in the project and reminding parishioners of the daily opportunities rung out by church bells according to the model of the monastic Office.