The ‘New Monasticism’ as Ancient-Future Belonging:
Imagination and Memory in the Emerging Church

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“More substantial than a trend but less organized than a movement.” That’s how a recent cover story in U.S. News & World Report described the “return to tradition” in contemporary North American religions.1 In Protestant Christian circles, the “new interest in old ways” has been around since Robert Webber published Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail in 1985. His “ancient-future” project shifted from description to prescription, showing amnesia-prone evangelicals how the future led to, or at least through, the past.2 Meanwhile Colleen Carroll traced similar impulses among younger Catholics in her book The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy (2002). Sociologist of religion Roger Finke has observed an “innovative return to tradition,” while social psychologist Philip Wexler documents “cultural changes toward the sacred” that renew “esoteric traditions” and “mystical practice and theory.”3 In the wake of the New Age, Madonna’s dabblings in Kabala caused skeptics—from inside and outside the traditions themselves—to question the seriousness or scope of the phenomenon. Yet despite the occasional hype and celebrity, there are persistent signs of a growing historical consciousness or, better yet, imagination directed at the roots of religious traditions and the ancient wisdom that has shaped beliefs, inspired practices, and sustained communities over the centuries.

Nowhere is this engagement with the past more evident than in the self-styled ‘emerging’ and ‘emergent’ movements of contemporary Christianity.4 Here is expressed not only a yearning for the supposed integrities of ancient ways, but a deep sense of participation in those practices and patterns of life that provide what Wexler calls a “reselfing”—the realization of a new identity by immersing oneself in a comprehensive way of life. I would also call it ‘ancient-future belonging’ because the expressed desire for new forms of common life is not only synchronic, but diachronic: synchronic in its attention to the development of intimate associations in a complex workplace of salvation; diachronic its fusion of horizons over time—remembering, recovering, and reckoning with a past way of life “within-time-ness”

4 Recent descriptions of emerging, emergent, and various dissenting movements, especially in contemporary evangelical Christianity, are found in Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” Christianity Today (February 2007), 35-39; “McLaren Emerging,” Christianity Today (September 2008); and Phyllis Tickle, “The Great Emergence,” Sojourners ((August 2008). McKnight makes a distinction between emergent, as represented in Emergent Village and its leaders Brian, McLaren, Tony Jones, and Doug Pagitt, and emerging, which is a “mix of orthodox, missional, evangelical, church-centered and social justice leaders and lay folk.” Tickle uses emergence in a broad historical sense for those movements within Christianity that, about every 500 years, break through the institutional “carapace” of the Church “in order that renewal and new growth may occur.” Included here is a diverse assortment of ‘young evangelicals,’ post-evangelicals and dissenting Catholics—all seeking “a new, more vital form of Christianity.”
(Heidegger). So, for example, emergent writer Tony Jones’s book on lectio divina is a guide to the “interior space” in which the Holy Spirit continues to work through a monastic reading practice. In learning how the saints “prayed the Bible,” one is better equipped to experience the “feeling, noticing, and absorbing” of God’s presence in personal as well as communal settings today. Meanwhile, in his novel Chasing Francis, Ian Morgan Cron hopes his fictional encounter with the “postmodern saint” Francis of Assisi will help the reader discover a long-lost transcendence, community, beauty, dignity, and meaning to the Christian life in the here-and-now. The “spiritual energy” released by plunging into “the heart of Francis” prompted the main character of Cron’s story—an evangelical pastor—to “dive” into his own heart and then re-emerge with a new vision of the church as a “genuine kingdom community.” In identifying with this character, the reader will learn to rely less on words to express his or her faith, especially in a communal context: it’s about “how we live together” that “attracts people to faith.”

What we see here and in much of contemporary emergent writing is not just the recovery of a past that seems useable; rather, we see an existentially compelling ‘way of life,’ especially a way of life together. Let us consider how this sense of a livable past gives rise to a distinctive historical consciousness in the imagination and memory of the New Monasticism. Here, in particular, a way of connecting oneself or one’s community to historic forms of spiritual life is deeply associated with the idea of ‘wisdom’—the traditional term most often used for the kind of participatory knowledge that is received and passed on in communal contexts featuring a wide array of epistemic practices or ways of knowing. Four quite different expressions of the New Monasticism—here understood in the broadest sense of Jonathan R. Wilson’s “twelve marks”—will show the central role that wisdom plays, explicitly or otherwise, in the thought and praxis of this diverse movement. And it all reveals just how far “beyond MacIntyre”—beyond virtue ethics, per se—the New Monastics have come in their quest for a new way of life.

Michael Casey, O.S.C.O., a Cistercian monk at Tarrawarra Abbey in Australia, has written a popular invitation to Benedictine monasticism entitled Strangers to the City: Reflections on the Beliefs and Values of the Rule of Saint Benedict (2005). Like countless other mediators of Benedictine monasticism today, he endeavors to make the practice of the Rule comprehensible to an audience that he imagines to be receptive to a “reorientation of life.” This conversion is likely to have begun stirring deep within the seeker well before arriving at the monastery, “working its magic and underground” such that the visitor gradually see things differently. Most especially, she begins to “glimpse something of the reality underlying human affairs.” Then, at some point, a radical choice is made in submission to a “secret summons,” and all this against the backdrop of an ambient culture “that espouses so very few of the values that characterize our seeking God” and its attendant way of life. The goals and assumptions of this culture recede in importance as she is “impelled toward a different future,” and, most immediately, a “different lifestyle.”

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6 Tony Jones, Divine Intervention: Encounter God through the Ancient Practice of Lectio Divina (Colorado Springs: Think, 2006).
7 Ian Morgan Cron, Chasing Francis: A Pilgrim’s Tale (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 194.
10 Ibid., 7-8.
Upon arrival at the monastery, a “fusion of horizons” occurs as the “life-enriching vision of St. Benedict” is gradually assimilated—consciously and otherwise—offering “greater access to the evangelical wisdom that he taught through his Rule and through the form of monastic living that he established.”11 This way of life and its attendant wisdom is communicated in what seems like a mostly “wordless process of transmission,” with the chief lessons “learned through living.” Doctrina (theoretical knowledge) and disciplina (spiritual disciplines) work together in the day-to-day “network of supportive practices”—“interior and exterior, individual and communal, spontaneous and routine.” Virtues and progress toward the goal of communion with Christ are then acquired almost unwittingly in an atmosphere of “antecedent willingness,” omnidirectional “mutuality” and “generativity.”12

Not everyone who arrives at the monastery doorstep will, of course, enter into the full life of the community and take the requisite vows—especially given the more accommodating options of the occasional monastic retreat or the secular oblation within traditional monasticism. Nevertheless, the ideal of traditional monastic life still manages to assert a powerful magnetic response in the spiritual compass of this more transient population. Borrowing from Esther de Wall, Brother Benet Tvedten, O.S.B, describes the “calling to oblation” as a “returning home” to a familiar place: “Sometimes one finds a place, a landscape, which is new and yet the forms, the shapes, the shadows seem already familiar. So it was with the Rule. It was neither remote nor past nor cerebral, but immediate and relevant, speaking of things that I already half knew or was struggling to make sense of.” Not unlike the “secret summons” referred to previously by Michael Casey, Tvedten recalls from the Prologue to the Benedictine Rule that the “voice of the Lord calling to us” may be deeply resonate with a longing that predisposes the seeker to recognize something strangely familiar in the 1500-year-old spirituality of Benedictine life.13

One of Brother Benet’s oblates, Dennis Okholm, has written of his own experience of this inner calling. He recalls his first monastic retreat from the demands of ministry in an evangelical church as a “profound” life-changing experience. In reflecting back on the initial basis for his deep attraction to the monastery, he highlights the practicality of the Rule—as a “guide for living the Christian gospel and for cultivating Christian virtue. It is less like the Law and more like the wisdom literature of the Old Testament… It passed on a tradition of wisdom from the lived experience of monastic life.” As such, the Rule operates “as a kind of flexible hermeneutical device to translate the gospel into daily communal Christian living” in any time or place.14 While an oblate is unable to participate in this communal life in a day-to-day residential capacity, he or she will put the “balance and realism” of its wisdom to work in the pursuit of God—personally as well as in the local church. In this way, the Rule reminds one that the Christian community’s ultimate function is “to shape individuals who, as disciples of Christ, are being formed into his image.” This is the “test of any religious community,” Okholm observes.15 And so, his director adds that monastic spirituality is not a “series of ascetical exercises,” but a “listening commitment to the human community” and a “way of relating that takes [one] out of [oneself] into the mind of God for humanity.” In short, it is not a “program,” but a “way of life.”16

The capacity of an ancient way of life to speak to an inner longing, a homing instinct, or a secret summons in late modernity is a cause of tremendous intellectual curiosity to Aaron Milavec. He has...

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11 Ibid., xiii. It should be noted that Casey makes no explicit reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer, who coined the phrase ‘fusion of horizons,’ nor does he use the phrase in Gadamer’s formal sense.
12 Ibid., 162.
13 Benet Tvedten, O.S.B., How to Be a Monastic And not Leave Your Day Job: An Invitation to Oblate Life (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 72, 105.
15 Ibid., 37; italics added for emphasis.
16 Tvedten, 19, 109.
produced the most detailed scholarly examination yet of the first-century church document known as *The Didache*. Formerly associated with the Athenaeum of Ohio, and, more recently, Catherine of Siena Virtual College, his project combines detailed textual, source, and redactive criticism with an imaginary participation in the “altered social reality” of the ancient Didache community. At the beginning of his commentary on the “life-transforming training program,” Milavec observes:

> Any community that cannot artfully and effectively pass on its cherished way of life as a program for divine wisdom and graced existence cannot long endure. Any way of life that cannot be clearly specified, exhibited, and differentiated from the alternative modes operative within the surrounding culture is doomed to growing insignificance and gradual assimilation.

Accordingly, Milavec’s 984-page study of *The Didache* reveals a pathway of spiritual training designed to form a distinctive way of life, with new “habits of perception and standards of judgment” that has contemporary significance.\(^1\) This becomes readily apparent when Milavec’s massive project concludes with a “spirituality” of the Didache community—already a source of inspiration to groups like the Sonoma Didache Community in Sonoma, California.\(^1\)

What is most interesting is the way Milavec consciously situates this ancient text within his own postmodern context and, in the process, engages in an imaginative reconstruction of its practical theology. He reads the text of the *Didache* with an expectation that it will convey a coherent plan, with its own “logic,” and “its own passionate concerns.” From his introductory autobiography, he recalls how he had been trained otherwise by those graduate school professors who dissected and manipulated the text to answer academic questions, not those “for which it was originally intended.” From his Epilogue, we learn that he also inherited the proverbial “God-in-the-box” Christianity of his parochial Catholic youth, not at all like the “grace-filled relationships” he has since discovered in the *Didache*. Milavec found the “religious system” and much anticipated “voice” that is internal to the text, with the help of philosopher Michael Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge as well as a wide array of close-reading techniques. He has reached a point where he can listen to his spiritual “companions” in the *Didache*, immersing himself in their world. In the larger of his two books on the subject, he hopes readers will do the same:

> You, the reader of this volume, can be compared to a shipmate signing on for … a second voyage. You are spared the terror and the uncertainty that accompanied the first passage. I faced them practically alone and returned alive to tell about it. Strange stories, strange experiences, and strange people returned with me. Now you, my reader, are signed on to retrace the route back in time whereby I discovered the ‘new world’ of the *Didache*.\(^1\)

Inevitably, Milavec hopes his “leaps of the imagination” will connect to the reality of Christian readers today—“in a situation only marginally removed from those encountered by the Didache communities.” He admits that he may “overdo these parallels and project some of them quite uncritically,” but it is all for the purpose of allowing the reader to experience the joys and pains which lay at the heart of the Didache community.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Ibid., 842.
Finally, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a leading exponent of the new monasticism and co-founder of the Rutha House in Durham, North Carolina, does his own retracing of routes by acquainting himself and his growing readership with the long history—or “river of faithfulness”—of intentional Christian communities. He considers not only ancient texts like the Rule of Benedict, but more recent movements like the Catholic Workers, Clarence Jordan’s Koinonia Farm, and Shane Claiborne’s Simple Way community. Initially, Wilson-Hartgrove was “looking for a way to live that would make it easier for [him] to do the things that Jesus taught and practiced.”

The search began with the feeling that his evangelical context was compromised by consumerism, and was intensified by contact with the Simple Way’s “unassuming but authentic ways.” Here he began to realize that living the Sermon on the Mount on the margins of church and society was not really such a “new” thing. It was merely one expression among countless others over the course of history of Christians recovering something vital—something the Christian faith “had in its period of beginnings.”

At the New Monasticism Gathering in 2004, Wilson-Hartgrove recalls his father-in-law, Jonathan R. Wilson, following through on Alasdair McIntyre’s “after Benedict” call—everyone imagining, in response, “new forms of faithfulness for American Christianity.” What was happening, as the younger Jonathan reflects, was that “God is always doing a new thing, always breathing new life into the church. If we have eyes to see, there are signs of something new right alongside the signs of the time.”

In response to the need to “hear the gospel again,” Wilson-Hartgrove sought out stories of monastic or semi-monastic life, ranging from St. Antony to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day, and began to realize they were all part of his own story, yet “a vision so old it looks like new,” he observed.

When he examined older texts like the Rule of Benedict, he felt a “deep intuition” that Benedict and other practitioners of intentional Christian community did something right. This “lively convergence” was most apparent in the four characteristics that Jonathan senior had proposed as definitive of the new monasticism, with: (1) a recovered gospel telos that views all of life—including modern distinctions between sacred and secular spheres—as under the lordship of Christ; (2) a commitment to building-up the whole people of God without division into ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ vocations; (3) a disciplined life, but only as “a means to an end—the faithful life and witness of the church”; and (4) “deep theological reflection and commitment” such that the new monasticism can recover both “right belief and right practice.”

The latter—“right belief and right practice”—are especially critical to the attainment of ancient ‘wisdom.’ In St. Benedict’s Rule, for example, there are both interior and exterior dynamics that constitute the sought-after way of life. There is the inner condition of one’s soul, with particular emphasis on cultivating the mind of Christ; and there is a wider participation in the external forms of communal life that cultivate the body of Christ. The relationship between the two is at the crux of Benedictine wisdom. This is the key to the Rule’s accounting for “ordinary” or “trivial” life redeemed. It is also the wisdom revealed in Christ—seeing with the “inner eyes the kingdom that we hope for.”

Despite the major differences one would expect to find between a traditional Benedictine, a Protestant oblate, a dissenting Catholic scholar, and an emergent evangelical community organizer, there are some striking similarities between the four in their exercises of imagination and memory. It is as if

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22 Ibid., 29.
23 Ibid., 38.
24 Ibid., 55.
history, itself, becomes a form of consciousness that involves not only rational thought and action, but a sense of real participation through ‘re-enactment’ and its attendant emotions, desires, motives, and other ‘non-rational’ aspects of human life—individually and communally. 28 The late Cambridge theologian Daniel W. Hardy spoke of this consciousness as a discourse of “intimate identification,” a “kinship,” constituted by a diverse array of epistemic practices and ethical structures and norms. “Time thickens” amidst the contingencies and dynamic interchanges between the self and the social, the present thick description of life and an imagined community that is as richly textured and complex as any way of life experienced in the here and now. 29 Similarly, historian Wayne Meeks writes of a “hermeneutics of social embodiment” over time made possible by “participation at least in the imagination, an empathy with the kind of communal life which ‘fits’ the text.” The ‘fit’ is discerned by “tuning” to the way in which the text worked in its original context as it is put into practice in a present-day community. 30

Time limitations allow me to unpack this complex operation only in terms of a theory of practice. According to Craig Dykstra, practice is how the memory, as just described, is most effectively constituted—remembering not only as one “seek[s] understanding,” but as one seeks a “way to live.” 31 When traditional monastic Michael Casey explains how doctrina and disciplina work together in the daily “network of supportive practices” of Benedictine life, new monastic Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove might immediately recognize something familiar. He sees a dual means of achieving the interior reconditioning of the soul and external realization of the body of Christ—the practiced necessities of a way of life that makes it “easier” to follow Jesus. In his study of Scripture and in his deepening acquaintance with historic monasticism, Wilson-Hartgrove comes to realize that practices are not made-up at all, but rather are received as a form of activity and life that are part of a complex tradition of interactions. “The past is embedded in the practice[s],” Dykstra observes, and as such they awaken the imagination to a “vision” that is strangely familiar, making for a “lively convergence” (Wilson-Hartgrove).

Certainly, if we look hard enough, we see within all of the case-studies I have presented—even in the ‘traditional’ monasticism of Michael Casey—a deepening, extending, or adapting of historic practices and patterns of life to a late-modern social-cultural milieu. Casey himself admits that Benedictine life must maintain a balance between “distinctiveness and porosity,” between adhering to the tradition and responding to the world “outside”. After all, he observes, “the sixth century has no more claim on us than our own.” 32 So it is not surprising that the shape and direction of particular practices may, in fact, be considerably altered in the process of transmission. And yet, a peculiar quality (and quantity?) of value is consistently associated with the practices, a value apprehended in the deeper intuitions. This value is the good(s) “internal” to the practice, realized only through actual participation in that practice. Moral standards and ethical norms, as well as doctrina and, as Wilson-Hartgrove suggests, a more immediate awareness of the mind of Christ, are the particular goods that attract new monastics to the strangely familiar ancient way of life.

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32 Casey, Strangers to the City, 11-13.
But let us not forget that this dual pattern is constitutive of wisdom, as traditionally understood. I’ve just noted that there is more than just a moral-ethical dimension to this ancient-future belonging, but a critical epistemological dimension as well. The imagination, and its reconstituted memory, recognize more than just goods and values, but also certain realities or, at least, understandings, beyond the practices themselves. At this point, we could plunge into the growing scholarship on what Dykstra calls “somatic knowledge” or, perhaps, explore the various forms of cognition associated with Michael Polanyi’s “tacit knowledge.” (Aaron Milavec moves in this direction as he shifts his attention from thick description of the Didache community to advocating its postmodern renewal!) For now, however, I would simply say that the dual pattern expresses a movement from ethics to epistemology—what Dykstra calls “more subtle realms of insight or perceptiveness into various regions of reality.” In most new monastic writing there is an urgent sense that talk about the Christian faith is only meaningful when it is properly conditioned by actual practice. This is what Milavec has in mind when he refers to his Didache project as the recovery of a whole new way of life, with new “habits of perception and standards of judgment.” Similarly, the wisdom attained as participatory knowledge inclines one to hear the “voice of the Lord calling,” as suggested by Brother Benet, or perhaps takes one out of oneself all the way “into the mind of God,” as his oblate, Dennis Okholm, prefers.

I’d like to conclude by suggesting that this way of knowing in the historical consciousness of new monasticism has moved well beyond the moral concerns of Alisdair McIntyre’s original “new Benedict” proposal. We are seeing, instead, how epistemology, not just ethics, follows ontology; or as Thomas F. Torrance suggests, understanding accords with “the substance of what is sought; … just as form and being are inseparable in what is known.” This assumes a “unitary view of truth” and a critical realism such that the “active truth” of God, especially in the domain of history, shows itself again and again. But this requires that the recipients be conformed to the interactive rationality afforded by this truth—and this is, at the least, the post-foundational ontology we see in the likes of new monasticism. The deep plausibility of this truth is realized in the wisdom of a practiced way of life—what one knows is indwelled or inhabited even as it is received and passed-on through ancient-future belonging.

Might the new monastic preference for past over present discovery lead to a more robust identification with the rich canonical heritage of the Church? Or, is this rather sturdy world-orienting view of things likely to impede the “river of faithfulness” envisioned by Jonathan Hartgrove-Wilson, et al.? I would answer ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ respectively, but only as the movement carefully tends to the practices of reading, testimony, and, most of all, prayer and worship that safeguard the integrities of the Tradition’s comprehensiveness, unsurpassiblity, and centrality. This will require not only a more anthropologically nuanced way of doing theology, but also an historical consciousness that is attentive to the rich complexity and detail of an entire way of life—the old but very active wisdom that is, in fact, crucial to any faithful transmission over time and space. Indeed, this promises to make the new monasticism—set against its transient context of ‘emerging’ and ‘emergence’—far more substantial than a trend!

33 Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 172.
35 Ibid., 168.