

BENEDICTINE WAY OF LIFE AND CONVERSION—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Benedictine Way of Life and Conversion
Convener: Kathryn Lilla Cox, College of St. Benedict /St. John's University
Moderator: Julia Brumbaugh, Regis University
Presenters: Thomas J. Bushlack, University of St. Thomas
Kathryn Lilla Cox, St. John's University/College of St. Benedict
Jason King, St. Vincent College

This session explored how the Benedictine notion of *conversatio morum*, with a commitment to practices and principles that facilitate ongoing conversion throughout one's life, might serve as a model for understanding moral formation and conversion in Catholic moral theology. To advance this objective, Kathryn Lilla Cox began with a brief overview of *conversatio morum* in the Benedictine tradition. She described how *conversatio morum* (RB 58:17) is a notoriously difficult term to render in the fullness of its meaning from the Latin into English. In its primary sense it suggests "fidelity to the monastic way of life," which for Benedict involves a dynamic commitment to living out the Gospel. As a corollary of this primary sense, *conversatio morum* entails the commitment to practices and principles that facilitate ongoing conversion throughout one's life. The purpose of *conversatio morum* is the conversion of hearts and actions into those of Christ who loves unconditionally. Each panelist discussed an aspect of this monastic way of life (*conversatio morum*), the willingness to change and to grow into the full stature of Christ (into the mind and heart of Christ).

Thomas J. Bushlack, in his paper, "*Lectio Divina*,' '*Intentio Cordis*,' and Fidelity to the Gospel: A Benedictine-Scriptural Blueprint for Moral Formation and Conversion," explored the link between the practice of *lectio divina*, right intention (*intentio cordis* – RB 52:4), and virtuous action. Bushlack described how *lectio* fosters the dynamic of attention on our intentions by forming our hearts through reading. The four-fold process of *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* lead to contemplation (*contemplatio*), specifically on God who is at the heart of the biblical text. This highlights that our moral life is rooted in an experience of God, and the reading of scripture, which in the words of Michael Casey, O.S.C.O., "evangelizes our behavior." Bushlack concluded with the claim that *lectio* offers a Benedictine model of moral formation that integrates contemplative practice with the forming of right intention as a spiritual foundation for fidelity to the Gospel made concrete through the practice of the virtues.

Beginning with the Confiteor, Kathryn Lilla Cox noted that liturgically we request forgiveness for four categories of sin: thoughts, words, visible actions, and a failure to act. Her paper, "Putting on the Mind of Christ: Conversion of Thoughts," explored the first category, thoughts, by investigating how The Rule of St. Benedict and the desert tradition, more specifically Evagrius, recognize and acknowledge the dangers of wrongful thoughts and the need for conversion in this area. While individuals must learn to discern their own thoughts, Evagrius and St. Benedict require that monks more skilled in discernment aid those less skilled. This practice permitted the ancient monastics to call upon the correct Scripture passage for refuting

evil thoughts and refocusing human thoughts on the things and vision of God. Furthermore, Cox, in examining the role of thoughts in the RB, revealed Benedict's concern for cultivating virtue grounded in a "love of God which casts out fear" (RB 7.67). Thus, showing that for Benedict the first step on the road to right conduct is to love Christ.

Finally, Jason King, in his paper, "Benedictine Obedience, Authority and *Conversatio morum*," explored how obedience and authority function to help the members of a Benedictine monastery grow daily, collectively and individually, in their love of God and each other. He began with the observation that the terms "obedience" and "authority" rightly elicit suspicion. They have been the dominant terms for understanding the relationship between bishops and theologians, and, more importantly, have a long history of justifying the powerful's biases, abuse, and aggression against the vulnerable. Yet, because the moral life is learned from others, an understanding of the proper exercise of authority and obedience is needed. King examined three ways obedience and authority are ordered toward *conversatio morum* in the RB. First, authority is not for controlling people, but to help guide them toward God. As such it depends more on the character of those in authority rather than the ability to coerce people. Second, obedience is more about serving others than compliance. Monks are to do the good for another joyfully, avoiding self-righteousness, self-indulgence, and resignation. Finally, listening is essential for keeping both obedience and authority oriented toward God and others. He claimed that this Benedictine understanding of obedience and authority provides some insight into their proper exercise.

The papers provoked lively discussion and conversation regarding both the ideas in the papers and the implications of the work. Discussion included the possible influence of Augustine on the Rule of Benedict, various understandings of authority operating in the church today, how we know the discernment of thoughts are effective, how *lectio divina* provides a practice for encountering God and the patterns in ourselves, as well as the effects on classroom pedagogy and pastoral practices.

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