

THE CANONS AND CANONESSES REGULAR AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO THE
MINISTRIES OF LARGE, MULTI-STAFF, CONGREGATIONS TODAY

Reflections on “Monasticisms” Old and New

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Megachurches are reconsidering their models. The Willow Creek Association’s REVEAL study only highlights the big questions nagging large congregations these days: What is the church really all about? What does it mean to “make disciples”? How does congregational form, size, and structure facilitate (or inhibit) authentic Christian ministry? What role(s) might the leaders of these congregations have to play in all this? Keith Meyers, executive pastor of the 3,000 member Church of the Open Door in suburban Twin Cities, Minnesota, addresses some of these themes in his forthcoming *Leadership Journal* article on megachurch discipleship and the new monasticism (due early in 2009).. In this article, Meyers makes the novel suggestion that “the answer for churches both large and small might be found in an approach to spiritual formation associated with the monastery.” Drawing from Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church*, he describes the potential of such practices as contemplative prayer, intentional community, and engaging with people on the margins of society for the local church, giving attractive examples from his own congregational experience. He explores the place of spiritual formation in the context of “environments of change” and ponders how to honor both the “core” and the “crowd.” In the end, Meyers has no final answers for the megachurch, but clearly communicates a hunch that we might have much to learn from

the history and practices of monastic life.

I concur. In fact, I want to take one step further. I wish to suggest that in the rich history of Christian spirituality there is one group of pastor-monks who rose up to serve large churches with fervent devotion and who, in doing so, might offer interesting models and perspectives for large multi-staff churches today. I am speaking of the Canons (and Canonesses) Regular, also known as the Black Canons, or Augustinian Canons. This group is, to quote one of the primary historians of the Canons Regular, “the most neglected religious order of the medieval church.”¹ And for that reason, I will begin by giving a brief introduction to the development and characteristic spirituality of the Regular Canons. Then, having offered a taste of the movement, I will be able to show something of its relevance for today.

Origins and Development of the Canon(ess) Regular

The term “canon” used as an ecclesiastical title was first used to describe those clergy who served under a diocesan bishop (and whose names were on the official list, or *canones*). In time, however the term was gradually limited to clergy associated with a cathedral or with a church attached to a college. Thus, by the end of the eleventh century, the term “*canonicus* is assuming its modern sense of one of a body of secular clergy attached to a large church.”² By “secular” clergy was meant clergy who were not members of a religious order (like those Benedictines who, on occasion, were ordained and served local churches), but rather who were part of the ordinary parish structure. The term “secular canon” actually developed in part “to distinguish them from the Augustinian or ‘regular’ canons who lived under a semi-monastic rule.”³ But that is getting ahead of our story.

1 . J.C. Dickinson, *The Origins of the Austin Canons and Their Introduction Into England* (London: SPCK, 1950), v.

2 . J.C. Dickinson, *The Origins of the Austin Canons and Their Introduction Into England* (London: SPCK, 1950), 24.

3 . F. L. Cross, E. A. Livingston, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition

The practice of ministry teams living in community, sharing resources, living within a rule of life, and caring for the population surrounding them goes back to Jesus and his disciples. Matthew 10// Luke 10 present this distinct rule of life for Jesus's followers. Jesus's example was followed to some extent by the primitive church in Jerusalem and by the missionary teams that spread the Gospel during the apostolic era. It is likely that there were always isolated examples of clerical communities throughout the first few centuries of the Church. The fourth century church historian Eusebius makes mention of a number of clerics who lived the common life.

But this vision of the *vita apostolica* (apostolic way of life) received special recognition through the life and works of Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430). Even before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine pursued a life of philosophic community with a few of his friends. His conversion itself was stimulated in part by the reading of the biography of Antony of Egypt, one of the founders of Western monasticism. Ultimately Augustine was appointed to become the bishop of Hippo. Historian of religious orders Doley Moss writes of Augustine's transfer to Hippo:

The austere life he had led in Tagaste was transferred to his episcopal residence; but instead of the company of his friends, he had the canons of the cathedral, whom he invited to join him in it. He and his priests renounced property and lived under the rule that he wrote for them. Thus they became Canons Regular, a binding together of the clerical and the monastic state that was not entirely monastic, yet not secular either. It was a "quasi-monastic" state."¹

While there is a great deal of uncertainty regarding this "Rule" of Augustine,² what is

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v. "canon," p. 277.

1 . Doley C. Moss, *Of Cell and Cloister: Catholic Religious Orders Through the Ages* (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1957), 25.

2 . For discussions of its authorship and development of the Rules of Augustine see Dickinson, *Origins*, 255-285 and Augustine, *The Monastic Rules*, trans. Agatha Mary and Gerald Bonner, *Classics of*

certain is that groups of clergy often banded together to serve the church from a commitment to shared housing/resources and a rule of life inspired by the life and writings of Augustine. As we shall see, this identification with Augustine becomes much more pronounced in the twelfth century.

By the eighth century monastic institutions had proliferated throughout Europe. But with this proliferation came disorder. It was difficult to know what was expected and who was in charge of what. Chrodegang, bishop of Metz (in the Frankish kingdom) from 742-747, sought to bring a measure of order to ecclesiastical and monastic life. Among the many reforms he pioneered was a call for the restoration of clergy community life, writing a distinct Rule to that end. In chapter four of this Rule for canons, Chrodegang states that

All should come to the divine office at all the canonical hours [the appointed times for prayer]. At the hour for the divine office, as soon as the signal is heard, those who are close enough to the building to be able to get there for the office must drop whatever they have in hand and hurry there with all possible speed. And if anyone is far from the church, so that he cannot get there for the canonical hours, and the bishop or the archdeacon agrees that such is the situation, he shall perform the work of God right where he is at that time, with reverence dear. And the archdeacon or the head or guardian of the church shall see to it that the signals are sounded at the proper time.¹

Chrodegang's Rule was later affirmed at the synod of Aachen in 817 where the common life was made a general rule for all clergy, as far as possible.

Nonetheless, the model of the apostolic life was not the norm for clergy in the middle ages. Indeed, by the eleventh century a variety of factors (wars, ecclesiastical power struggles,

Western Spirituality (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2004), 479–94.

1 . Cited in Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 205.

church-state relations, etc.) had left clerical life in a sad condition. Ecclesiastical positions were sold or given to nobles with little Christian training (or interest). Many, disregarding any vow of celibacy, were too distracted with families and properties to be concerned with the people who congregated in their cathedrals and churches. Thus, as Dickinson writes,

The real cause of the rise of the regular canons was that disgust with contemporary worldliness which became increasingly prominent in the Western Church from the mid-eleventh century. As we have seen, in many parts at least drastic measures were needed, and these the faithful were now prepared to furnish. Amongst the most influential of them was that integration of the *ordo canonicus* and the full common life which constituted the distinctive contribution of the regular canons to the problems of their day and the history of their Church.

Against the chief dangers of the eleventh-century Church this was an admirable bulwark. For clergy vowed to the full common life the possession of private property and the acquisition of a wife became as difficult and unlikely as was humanly possible. To embrace such a life was, in general, a sign of spiritual ardour not to be found in the landed gentry, who had for so long been gravitating into lucrative ecclesiastical offices, whilst this deep communal life offered spiritual succour against temptation withheld from those who, like so many parish clergy of the day, lived in undisciplined isolation. Further, as recent centuries had painfully manifested, the maintenance of divine worship, was more likely to be maintained by a community of regular canons than by individuals liable to the distractions of private property and family ties.¹

Dickinson states that the evidence makes it clear that “the early houses of regular canons were largely, if not wholly, inspired by the wish of earnest churchmen to restore the primitive purity of that canonical life without which the primary function of worship could scarcely be

1 . Dickinson, *Origins*, 26-27.

maintained.”¹

This effort at restoration took place at three different levels. First, devout clergy began to band together here and there and explore appropriate ways to serve the church together. Second, inspired authorities would hand responsibility of churches over to communities of clergy. And third, official statements were issued to support the legitimacy and function of these communities of priests. Key statements were made in the Lateran councils of 1059 and 1063, authorizing and encouraging the development of communities of regular canons. Again Dickinson writes of the decree of 1059:

With that sound sense of the possible which medieval Church Councils so often displayed, a judicious middle course was taken. The fourth canon of the Lateran Council of 1059 immediately followed an enactment recalling an ordinance made by Leo IX to secure the continence of priests, deacons, and subdeacons, and laid down that “those of the aforesaid orders who, in obedience to our same predecessor, have kept their chastity shall eat and sleep together by the churches to which they have been ordained, as behooves religious clerks; and whatever income they derive from the churches they shall hold in common. And we ask and urge that they shall strive with all their might to attain to the apostolic, that is the common life.” . . . “In according the highest praise to this ideal without making it of universal obligation, the council faithfully produced what had long been the considered opinion of the Church.”²

These developments were strongly supported by such important figures as pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand, d. 1085) and Peter Damian (1007-1072).

It was during this period (the eleventh and twelfth centuries) that the canons regular achieved their most distinctive character and influence. Independent houses of regular canons were established in Italy first. Then the movement spread to France and England and beyond.

1 . Ibid., 29.

2 . Dickinson, *Origins*, 32, 33.

By the start of the thirteenth century there were more regular canons than members of any other religious order in England (around 173 independent houses). The character of these regular canons was constantly put into question: were they monks, priests, or something else? One of the regular canons of the time (around 1120) wrote a treatise, “On the Different Orders” to address just such concerns. Christopher Brooke, in his *The Monastic World: 1000-1300* summarizes this canon’s perspective as follows:

To him, there were two types of religious communities, those that dwelt remote from man’s habitations, and those that lived in towns, surrounded by the secular world. He has something to say about hermits (whom he admires, but treats quite briefly), and of the difference between monks and canons, and between canons regular and secular. The heart of his message is that those who dwell far from men are often more austere, more heroic in their prayers and their fasting; but that those who live in cities can combine contemplation with good works and practical influence.¹

In 1139 a council declared that all Regular Canons would follow the Rule of Augustine, and so the tie was officially made between the regular canons and the Rule of Augustine. It was not until the middle of the thirteenth century that many of these congregations of canons amalgamated and, under the Rule of Augustine, became definitely known as the “Canons of St. Augustine.” A variety of independent houses and congregations of houses developed throughout the late Middle Ages (including the Augustinian friars, the order with which Martin Luther was associated). Some of the more well-known congregations of regular canons are the Victorines founded by a scholar in the monastery of St. Victor and the Norbertines or Premonstratensians founded in Prémontré in France. During the thirteenth century some of the energy of this movement was transferred to the Dominicans (followers of St. Dominic, also known as the Order of Preachers), who adopted the Rule of Augustine and much of the

1 . Christopher Brooke, *The Monastic World: 1000–1300* (New York: Random House, 1974), 133.

Constitutions of the Premonstratensians for his pioneering missionary order. Ultimately, the Rule of Augustine (and the ideals of the regular canonical orders) were adapted to a wide range of “active” institutes in the modern period (like the societies formed around the leadership of St. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marrillac). Some of the orders (for example, the Premonstratensians) still exist today.

To many of these orders throughout history there have been communities of women related. Hence, just as there are canons regular, so there are canonesses regular. Once again, there is evidence of these types of communities back to Augustine, Basil, and apostolic times. Whereas canons, as ordained clergy, serve the church through clerical duties, the canonesses have served the church through prayer, through education, through care for poor and needy, and through the sewing of articles related to liturgical services.¹

Spirituality of the Canon(ess) Regular

Having given an overview of the origins and development of the regular canonical orders, we are now prepared to comprehend a summary of the characteristics of their spirituality. It must be remembered, however, that the regular canons (without any definite “founder” or uniform charter) developed their characteristics slowly and variously from community to community and location to location. Indeed this institutional ambiguity was one of the strengths and weaknesses of the regular canonical orders. On the one hand, it offered much room for what Dickinson calls “unbridled experimentation.” Communities of clerics would resist formulating strict Rules or Constitutions until they had explored various ways of linking pastoral service and quasi-monastic commitments. This gave them freedom and time to discover what worked. On the other hand, they constantly struggled with official approval and understanding. Whereas most monastic orders had recognized founders and clear Rules and Constitutions to guide them, regular canons only had appeal to “custom” or “common observances.” Indeed it was these concerns, in the context of a very legal-oriented culture, that led to

1 . On canonesses see the last section of the article on “Canons and Canonesses Regular” in the Catholic Encyclopedia found at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03288a.htm>.

the increased emphasis on Augustine and the Rule of Augustine. I will summarize their spirituality under a number of headings that, to my understanding, characterize the regular canonical orders: pastoral vision, common life, moderate intentionality, flexibility, and the balance of prayer and action.

Pastoral Vision

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the regular canonical orders is the combination of two features: congregational ministers in the context of a common life. As we have seen, the foundations of the regular canons are rooted in concerns with the state of pastoral ministry. It must be clearly understood that the regular canons were *clergy*, for the most part. They were people of the church. As Dickinson puts it, “regular canons were regarded not as monks with clerical characteristics, but as clerks with monastic characteristics.”¹ Theirs was a ministry of leading worship, hearing confessions, preaching, teaching, and compassionate hospitality. The mechanism of the canonical ordered life was explored as a means of vitalizing ministry to the local church, and in particular the large, multi-staffed cathedrals which served not only as worship centers but as the civic centers of their era.

Consider, for example, the commitment that each member of the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré (the Premonstratensians) makes:

On the day of profession each one of us offers and gives himself to a specific church in which the Church of Christ is truly present, and is immediately incorporated into a certain community (canonry) of the Premonstratensian Order. Our communities are especially ordered so that through the practice of the common life and the apostolic mission they may manifest the “*communio*” [relation to and for one another] of the Church of Christ within themselves, and also beyond: in the people of God as well as among men.²

The aim of the Premonstratensians is a self-giving relatedness: first within their own smaller

1 . Dickinson, *Origins*, 79.

2 . Day of Pentecost: Constitutions of the Order of Canons Regular of Premontre (DePere, WI: St. Norbert Abbey, 1997), 5.

community, then because of and through this community to the service of a specific congregation, and then beyond that to the people of God and the world in general. While many religious orders have as their focus the life of prayer (the Carthusians, for example), or the life of missionary endeavor (the Jesuits, for example), the regular canonical orders see themselves as servants of and participants with the local church.

This sense of identity as parish clergy had painful consequences in the history of the regular canonical orders. It was not always clear who was in charge of particular communities. Was the local abbot or prior the leader? Was there a leadership structure within the larger collection of associated houses of canons (as with the Premonstratensians)? Or were they, as diocesan clergy, subject to the authority of the local bishop? Quite often, their commitment to the local congregation led the regular canons to see themselves as simply a collection of servants of the local bishop, with all the advantages and disadvantages this might entail.

Yet their pastoral vision did not stop with the exercise of the ecclesiastical services of a local congregation. As with many involved in pastoral ministry, the compassionate care of those on the margins has been a work of regular canons and canonesses throughout their history. In fact, “many congregations of canons made it their chief end to work among the poor, the lepers, the insane, and the infirm.”¹ The work of offering hospitality to poor travelers has long been distinctive of regular canonical ministry. As you can see, this is not simply a matter of supporting the ministry to the needy, but of hands-on care itself.

Worship, spiritual formation, instruction, compassion, communion: these were the driving themes of regular canonical pastoral vision. In hearing another’s confession and offering advice from the Rule of Augustine, it was the desire to guide another in “uprooting vice.”² In preaching it was the desire to proclaim the gospel to many who, not knowing Latin, did not understand the nature of the faith with which they were aligned. The right relatedness to God expressed in the sacramental ministry, to one another expressed in the common sharing of life and resources, and to the world expressed in

1 . “Canons and Canonesses Regular” <http://newadvent.org/cathen/03288a.htm>.

2 . See “The Customs of Barnwell” in Dickinson, *Origins*, 163).

hospitality--this together was the “communio” sought by the regular canons and canonesses. It was a distinctively pastoral vision.

Common Life

Nevertheless, it was a vision of pastoral ministry lived out in the context of a *common life*. The vision of the apostolic life, so central to the development of the regular canonical orders, is rooted in the vision of Jesus and his disciples sharing life together, and of the early apostolic community sharing life together in Jerusalem. A fourteenth and fifteenth century movement which grew out of the expansion of the regular canonical orders became known as the “Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.” By “common life” was meant the full pooling and sharing of resources among the local community. Thus, by the time of Urban II (around 1088) “charters quite often refer to the practical or theoretical aspect of the full common life, the adoption of which was the first and most distinctive characteristic of their order, noting that the brethren live without private property or follow the *vita apostolica*.”¹ In an economic context flooded with the temptations of ecclesiastical privilege and accumulation of private holdings, a commitment (and by ordained clergy - those who often had access to privilege) to the common possession of goods and resources spoke a prophetically counter-cultural response. The vows of common property and celibacy were not mere shallow traditions but spoke to the heart of the immorality and distractions of the “worldly” life of the landed gentry.

Common life also points to those features present in any community: support, encouragement, and accountability. Again, the Constitutions of the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré urge that,

Among the people of God, we should put into practice day after day the gift of self we have made, whether in the principal house (abbey) or in dependent houses, or in other assemblies of brethren. There, while cooperating with one another and holding all our goods in common, we cherish the growth of that one mind and heart which makes us the temple of God through our joys and sorrows.²

1 . Dickinson, *Origins*, 52.

2 . Day of Pentecost: *Constitutions of the Order of Canons Regular of Premontre* (DePere, WI: St. Norbert

This sense of the mutual support of one another toward not only personal spiritual formation, but of the formation of a common heart and mind is characteristic of a spirituality nourished by the Rule(s) of Augustine. The Augustinian *Praeceptum* declares that “in the first place--and this is the very reason for your being gathered together in one--you should live in the *house in unity of spirit* (Ps 67:7[68:6]) and you should have *one soul and one heart* (Acts 4:32) centered on God”; that “[a]t the moment of entering the monastery those who had any property should gladly choose to have it become common property”; that “when you go out, walk together; and when you come to your destination, stay together”; and that “when you are together in church or elsewhere where women are also present you should protect one another’s modesty, . . . and if you should notice in any one of you such wanton eyes as I am speaking of, you should warn him at once so that what has begun may go no further and may be immediately corrected.”¹

Moderate Intentionality

This mention of the Rule of Augustine brings us to our next feature of the spirituality of the regular canons, the moderation of their life. Like monastics (and unlike secular clergy) the regular canons lived under the guidance of a Rule of life (the term “rule” is literally *regula*, hence “regular” canons are those canons who live according to a rule, as opposed to the “secular” canons who live just as other people of the world--the *saecula*-- live). As St. Martin of Leon, the Spanish Augustinian, writes of the regular canons, “they deny self, they cut themselves from marriage and contagion of the world, content with food and raiment, they promise obedience unto death to their superiors. And this that is the life of monks cannot be taken to differ from that of regular canons.”² And yet their Rule of life is distinctively moderate. Whereas other Rules might specify the precise times for and items to be

Abbey, 1997), 5.

1 . Augustine, *The Monastic Rules*, trans. Agatha Mary and Gerald Bonner, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2004), *Praeceptum* 1.2,1.4, 4.2, 4.6–7.

2 . Cited in Dickinson, *Origins*, 206-07.

avoided in fasting, the *Praeceptum* of Augustine simply encourages the participant to “[d]iscipline your flesh by fasting and abstinence from food and drink as far as your health allows. But when anyone cannot remain fasting, he should not take food apart from the midday meal unless he is ill.”¹ Augustine does not specify the nature of the clothing worn by participants, encouraging instead the “holy interior clothing” of the heart. Again and again, the Rule of Augustine expresses a unique combination of intentionality with regard to issues of spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines along side a broad welcome to the variety of circumstances and people who come together to be formed.

The canons and canonesses who ultimately adopted this Rule lived into this same moderate intentionality. As one interpreter puts it:

The Rule of Augustine varied in severity according to the houses. It laid down as essential the community life with the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The night Office also was always prescribed, but it was shorter than that of the Benedictines. The day was taken up by prayer and work, which was either that of parochial duties, study, or manual labour. Fasting and mortifications varied considerably between one congregation and another. With the Premonstratensians, austerity as regards food, clothing and sleep were as great as in the Cistercian monasteries. On the other hand, meat was allowed three times a week, and fish, eggs, and milk products were not forbidden at other times.”²

Interesting enough, this “moderation” of spirituality extended even to the balance between “head and heart” toward which extremes Christian thought and life can swing. Dickinson compares the canons to their contemporaries, the Cistercians who, according to Dickinson, appealed “almost exclusively to the heart rather than the head.” He goes on to say that

The attitude of the first regular canons, like that of the Elizabethan Reformers, was much more rational and strove to lead a life formulated as a result of careful study of the Church’s past. They studied previous *canones* as the Anglican Reformers probed the primitive Church. As the Anglican

1 . Augustine, *The Monastic Rules*, trans. Agatha Mary and Gerald Bonner, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2004), *Praeceptum* 3.1.

2 . Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality in the Middle Ages*, trans. S. P. Jacques, *Christian Spirituality* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1927), 105–06.

tradition was maintained by an unbroken line of donnish defenders, so the regular canons, at least in their heyday, included within their ranks more than their share of the learned. The delicate balance which the Book of Common Prayer sought to maintain between “true piety and sound learning” was exactly the task on which the regular canons were mostly engaged in their quite different sphere when, as the twelfth century advanced, it became necessary for them to formulate their position.”¹

I suspect that it was this same moderate balance of head and heart that was transmitted to the Order of Preachers in the thirteenth century. I also suspect that the Augustinian “moderate intentionality” would be perceived in our over-lax society as being quite severe. And it *was*, I repeat, a prophetic statement in the context of the corruption of the clergy of the day. Nonetheless, set aside other monastic communities, the regular canons and canonesses lived a truly moderate intentionality.

Flexibility

Which, in turn, brings us to the next feature of the spirituality of the regular canonical orders. The article on the Augustinian canons in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* specifically mentions this characteristic, stating that “The flexibility of their rule enabled regular canons to follow various occupations, active and contemplative.”² Similarly Dickinson, in summarizing the factors contributing to the growth of the movement states that, “[t]he well-known flexibility of the order was a further important factor in furthering its progress. As we have seen, the primary concern of the regular canons was to live the “apostolic life,” a scheme whose sole certain implication was the full common life. This was compatible with a variety of spiritual ideals, No other order offered the founder of a religious house such a choice of spiritual prospects.”³

The flexibility of the canons and canonesses was not merely an accident of history. It was part

1 . Dickinson, *Origins*, 176.

2 . F. L. Cross, E. A. Livingston, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v. “Augustinian Canons,” p. 131.

3 . Dickinson, *Origins* 137.

of their spirituality. The apostolic life demanded the possibility of adapting to the needs of different peoples and situations. It was a virtue to be cultivated, one which regarded interior authenticity above the exterior means and manifestations. While the canons could not rest, like the Cistercians, in absolute predictability, they were able to make themselves available--through the adaptation of devotion and service to particular circumstances--to the advancement of the communion of God.

Balance of Prayer and Action

And of course this moderation and flexibility was most clearly expressed in the balance of prayer and action that was characteristic of the regular canonical orders in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Roger Bonner, commenting on the Rule(s) of Augustine, writes,

The profoundly religious society of twelfth-century Western Europe witnessed a widely-spread desire to serve God and the community in an active monastic role that was larger in scope than that of the contemplative monk or the simple parish priest. For such an aspiration the Benedictine *Rule* was unsatisfactory in that its essence was stability--a monk joined the community of a particular house and remained there, in the spirit of the Egyptian desert, until death, leaving it, if at all, only in the most compelling circumstances. The way of life prescribed in the *Praeceptum*, on the other hand, while it emphasized fellowship and mutual sharing within the community and forbade any unnecessary absence from the monastery, was less minutely prescriptive than the Benedictine *Rule* and better adapted for a religious family wishing to pursue an active life in the service of God.¹

As previously mentioned, canons and canonesses were, like nuns and monks, obliged to formal times of public prayer (the divine office) throughout the day. Yet, as we have also seen, canons and canonesses were often active in ministries of preaching, care for the unfortunate, and a good deal of ordinary church work. While examples of contemplative canons and canonesses--and examples of more active monastics--can be given,² the characteristic spirituality of the regular canonical orders is to be

1 . Augustine, *The Monastic Rules*, trans. Agatha Mary and Gerald Bonner, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2004), 31–32.

2 . In fact, however, am simplifying the situation. There was, in the twelfth century, influence from the contemplative

found in the balance of prayer and action.

Just as we can identify a “spirituality” of the Benedictines: a way of relating to God ordered, for example, around stable community, common worship, and humility; so we can describe a “spirituality” of the regular canonical orders: a way of relating to God loosely ordered around pastoral ministry in the context of common life, expressed in a balance of prayer and action on behalf of the Church of Christ.

Relevance for Today

So, what does the history of the regular canonical orders offer us today? Much, I think. To consider the relevance is to ponder the question, “What if . . . ?” Let us take, for starters, the three features specifically mentioned in Keith Meyers’ references to the traits of new monasticism.

First, there is disciplined or contemplative *prayer*. Meyers speaks of the “Wasting Time With God and Others” staff retreat, of the introduction of listening prayer into staff meetings, and other random prayerful exercises explored by church members. But, what if . . . ? What if we comprehended staff membership in a large church as part of a semi-monastic life of prayer? What if we met for common prayer at the opening and close of each day? What if we designated sections of the church campus and times of the day as places and times of prayerful silence (practices common to regular canonical orders)? What if maintaining the purity of public worship was one of our main concerns? How would we, as did the pastors of the large medieval cathedrals, integrate this desire for pure worship with our desire to welcome “Unchurched Harry”? While the canons and canonesses offer no precise formula for ministry today (and indeed, the flexibility of the movement prohibits such a formula from being established) what is present--and I think valuable for us today--is simply the commitment to prayer in the midst of ministry. The regular canons would not allow their pastoral activity to dominate their lives such that personal devotions were abandoned. The regular canons would

revival that affected a number of houses of canons and canonesses such that they became essentially houses of prayer. And conversely, there are instances of Benedictines and other more traditionally “monastic” orders who were involved in the care of churches and other compassionate ministries. Nevertheless, my summaries reflect the general character and founding documents of the respective groups.

not allow the programs of the church to obscure their vision of corporate worship as the first work of the people of God. The “communions” expressed on earth emerge from a communion experienced in relationship with God.

Second there is the issue of intentional *community*. Meyers speaks of the common Rule of life shared by staff, of their hiring of staff with experience in community, of new mentoring ideas with youth, and of the releasing of intentional communities from the womb of the local church. But what if . . .? What if the staff of large multi-staff churches identified themselves as “given over” to this local congregation and to each other in community? What if they began to share an increasingly close geographic location (or even bought a block of suburban housing to house the pastors and families)? What if they lived so “close” they could share lawn-mowers, or bi-weekly dinners, or garden vegetables, or family devotions, or finances? What if pastoral ministry was not a matter of our “occupation” but of our community, a matter of a vow of life together for the sake of service to God and the Church of Christ?

Regular canons saw themselves preeminently as pastoral servants living the apostolic life. What might this “apostolic life” look like today? Would we leave open the option of collectives of unmarried men or women living together in ministry houses? Again, I suspect that much of the actual practice of the eleventh and twelfth century canons and canonesses would be over the top for many mega-churches today. But it is not a question of externals. It is a question of the appropriate embodying of values. One of the reasons that megachurches are reconsidering their structure is that they are wondering if size in itself prohibits the authentic discipleship that arises from community life. My suggestion, as was that of the regular canonical orders (and also was true of the Methodism Meyers mentions), is that perhaps community begins with the leadership.

Third, there is the issue of engaging the margins. The “margins” for one location might be different than that of another. One city’s AIDS ward may be another congregation’s leper colony. Hospitality to needy wanderers might look like Sanctuary for immigrants. Pilgrimages (or relocations) to the inner city might be the “preaching” or “caring” missions of the middle ages. Again, while, we do not find a single “solution” to the question of making the gospel in a megachurch practically relevant to or expressed into the margins of society, what we do see in the regular canonical orders is a

commitment to see part of pastoral ministry and community as a spreading of “communio”--right relationship to and for others. What if . . . this commitment was up front in our mission statements? What if our efforts at compassionate ministry sought not merely to provide finances (although finances are often helpful), but also regular hands-on contact with those in need?

And what might we say about those “environments of change” that Meyers considers? Meyers suggests we become “designers of formational systems of change,” that we develop “experiences and relationships that take people out of their habitual patterns and open them to new ways of thinking and living.” These sound like exciting ideas, and even more exciting when connected to exotic ideas like prayer retreats, rules of life and people on the margins. Being an agent of change is a tantalizing vision, and not without biblical or historical precedent (the regular canonical orders did seek to reform the Church did they not?). And yet, there is a caution. What if . . . we “gave ourselves” over to the service of a particular church for a real, long, time? What if our life was not about doing something big for God, but rather about doing something faithful? The pastoral ministry has long been known as a ministry of self-giving care. At times there are wonderful results. At other times there is little fruit. And yet we serve. We lead in worship; we hear confessions; we preach the Gospel to those who may not understand; we care for those who are suffering. Perhaps we offer a prayer retreat and a flame is ignited in the heart of one. Perhaps we offer a sermon and some are converted. Perhaps we an ear and are able to facilitate healing between a few siblings in Christ. We preside over the setting forth of the praises of God, and in time a congregation begins to grasp a bit more of the presence of God. Communio in small things. And our community of clergy supports us through the work, praying with us, eating with us, living with us.

What if pastoral ministry was not something we accomplished, but someone we were? What if it is not about the design of our programs, but of the faithfulness of our people? As we have learned, the spirituality of the regular canonical life is flexible. Perhaps just flexible enough to strengthen the ministry team of a program-heavy cathedral just as much as a small country church. Yes, perhaps we need to reconsider some of our programs. But perhaps, just perhaps, the most powerful influence might come not from our revised programs, but from our reborn communities of pastors. Perhaps *being* the

change we want to produce is in itself the environment of change for our churches. Once again Dickinson, concluding his list of the factors contributing to the growth of the regular canonical movement and speaking of his own British homeland, writes,

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, there is the spiritual factor, the hardest of all to assess, since contemporaries took it largely for granted, finding no legal or moral necessity to record it. It is a curious and interesting illustration of the inadequacy of contemporary records that they contain but the scantiest direct reference to the esteem which the English Augustinians must clearly have inspired to make them the most numerous of any medieval religious order in this country.¹

Meyers wants to honor the crowd as well as the core. “There always seemed to be a crowd around Jesus.” This was true in Jesus’s day. This was true as the Gospel spread through the Roman Empire. This was true in medieval cathedrals. It is true in Chinese cell churches. And it is true of the megachurches of today. And so we offer ourselves as pastors to our churches, whether big or small. We give ourselves to our core of peers in a devoted community of service to the crowd. Perhaps, as in Jesus’s day, we will notice distinct “layers” of core/crowd. To those who are ready for a Rule of life, we offer an invitation to take a significant step forward. And to those who struggle on the brink of insanity we offer the security of unconditional acceptance apart from their performance of any rules. I suspect there will be more of the latter than the former. Such is the nature of pastoral ministry. There always have been more in the crowd than in the core. Jesus was intentional about the formation of his disciples. But he was also intentional about sharing the heart of a grieving widow. Jesus was intentional about setting apart time to spend with the Father in prayer. But he was equally intentional about healing scores of individuals who came to him one by one.

So what do the regular canons and canonesses have to offer us today? Just an

1 . Dickinson, *Origins*, 137.

encouragement, I think. An encouragement to give ourselves unashamedly to ordinary pastoral ministry as best we can, but to do so as a team of friends who decide to live differently and to model the new life of Christ out together in the midst of that ministry. This encouragement helped changed the face of the Church of the medieval West. Perhaps it can do something good today.

Bibliography