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*“God’s Recurring Dream”:
Assessing the New Monastic Movement through a
Historical Comparison*

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History and Political Science
School of Graduate and Continuing Studies
Olivet Nazarene University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Philosophy of History

By
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Introduction

“It is one of God’s recurring dreams to raise up servants intent upon reaching those who have been impoverished materially, spiritually and emotionally.” -Scott Bessnecker,

On the night of April 16, 1208, Pope Innocent III had a dream.¹ He saw the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the seat of the papacy and the mother church of all Christendom, tottering on the brink of collapse. Then he saw a small man in beggar clothing physically lifting the church on his back, saving it from destruction. The Pope woke knowing who the man was. He had met him the day before. Francis of Assisi had come to Rome with a handful of his followers, seeking papal permission to found a new religious order. Innocent III had other issues on his mind at the time. The Church was facing a wave of heterodox challenges across its domain—a Crusade against the powerful heresy of the Cathars in the south of France, a rebellious English king who was very publicly flouting papal authority, widespread criticism of the clergy, groups of scholars with no connection to the church founding universities and teaching laypeople compelling pagan philosophy, to name a few. He was understandably reluctant to evaluate a group of ragged, uninitiated ascetics, and he doubted whether it was wise to give his approval to this small lay group when his church was rife with new movements and ideas at the moment. But tradition, however romantically embellished, holds that the dream changed his mind, and he gave his qualified approval to the order of the Friars Minor that day. His gamble was vindicated by history. Twenty years later, Francis of Assisi was canonized, beloved by all Christendom as the founder of the Franciscan mendicant order. His order and others like it constituted a revolutionary departure from traditional monasticism, emerging from the cloister to engage secular society as wandering servants of God. Their service had reinvigorated and saved the Church at a crucial turning point in Western history.

¹ Thomas of Celano, *First and Second Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, trans. Placid Hermann (London: Franciscan Herald Press, 1962.), ch. 11.

Today, St. Francis' life and example has found a new champion within the American Protestant tradition. Promoters of the popular "new monasticism" movement that has recently become a buzzword in the evangelical community have often invoked St. Francis and his friars specifically as a guiding historical example for what they seek to accomplish. After centuries of Protestant rejection and avoidance of the Christian monastic tradition, this young movement, consisting of small groups engaging in communal living and radical activism across the country, has begun to consciously rehabilitate the practice of monasticism within the evangelical Protestant fold, pointing to St. Francis and other historical examples to describe their efforts to form an alternative church culture that adheres most directly to the apostolic life of the New Testament. Their efforts and vision, as articulated by movement leaders like Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson, have received a great deal of attention and admiration from the mainstream Christian public, along with significant criticism, and the movement continues to grow with the foundation of new communities across the country.

The initial successes of the new monastic movement and its early efforts at more concrete self-definition have laid the foundation for a number of significant historical possibilities. If the movement successfully endures and establishes for itself a stable role in the evangelical world, it may constitute the full reacceptance of monasticism as a legal and worthy practice in the Protestant world. The impact of fully functioning religious orders in the Protestant world could be huge. The acceptance of monasticism also has the potential to alter the character of Protestant culture, especially in America, and to lead to greater rapprochement between the Catholic and Orthodox churches and Protestants. However, the limitations of establishing traditional monastic practice in the American Protestant environment may also change the nature of the practice itself, creating a new chapter in the history of the monastic tradition. At the very least, the

movement's unique and specific embodiment of the perennial Christian monastic impulse, historically situated in relation to traditional orders, may have much to teach us about the relationship of the Church with its surrounding culture and the Christian ascetic tradition in general.

In this project, I aim to assess the possibilities, limitations, character, and meaning of the new monastic movement through a historical comparison with the 13th century mendicant movement. The similarities between the two movements are many, including their respective contexts, priorities, habits, and initial receptions in the wider Church and surrounding society. Perhaps more importantly, the leaders of the new monastic movement are consciously aware of these similarities and interested in modeling themselves further on the example of the St. Francis and his counterparts. Where the new monastic literature uses these analogies as a visionary example, my study will seek to assess the historical reality of the comparison and its implications for the young new monastic movement.

My study is preceded and aided by several recent articles and theses that have taken a closer look at the meaning of the new monastic movements and its background in the history of Protestant monasticism in general, including David Lowitzki's thesis at California State University, "New Monasticism: A Sociological Analysis" (2008), and Philip Harrold's theological article, "The 'New Monasticism' as Ancient-Future Belonging" (2010). Each provides interesting perspective on the meaning of the movement. The most detailed treatments of the new movement have been put forth by its advocates in visionary literature, often with a helpful historical perspective. Jonathan Wilson in particular is most often pointed to as the source of the idea and terminology of the movement, in his 1998 book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's 'After Virtue'*. The values and

genealogy of the new movement may be taken most coherently from this work. Overall, new monastic leaders and thinkers have been prolific and determined in elaborating their vision and answering questions from a variety of perspectives, allowing for a clear, if not neutral, view of the movement.

While new monasticism is a current phenomenon described by its proponents and more often editorialized instead of thoroughly scrutinized, the rise of the mendicant orders, along with their distinctive theology, spirit and achievements, has been thoroughly covered and debated by scholars, both specifically and within larger interpretive narratives of Western history. The debate has led to a wide range of interpretation of the causal processes that led to the friars' emergence and popularity, their true values and purpose, and their subsequent impact. The views of prominent historians and medievalists, including C.H. Lawrence, Giles Constable, Norman Cantor, John Van Engen, Will Durant, and others, provide a contoured picture of the mendicant movement in all its complexity to be compared with the specifics of the new monasticism.

In addition, historians, theologians, and sociologists have all weighed in on how new movements like this one reflect tension between the active and contemplative aspects of the Christian faith, the spirit of order and that of prophecy, and the radical spirit of the sect alongside the orderly compromise of the mainstream church. Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch's typologies in the sociology of religion field, as expressed in their most famous works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church* (1912), while controversial, have explained the human and social forces behind the rise of new forms of piety and devotion, as well as their impact, role, and prolonged existence in the surrounding mainstream religion and society. Psychologist William James, in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), offers a dispassionate interpretation of the nature of religious devotion,

including monasticism, focused more on the human aspect of these phenomena. Plenty of scholars have examined the nature of monasticism in specific, including Walter Capps in *The Monastic Impulse* (1983), Adolf von Harnack in his *Monasticism: Its Ideals and History* (1901), and J.A. Zeisler (*Christian Asceticism*, 1973). Especially relevant to understanding what the mendicant revolution meant is Jeffrey Burton Russell's *A History of Medieval Christianity* (1968), which covers the 12th century monastic revolution in light of the tension between the spirits of prophecy and order that has existed throughout the history of Christianity. Placed in the context of Weber and Troeltsch's well-known categorizations, Russell's perspective sheds light on what motivates and sustains a monastic development, and how such radical piety exists successfully in the long-term alongside more conservative religion.

From the third century forward, Christians have intentionally withdrawn from the world and vowed themselves to more pure and simplistic lives focused only on God, either as hermits and wanderers or within close communities regulated by specific standards and eventually Rules of life. Often these movements of radical, whole-hearted response to the commands of the Gospel have been precipitated by dissatisfaction with the Church as it is. At points of crisis within the Church and cultural confusion throughout society, the Christian monastic community has renewed itself and played an active role in renewing the church as a whole. In the 12th and 13th centuries, the mendicant orders emerged from all sectors of the church to unify the active and contemplative aspects of obedience to God, to restore monasticism to its original intentions, and to meet the most desperate needs of the changing society around them. The new monastic movement, in all its variety and complications, set against the background of a theological heritage with only a faint and marginal connection to the traditional monastic ways, claims to be the heir of this millennia-long heritage of extreme Christian devotion, community, and service.

With a careful look at the particulars of each movement, it is possible to clarify the historical truth of this claim and its implications and to assess the distinctive character of the new monastic movement, the meaning and significance of its emergence, and its future possibilities and limitations within the evangelical community.

Chapter One: Introducing “New Monasticism”

“I’m part of a movement called new monasticism. I don’t wear a robe and I’m happily married, which is enough to confuse most people.”² Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, the author of this declaration, represents the proudly unique blend of tradition and innovation that characterizes the popular “new monasticism” movement in the evangelical community. He is one of many young evangelical Christians who are eschewing the traditional American dream for the communal life, inspired by the historical example of traditional monastic orders. Frustrated, disillusioned, and openly critical of the contented evangelicalism they have grown up with, these young men and women are turning to a tradition long dormant and rejected by the Protestant community. They seek to consciously rehabilitate the practice of monasticism in the belief that living out the Gospel in this manner has the potential to save the Church from its own corruption, effectively reach a particularly fragmented and hurting generation, and seriously transform people’s lives. Their efforts have received substantial attention in both the Christian and secular media, garnering widespread admiration among their younger evangelical peers as well as condemnation, criticism, and dismissal from a variety of perspectives. The openness they display to the most traditional forms of religious life, sourced from Catholic and Orthodox traditions previously rejected even by the most radical and intentional Protestant groups, and the more mainstream credence their efforts have received, mark the new monastic movement as an extraordinary development with great possible impact. It is a purposeful Protestant connection between long-buried traditions and relevant responses to today’s culture, capable of radically impacting the Protestant faith and evangelical culture. In this chapter, I will describe the new monastic movement and its heritage, its characteristics and theology, and the critical

² Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 9.

interpretations it has evoked from the wider evangelical community. In the next chapter, I will provide a similar portrait of its chosen predecessor, the mendicant monastic movement, in its own years as a young charismatic movement with a new vision of the ideal religious life.

Background

Monastic practices, both individual and communal, have been a persistent feature of religious life the world over for millennia. In the Christian Church, monasticism has developed from a radical impulse of a holy few to an institutional option for those who wish to commit their lives in entirety to pursuit of God and His purposes, to the exclusion of all else. The inspiration for such a way of life within Christianity's own history includes the Old Testament examples of the Nazirites and the prophets, John the Baptist, the Apostles, the early church described in Acts, and most significantly, the lifestyle of Jesus Christ Himself. From the 3rd century forward, Christians have intentionally withdrawn from the world and vowed themselves to more pure and simplistic lives focused only on God, either as hermits and wanderers or within established monastic communities regulated by specific rules. These early examples have inspired the new monastic movement, as they have most monastic revivals and innovations throughout the centuries. Like their forerunners in each age of monastic development and reform, the authors of the new monastic movement have looked back to the example of the Apostles' lifestyles (the traditional Christian concept of the *vita apostolica*, or apostolic life, embodying a longing for the primitive Church) and the fervor of the first monks as an inspiration and a justification for the way of life they seek to recover.

Though plagued by periodic corruption, at points of crisis in the Church and cultural confusion throughout society the Christian monastic community has renewed itself, as in the 12th century, when the mendicant orders emerged to unify the active and contemplative aspects

of obedience to God, restore monasticism to its original intentions, and bring the community to the cities and onto the road. The mendicants and their effect on the wider church have particularly inspired the new monastic movement. They often prefer to refer to themselves as “new friars” rather than “new monks,”³ stressing the effective balance between active and contemplative aspects of the religious life that the mendicant orders achieved. Throughout the years, monastic communities have played important roles in secular society, from the political, social, and economic power they held during the medieval period, to their protection and furthering of knowledge, to the foundation of hospitals, charities, and educational institutions. For countless communities and individuals, the presence of monks and nuns has provided a positive image of Jesus Christ working and striving in their midst. Through troughs and peaks, the practice has continued in both the Western and Eastern Church, producing saints, changing the world on the local level, and providing an opportunity for those who wish to jettison everything secular and all obstacles in order to come as close to an ideal holy life as possible.

In the 16th century, however, in the throes of the Reformation, the leaders of the newly formed Protestant schism in the Church attacked and ultimately rejected the practice of monasticism. Martin Luther started by criticizing the corruption of the monastic orders of his time, and then proceeded in his *On Monastic Vows* (1521) to the decided assertion that the monastic vows had no foundation in Scripture. These “foolish and wicked vows”⁴ were but

³ Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006)

⁴ “The schoolmen, the monks, and such other, never felt any spiritual temptations, and therefore they fought only for the repressing and overcoming of fleshly lust and lechery, and being proud of that victory which they never yet obtained, they thought themselves far better and more holy than married men. I will not say, that under this holy pretense they nourished and maintained all kinds of horrible sins, as dissension, pride, hatred, disdain, and despising of their neighbors, trust in their own righteousness, presumption, contempt of godliness and of the Word of God, infidelity, blasphemy, and such-like. Against these sins they never fought, nay rather they took them to be no sins at all: they put righteousness in the keeping of their foolish and wicked vows, and unrighteousness in the neglecting and contemning of the same.” Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. Philip S. Watson, (Cambridge & London: James Clarke, 1953): 502-3.

another form of merit-based faith, trusting in one's own good works to attain the justification and the perfection that was only given by God's grace. He assured monks and nuns that they were justified in breaking their vows without sin. In later writings, he berated those who continued to trust in these vows, often comparing them to Pharisees. He himself married a former Cistercian nun he had helped smuggle out of her convent, and they raised a family in a reclaimed monastery building.

In 1530, the Augsburg Confession, the foundational Lutheran statement of faith, affirmed and made official Luther's rejection of monastic vows, pinpointing their issue with monasticism in the imposition of regulations and vows. While allowing that monastic institutions were legitimate endeavors as long as they remained "free associations,"⁵ the writers of the confession agreed that man could not achieve purity by any vow. Thus monasticism, despite its auspicious beginnings, great heroes, and impressive accomplishments, served primarily to obscure the truly important truths of the Christian faith. It ensnared the ignorant (namely children who were placed in monastic orders for a living before they could understand the momentous nature of the vocation), as well as sincere converts, in a corrupt discipline not unlike "a carefully planned prison," while preaching that its rigorous "show" was the superior form of a Christian life and service.⁶ Catholic authorities accused the young Reformation movement of objecting to monasticism out of a simple desire to indulge the flesh and avoid spiritual disciplines, using Luther's marriage as ammunition. However, the Confession emphasized that all Christians were

⁵ F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau, trans., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (St. Louis, MO: The Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1921): Augsburg Confession, Article XXVII, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, AC XXVII, 2, 48. "It is no light offense in the Church to set forth to the people a service devised by men, without the commandment of God, and to teach that such service justifies men. For the righteousness of faith, which chiefly ought to be taught in the Church, is obscured when these wonderful angelic forms of worship, with their show of poverty, humility, and celibacy, are cast before the eyes of men."

to obey Scriptural commands about spiritual disciplines and subduing the flesh in all aspects of life, while recognizing that their salvation was not received from these efforts or the sacraments.

Luther was joined in his condemnation of monasticism by the other major Reformers. John Calvin, in his exhaustive *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), characterized monastic vows as a man-made form of worship and discipline meant to earn God's favor and thus abominable. Like Luther, he blamed monasticism in its present form for ensnaring "miserable souls", encouraging superstition and mistaken doctrine, and having fallen to a generally corrupt, degenerate, and Pharisaical state. He compared the monasticism of his day to its ancient beginnings, when it was "holy and legitimate," kept within its proper boundaries and practiced in a very different manner out of sincere piety.⁷ Ulrich Zwingli began his career as a reformer by challenging the corrupt or unbiblical practices of local monks and his fellow priests. He then progressed to preaching that there was no Scriptural foundation for monasticism and succeeded in leading state authorities in his native Zurich to close all monasteries. Along with the other reformers, he particularly objected to the economic supports of monasticism. The mendicant orders often fell under condemnation specifically in this aspect—begging was rejected as utterly unscriptural as the Protestants sought to rehabilitate the worth of "secular" work.

It is important to note, as new monastics often have in the interest of redeeming monasticism, that each of the reformers allowed for the legitimacy of the spirit of monasticism to some degree. While the major Protestant leaders and writers did not always oppose the religious life per se, they agreed in condemning monasticism in its present institutional form. Protestant polemics against monasticism as a major symptom of the church's theological, bureaucratic, and social corruption were a staple of the Reformation culture. Despite this swell of criticism,

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Public Domain, 1536), accessed 12 April 2012, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes>: Book IV, Chapter 13.

monasticism remained a powerful institution in European society. It seemed to challenge the most strenuous emphases and concerns of the Reformation—justification by faith alone, living out Christian disciplines and virtues in all callings instead of separating life into “sacred” and “secular” realms, and various abuses of Christian liberty and doctrine by the Roman Church. Protestant objections to its current flaws thus grew into a deeply seated prejudice, aided by defensive pushback from the Catholic Church and further attacks on the corruption of the institution motivated by political opportunism. Starting in 1536, English King Henry VIII dissolved all monasteries, convents, and friaries in his kingdom and appropriated their assets, following the example of continental rulers who had begun to plunder monastic wealth in the opening provided by the Reformation. Traditional monasticism was soon to be associated exclusively with the Catholic and Orthodox churches and more oft than not, with a bygone medieval era.

Nevertheless, Protestantism was initially rooted in the monastic experience. Martin Luther was originally an Augustinian monk himself. Even as he repudiated his vows and took a wife, he had reached that point of conviction through the opportunities his time as a monk had provided him for reflection and theological study.⁸ Protestant theology from Luther forward was rooted first in Scripture and then in the writings of wise monastics throughout church history, from Augustine to Aquinas. Even after the dissolution of the monasteries, the monastic impulse continued to exhibit itself in the Protestant fold, in committed groups like the Anabaptists and the Puritans, unique intentional communities like the Amish, and in the fervor of young revivalist movements like the Wesleyan American Holiness movement.

⁸ In his work *On Monastic Vows*, Luther himself commented that he believed that God had allowed him to become a monk so that he could testify against monasticism from personal experience. http://www.oodegr.com/english/protestantism/loluther_antimonaxismos1.htm

The Anabaptist and descendant Mennonite tradition in particular is a familiar and accepted part of the Protestant landscape, with a history of monastic-like efforts, radical pacifism, justice-seeking, and emphasis on “simple living” and close-knit intentional communities. Even to those relatively unfamiliar with their history, which includes heavy persecution and martyrdom from both Catholic and Protestant critics in the aftermath of the Reformation, met by peaceful resistance and refusal to fight back or defend themselves, the most conspicuous of their efforts at alternative living styles are well known—the extreme commitments of the Amish, their option of alternative service in warfare and the court cases that have defended it, etc. Less conservative or extreme Mennonite congregations still adhere to a more radical creed than the average evangelical. They maintain a strong presence in the Christian academic environment and espouse political and ethical views based in the theology of John Howard Yoder and his academic disciple Stanley Hauerwas, who have succeeded in popularizing to some degree the Mennonite perspective. The new monastic movement stems directly from this tradition—its founders, leaders, and authors from the Mennonite background or educated in its creed, its language and influences strongly echoing the works of Mennonite theologians, and its prominent communities often connected to the areas in North America of historical Mennonite settlements. It is thus often easy for the knowing Protestant evangelical to dismiss the movement as less revolutionary, as the Anabaptists’ radical alternative has long coexisted with other denominations without transforming them completely or truly reestablishing traditional monasticism in their midst.

Eventually the more organized and orthodox Protestant denominations did attempt the reestablishment of traditional monastic communities, starting in the 19th century with the Anglican Church and coming full circle with the founding of Lutheran monasteries in the late

20th century. However, in the American evangelical community, these denominations are considered nearly indistinguishable from Catholicism, and thus their reacceptance of monasticism did not make too large of an impact on this community's perception of the practice. It has remained generally agreed upon throughout mainstream evangelical Protestantism that monasticism is a theologically mistaken form of Christian life.⁹

Despite this prevalent view, monasticism, alongside other classic spiritual disciplines, experienced an overall revival of interest and prominence in the 20th century. The reasons for this specific interest will be discussed in greater depth in the third chapter, but in general, the 20th century inspired new religious energies and desires because it was a century of intense change, transition, and disillusionment. Catholic and Orthodox monastic orders attracted a larger influx of prospective members and interested visitors (as did non-Christian Eastern monastic institutions). A variety of experimental Christian intentional communities were formed emulating monastic characteristics. Theologians, academics, and monastic writers espoused ideas and visions that have come to inspire the young new monastic movement at the turn of the 21st century.

Influences

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is often cited as a major catalyst of the new monastic movement. His call for the renewal of faith, open imitation of Christ, and the Church's active engagement with the world included the suggestion of "a new type of monasticism", and he implemented this vision in the underground seminary he headed up in Nazi Germany. In his bestselling book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer rehabilitated the historical function of monasticism in the Church:

⁹ William M. Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism, Vol. I*, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 290.

It was decisive that monasticism did not separate from the church and that the church had the good sense to tolerate monasticism. Here, on the boundary of the church, was the place where the awareness that grace is costly and that grace includes discipleship was preserved.... Monastic life thus became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity, against the cheapening of grace.¹⁰

However, in the same book, Bonhoeffer also reiterated the Protestant complaint that monasticism created a body of “elite” Christians that allowed for a double standard in the Church, justifying cheap grace for the majority by the existence of an opportunity for higher discipleship.

Nevertheless, his acknowledgment of the dangers monasticism posed did not prevent him from having a vision of what a rehabilitation of the practice could do for the church. In his private letters, he predicted that “...the restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism which has nothing in common with the old but a complete lack of compromise in a life lived in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount in the discipleship of Christ. I think it is time to gather people together to do this.”¹¹

Following the Second World War, a few notable evangelical monastic communities were founded, including the famous interdenominational, formalized Taizé Community in France, founded by a Protestant. Established Catholic monastic traditions also experienced surges in membership. Many were recruited after an encounter with Thomas Merton’s best-selling autobiography, *Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton, a Trappist monk, spoke meaningfully to a very confused and traumatized generation about monastic values, casting them in stark contrast with the cultural values he himself had rejected as a privileged, indulgent young man with a promising career ahead as a writer. Critics later credited him with having “redefined the image of

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller. (New York: Touchstone, 1959): 46.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, letter to brother Karl-Friedrick, (14 January 1935), accessed 15 May 2011, http://www.prayerfoundation.org/dietrich_bonhoeffer_on_monasticism.htm

monasticism and made the concept of saintliness accessible to moderns.”¹² Monastic commitments continued to enjoy a revival throughout the 1950s and ‘60s, often directly credited to Thomas Merton’s influence. At the same time, the Protestant monastic impulse became more noticeable. Lutheran monasteries were founded for the first time. The popular Jesus People movement established communes throughout North America, before fizzling out in the 1970s and ‘80s. But it was in the 1990s and the early years of this 21st century that the new movement of evangelical Protestantism truly blossomed.

Jonathan Wilson is often credited with coining the term “neo-monasticism” in his 1998 book, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre’s After Virtue*. Inspired by Alasdair MacIntyre’s pronouncement, “We are not waiting for Godot, but for another—and doubtless very different—St. Benedict,”¹³ Wilson called for the formation of a new monasticism—“not a new St. Benedict, but Christian communities that may produce a new St. Benedict.”¹⁴ His book provided guidelines for the new communities and galvanized a movement that saw dozens of small intentional communities formed across the country.

As the term “neo-monasticism” quickly became common parlance in the evangelical community, a few young leaders and authors achieved celebrity status as the face of the movement. Shane Claiborne of the Simple Way community in Philadelphia and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (son-in-law of Jonathan Wilson) of the Rutba House in Durham, NC in particular have popularized and publicized the movement through authorship, interviews, and extensive speaking tours. The movement was purposefully defined and solidified in June 2004 when Wilson-Hartgrove and other leaders gathered together at his small community in North

¹² Richard N. Ostling, “Religion: Merton’s Mountainous Legacy,” (*Time*, 31 December 1984), accessed 15 June 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,951456,00.html>

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984): 263.

¹⁴ Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre’s After Virtue*, (Trinity Press International, 1998): 78.

Carolina, The Rutba House, to draw up common characteristics for neo-monastic communities, settling on twelve defining “marks” for guidance.¹⁵

The Communities

Claiborne and Wilson-Hartgrove’s projects have become the most prominent communities associated with the term “new monasticism”—those that have written about it, labeled it, and defined it by purposefully networking and setting down the official “marks” for the movement. Most of the communities the movement has collected or spawned are relatively young. The Simple Way is one of the oldest communities, founded in 1998 by Shane Claiborne and a handful of fellow Eastern University students. “The Rutba House” community in North Carolina was founded in August 2003, just ten months before it took the lead in organizing the June 2004 conference that officially launched the new monastic movement and published its collaborative *12 Marks*.¹⁶ These leading new monastic communities can seem a bit “inbred,” in commentator Jason Byassee’s words.¹⁷ The founders of the Simple Way and the Rutba House all went to Eastern University in Philadelphia. Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove, the founders of the Rutba House, are the son-in-law and daughter of theologian Jonathan Wilson, the author of *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* (1998), the source of the “new monasticism” terminology and concept. Several new monastics, including Shane Claiborne and fellow author Chris Haw, have been a part of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago. Members of other intentional communities in the new monastic network often cite close connections to these same circles or their supporters, teachers, and projects. However, in some cases, these younger, more intimately connected projects have reached out and sought

¹⁵ Refer to Appendix 1.

¹⁶ The Rutba House, ed., *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005).

¹⁷ Jason Byassee, “The new monastics,” *The Christian Century* 122, no. 21 (2005): 38-45.

connections with older communities. Due to this inclusive recognition, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove has claimed that the new monastic movement is actually eighty to one hundred years old.¹⁸

Rutba and the Simple Way maintain an Internet directory of the intentional communities they have screened and recognized as reflecting “a similar character and spirit that we see in Christ”.¹⁹ While it is not meant to be an exhaustive list, it shows the range of communities the new monastic movement willingly embraces. These include Catholic Worker communities, cooperative housing communities and economic pools, and many older small-scale ecumenical and Protestant intentional communities that predate the present movement. Younger communities have a high rate of failure, but through its self-promotion and organized articulation of its vision, the new monastic network has built for the movement a more established foundation and a sense of permanence. Its leaders also seek to draw upon a wealth of experience and inspiration by connecting with several communities hailing from an earlier wave of monastic revival in the mid-twentieth century, like the Reba Place Fellowship. Reba is a Mennonite community in Evanston, IL founded in 1957. Although it reached its highest membership numbers in the 1970s, the community continues to thrive and renew itself.

The Twelve Marks

From this initial effort in social networking and accountability amongst new monastic communities, the movement has progressed to periodic conferences and was thus able to put together a common manifesto, a more informal version of the traditional monastic “rule of life,”

¹⁸ Ashley Wolpert, “Exploring the New Monasticism,” (*Relevant Magazine*), accessed 18 June 2011, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/features/21029-the-new-monastics>
Caty Hirst, “New monastics share community, offer hope,” (*USA TODAY*, June 28, 2011), accessed 11 November 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-06-27-monastics_n.htm

¹⁹ www.communityofcommunities.info

published as “12 Marks for a New Monasticism.”²⁰ More established authors, academics, and members of older communities elaborated and offered guidance on each “mark” in the published book, edited together by the Rutba House community. In the editor’s preface, Wilson-Hartgrove notes common criticism of new monastic efforts as unrealistic or a repeat of the failed wave of intentional Christian communities in the 1960s and 70s, expressing hope that the marks thus elaborated will show how possible and genuine the movement is and spark general dialogue on its goals and ideals.²¹ Shane Claiborne has spoken of his sense of the marks’ function as unifying the movement and giving it weight, showing “the common threads that connect Christian communities that might otherwise be seen as scattered anomalies, rather than vibrant cells of a body.”²² It is clear that the leadership of the young movement, conscious of skepticism and their marginal, radical status in the wider church, sees their informal “rule of life” as an essential difference between their endeavor and previous short-lived Protestant monastic efforts, as well as an answer to criticism and ignorance of their efforts.

The twelve marks reflect the movement’s priorities and reveal the common characteristics they consider essential, although each community is free to enact them as they please. Many of the conditions refer to the traditional monastic requirements, albeit modified to fit modern circumstances, reflect Protestant priorities, and provide enough flexibility for the inclusion of a wide variety of monastic and intentional forms of life. Significantly, one mark of the twelve specifically calls for the historical situation of the new monastic movement, requiring the new monastic movement to look towards traditional monasticism and the example of the apostles and the early church for guidance. “Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the

²⁰ Refer to Appendix 1. The Rutba House, ed., *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005)

²¹ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

²² Quoted in Rob Moll, “The New Monasticism,” (*Christianity Today*, September 2005), accessed 21 May 2011. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/16.38.html?start=8>

rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate,” the sixth mark, is elaborated by David Janzen, a member of the Reba Place Fellowship since 1984, with positive lessons and practices new monastics ought to learn from Benedictine rules and cycles of discipleship formation in the apostolic age.²³

Looking back to the example of the Israel, Jesus, and the earliest Christian monks in going to the desert to meet God and face temptation, the first mark asks new monastics to “relocate to abandoned places of empire.” The desert is equated with “abandoned places” considered unattractive or without anything to offer to mainstream society—the inner city, recovery communities, prisons, Third World countries, secluded areas for contemplative communities, etc. The concept of “empire” alluded to in this mark, referring to the overwhelming pressure of current cultural and economic influences on our lives and the Church, plays a huge role in defining the communities, their locations, and activities. For new monastic communities, location is focused on engagement with “the issues of our time” rather than withdrawal or seclusion. “God-seeking and prayer will have the primary place, but be thoroughly integrated with life and witness.”²⁴ Thus, the typical new monastic community is urban and integrated with an impoverished locale in ministry, community life, and occasionally provocative protest efforts.

The traditional contemplative aspect of monastic life is affirmed in another mark, but with a heavy emphasis on the priority of action—“We must work to see the world as God sees

²³ David Janzen, “Mark 6: Intentional Formation in the Way of Christ and the Rule of the Community Along the Lines of the Old Novitiate,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 81-95.

²⁴ Sr. Margaret M. McKenna, “Mark 1: Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 11-21.

it...It is all action. And it is all contemplation.”²⁵ In addition, the seclusion of the hermit’s cell and the dorm-like atmosphere of a traditional cenobitical community are synthesized into a more flexible requirement for the location of the community members. “Geographical proximity” is the vague condition to be met by new monastic communities. On principle, proximity is required as an antidote to the current cultural trend of self-centeredness, sacrificing some degree of one’s freedom of choice and movement to the community’s purpose and mission. More practically, requiring proximity allows and stimulates individual communities to pursue more traditional monastic practices (or “spiritual disciplines”), such as common prayer, meals, mutual confession, spiritual fellowship and guidance, etc., as far as they choose to.²⁶

Rather than the traditional monastic vow of voluntary poverty, new monasticism stresses simplicity and redistribution—“sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.” The traditional vow is described as an “aspiration” to poverty and condemned as “reek[ing] of privilege,” a form of ascetic dualism, and concerned more with personal piety than love. New monastic authors instead promote a “theology of enough,” rejecting the privileged lifestyle and consumer mentality of the surrounding culture.²⁷ Both redistribution and radical relocation entail “hospitality to the stranger,” the third mark of new monasticism, particularly oriented toward the poor, lost, and lonely and practiced as a spiritual discipline.

²⁵ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “Mark 12: Commitment to a Disciplined Contemplative Life,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 166, 170.

²⁶ Jon Stock, “Mark 9: Geographical Proximity to Community Members Who Share a Common Rule of Life,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 125-136.

²⁷ Shane Claiborne, “Mark 2: Sharing Economic Resources with Fellow Community Members and the Needy Among Us,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 30-4.

The obedience of the old monastic orders to the wider Church is praised as an essential relationship, though necessarily softened to an insistence that new monastics remain “closely connected” to the wider church while providing a distinct and radical witness. Any number of options in keeping up this relationship between a community and the church are considered acceptable. Many of the new monastic communities live out this particular mark simply by belonging to a nearby congregation independent of any official association with or control by the community. Association and dialogue with other Christians, including those critical of their efforts, is also often preached by new monastics as necessary to fulfill this requirement of “humble submission to Christ’s body, the Church.”²⁸ Obedience to a particular leader, rule, or order, as vowed by traditional monks, is also softened to the particular situation of new monastic communities, which are individually contained and connected only informally with other communities with differing standards, projects, and lifestyles. Some degree of accountability, control, and rules within each community, as well as the importance of “entering into conversation with other communities,” is mandated by the seventh mark, “nurturing common life among members of intentional community.”²⁹

The monastic vow most deliberately rejected by the Protestant church, celibacy, is somewhat reaffirmed by the eighth new monastic mark: “support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.” The explanation of this mark clarifies celibacy and marriage as two sides of the same coin—both requiring vows in the presence of the church, both holy and supported by Scripture, and both states of life that can bring one closer to God and to greater service in the church community. New monasticism is against the separation of

²⁸ Ivan Kauffman, “Mark 5: Humble Submission to Christ’s Body, the Church,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 68-79.

²⁹ Sherrie Steiner and Michelle Harper Brix, “Mark 7: Nurturing Common Life Among Members of Intentional Community,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 100-111.

celibacy and marriage into opposing ideals and seeks to incorporate both states of life into their communities. The suggested “support” for each group includes providing accountability, guidance, and help with parenting, and encouraging openness between those who have taken either path.³⁰

In these flexible adaptations of the traditional vows of historical monasticism, new monastics believe they are coming closer to the original intent of traditional monasticism while avoiding the pitfalls their Protestant forefathers so strenuously objected to—the corrupt regulations, elements of dualistic theology, Pharisaical tendencies, and unacceptable withdrawal from the world and its problems. At the same time, their modification of the traditional marks of monasticism has led critics from the more orthodox side of the divide to reject the movement. “Set the bar for *monasticism* as low as Wilson-Hartgrove sets it and you might as well call a Christian college dormitory a monastic institution,” one Catholic commentator complains. “Frugality, fidelity, and consistency are very good things, maybe even essential things, but they aren’t the *same* things as poverty, chastity, and obedience.”³¹

Other Catholic and Orthodox commentators point to the difference between full monasticism and the successful institution of tertiary orders, where lay persons who cannot enter fully into the religious life may live out its rule of life or participate in a similar community while remaining in the world. The Protestant rejection of the dual standard of monasticism has mirrored to some degree the spirit of these “Third Orders”—calling all lay persons to be tertiaries by taking the cloister out of the order and setting it in the world. Critics point out that new monasticism cannot claim to be reviving the true practice of monasticism and its benefits

³⁰ Jana Bennett, “Mark 8: Support for Celibate Singles Alongside Monogamous Married Couples and Their Children,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 115-122.

³¹ Alan Jacobs, “Do-It-Yourself Tradition,” (*First Things*, Jan. 2009), accessed 05 December 2011, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/12/002-do-it-yourself-tradition-11>

without moving past this tertiary status to more extreme lifelong commitments. Whether this is something the new monastic movement desires to do in the first place is as of yet unclear, even to some of its leadership, as reflected in the ambiguous words of Wilson-Hartrove himself on the nature of the movement:

What I've been saying is that I think there's a *new* monastic movement that looks a lot more like some of the traditional orders when they started than now. So it's sort of in a birthing phase now and what it will become remains to be seen.³²

Several of the new monastic marks are specifically oriented to the challenges the church faces today as the community sees them—racial divisions, environmental concerns, and the Church's orientation toward violence and warfare. New monastic communities are to “lament for racial divisions within the Church and our communities” while actively pursuing “just reconciliation.” This “active pursuit” is to include drawing awareness to racial divisions through social analysis and discernment, being open and hospitable to strangers, and calling for dialogue between cultural and racial groups. Chris Rice, the author of the essay for this mark, openly acknowledges the racial divisions within new monasticism specifically. Although these communities often situate themselves within minority areas and have for years sought to recruit members of color, their membership, and especially their leadership, remains predominantly white and drawn from similar backgrounds of financial privilege and education. Quite simply, these populations are well-acquainted with privilege and power and have come to see their negative ends. They have been given the “opportunity and leisure” to philosophize, read, write, and become familiar with church history. When they take a leap in founding or joining a new monastic community, they have resources and options to fall back on should the experiment fail. Many black Americans are on the “opposite trajectory”—they are accustomed to poverty and

³² Ashley Wolpert, “Exploring the New Monasticism,” (*Relevant*), accessed 18 June 2011, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/features/21029-the-new-monastics>

lack of influence and are struggling to overcome it. Embracing it seems ludicrous, a fantasy of the rich and bored.³³

Environmentalism and responsible consumerism as a priority for the new monastic movement is reflected in the requirement to “care for the plot of God’s earth given to us along with support of our local economies.” New monastic communities are to consider how we can restore creation and refrain from exploiting it, rejecting the affluent American culture that disregards the price of its high quality of life. Suggestions include gardening, making things at home when possible, buying local goods or products only from socially responsible companies, living off of communal pools and shared resources, and preaching a more compassionate and attentive ethos against the competitive pace of modern American life through “celebration,” using projects like the Slow Food movement as an example.³⁴

The requirement of “peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution” for each community is the most openly connected to current events and politics in the year of publication (2004). Environmentalist and peace worker Fred Bahnson asks the new monastic communities to provide “imaginative examples of Christian nonviolence” for the misguided Christian majority in America that has accepted and promote an “alliance with Empire...an Empire that slaughters Iraqi children in the name of ‘freedom’...” He describes a standard of absolute nonviolence in all situations and gives guidelines for dealing peacefully with “wayward” Christians that have “bowed to the gods of nationalism and militarism.”³⁵ The

³³ Chris Rice, “Mark 4: Lament for Racial Divisions Within the Church and Our Communities Combined with the Active Pursuit of a Just Reconciliation,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 56-66.

³⁴ Norman Wirzba, “Mark 10: Care for the Plot of God’s Earth Given to Us Along with Support of Our Local Economies,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 139-148.

³⁵ Fred Bahnson, “Mark 11: Peacemaking in the Midst of Violence and Conflict Resolution Along the Lines of Matthew 18,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, ed., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 151-6.

theologians Bahnson uses to illustrate his points, including outspoken pacifist John Howard Yoder, and the language he uses reflects the common heritage of many of the new monastic communities in the radically peaceful Anabaptist and Mennonite tradition.

Mainstream Evangelical Responses

The common theological heritage of many new monastic communities and prominent leaders has led many knowing evangelicals to dismiss the movement as nothing new—simply another manifestation or revival of the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition. Wider rejection of the movement in the evangelical community is more often due to its agreement on specific current political issues and its likeness to wider cultural trends. To many it appears a liberal or postmodern manifestation of the faith. The perspective of the average mainstream, engaged, and usually older evangelical is revealingly illustrated in this satirical piece by a writer casually friendly to the new monastic movement, “The 12 Marks of New Monasticism, interpreted by your Dad”:

1. You say “Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.” Your dad hears “buy cheap houses in the ghetto and gentrify, but complain when other white people move in, thereby increasing your street-cred.”
2. You say “Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.” Your dad hears “become a hippy cult like those people in Haight-Ashbury and continue to misinterpret Acts 2:44-45 by taking it literally.”
3. You say “Hospitality to the stranger.” Your dad hears “Hospitality to other strange white people with tattoos oh, and poor people too, just don’t feed them the organic stuff.”
4. You say “Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.” Your black friends hear “whine and complain with other white people about the lack of black people in your church. Go to black churches and notice how much better the music is. Complain less loudly.”
5. You say “Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church.” Your dad hears “when the pastor says ‘drink the Kool-Aid,’ you ask ‘can I have grape?’”
6. You say “Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.” Your dad hears “act Catholic when it suits you, Protestant at all other times.” While the priest down the street hears “act Catholic, except when it

comes to all that Mary, Pope and lifelong celibacy stuff. You know the stuff that makes a Catholic, Catholic.”

7. You say “Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.” Your dad hears “rebel against your upbringing, but with other weird people (don’t drink or smoke alone). Talk about how much more real this is than the way you grew up in Evangelicalism.”
8. You say “Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.” Your dad or single friend hears “get to know singles that won’t let their girlfriend/ boyfriend sleep over. Ask them to babysit.”
9. You say “Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.” Your dad hears “find roommates to share expenses so you don’t have to get a real job working for *The Man*.”
10. You say “Care for the plot of God’s earth given to us along with support of our local economies.” Your dad hears “stay away from Starbucks, McDonalds and Wal-Mart frequented by real people and silently judge that those that shop there. Drive a Prius or a bike. I guess you could take the bus.”
11. You say “Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.” Your dad hears “don’t pray people in the back, like they did in your parent’s church. Tell people when you got a beef against them.” For once he agrees with you, unless you are really saying “vote for Democrats, if they are sufficiently non-patriotic. Vote Green Party, if you must vote. Just don’t tell anybody.” He just can’t tell which you are saying, but he is concerned your vote will cancel his Republican vote.
12. You say “Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.” Your dad hears “give up on everything you were taught in Sunday School.” Your older friends that listen to Toad the Wet Sprocket hear “Burn your TV in the yard. Gather round it with your friends.” They smile, unless you really mean it.³⁶

The critical and counter-cultural nature of the movement, its youth, and the example of previous movements in the 1960s and 70s that identified too strongly with the current sensibility to endure all add to suspicions of its true nature and its survivability. The Christian community entertains a variety of priorities and opinions on current issues, but in the United States, many Christians align themselves and their faith specifically with one side of the secular political spectrum or the other—Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal. New monastic authors condemn the marriage of political loyalties to the faith, but many Christian commentators throw this

³⁶ <http://djword.blogspot.com/2010/04/12-marks-of-new-monasticism-according.html>

condemnation back at the movement, noting that their priorities align with a larger political and cultural trend, one that is nearly perfectly intact in the secular community without the added justifications and motivations of the Christian faith. Racial diversity, social justice, environmentalism, simplicity, peace and protest movements, creativity and the arts, and unconventional living arrangements that step away from the traditional American ideal of family and white picket fences have been culturally “fashionable” priorities for an entire generation, labeled interchangeably as “alternative,” “postmodern,” “liberal,” “radical,” “counterculture,” etc.³⁷

In the Christian community, this cultural trend has found expression in the “emerging church movement,” represented by authors like Brian McLaren, which seeks to clarify Christianity in its postmodern context, rejecting mainstream organized church practices and promoting “new” ways of living out the faith. Leaders of the new monastic movement have sometimes tried to distance themselves from the emergent church label; Shane Claiborne, for example, has described it as a “bit narcissistic” and misguided, opining “some ‘emerging church’ folks have repeated some of the mistakes of fundamentalism (only with more tattoos), and others have repeated the mistakes of liberalism (only with more wit).”³⁸ Nevertheless, many evangelicals automatically associate new monasticism and its authors with the emerging church—their priorities, methods, language, style, and influences are very similar—and new monastics do not always fight this association, sometimes even celebrating the connection with

³⁷ A purposeful connection between secular cultural trends and the spirit of new monasticism is illustrated by the title of one popular text in the new monastic library—*Punk Monk*, by Andy Freeman and Pete Greig (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007).

³⁸ Shane Claiborne, “The Emerging Church Brand: The Good, the Bad, and the Mess,” (*Sojourners: God’s Politics*, April 13, 2010), accessed 12 March 2012, <http://sojo.net/blogs/2010/04/13/emerging-church-brand-good-bad-and-messy>.

emergent authors they respect or offering their literature or lifestyle as appropriate for those interested in the emergent church.

In the second edition of *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, published in 2010, Jonathan Wilson specifically addresses the association of his work with McLaren's and the accusation that together the two authors are promoting a "post-modern agenda". After declaring himself distinct from McLaren³⁹ and his "emerging church"⁴⁰, Wilson focuses on clarifying his position and that of the new monastic movement in general in relation to postmodernism. He states that the only "postmodern agenda" he has is a missionary one, and although he may be unaware of ways postmodernism has shaped his own perspective, the new monastic communities are capable of helping him to diagnose those areas. This is because "new monasticism is rooted in a stringent critique of modernity and postmodernity."⁴¹ It is capable of exposing both ideologies and providing hope through its witness, "so that postmodernity loses its veneer of inevitability and inescapability".⁴² However, many critics question whether new monasticism is able to step outside postmodernism and provide this redeeming function. Even positive appraisals of the movement recognize the connection between new monasticism and postmodernism, which will be explored in more depth in the third chapter of this work. Both the hopeful and the critical commentators wonder if new monasticism is a postmodern expression of the evangelical faith and how this context will affect the longevity and character of the movement.

³⁹ "...although I learn much from McLaren and am grateful for his vision and energy, I am not in full agreement with his work." Wilson, 71.

⁴⁰ "...[D.A.] Carson, after listing a number of concerns about the truth of the biblical narrative, is right in claiming that 'on none of these matters is the emerging church very clear.' He also is right to claim that members of the emerging church movement are loathe 'to talk at length about truth.'" Wilson, 78.

⁴¹ Ibid. x

⁴² Ibid. x

Conclusion

By 2008, the new monastic movement claimed over a hundred communities.⁴³ Its authors have produced a library of bestsellers and have spoken for the movement on campuses across the country, in conferences, and on the covers of almost every major Christian magazine. The movement's ideas and the language its authors have used to convey those ideas have become familiar to an entire generation of Christian university graduates. Nevertheless, the communities remain small, with a high rate of failure. The movement remains in its youthful idealistic origins, with plenty of vision for the future but no exact plans for the long-term development and character of the movement. While it is thriving on the strength of charismatic leadership and committed membership, many still express doubts as to the movement's longevity and speculate as to the development of its character as it ages. The historical examples that the movement imitates in its growth and activities are key to understanding it as a phenomenon and assessing its future. In the next chapter, we will turn to the charismatic movement the new monastics have most openly admired and emulated—the mendicant revolution of the twelfth century.

⁴³ According to the Prayer Foundation, --http://prayerfoundation.org/brief_history_protestant_monasticism.htm

Chapter Two: The Emergence of the Mendicant Orders

Although new monastic authors draw their inspiration from all corners of the monastic tradition, the example they seem to most admire and often speak of emulating when describing and justifying their movement is that of St. Francis of Assisi in specific and the mendicant orders in general. The mendicant orders were a new form of monastic life that arose in the 12th and 13th centuries, led by charismatic and inspiring figures like St. Francis. They began as revolutionary fringe movements, but were soon accepted and supported by the Church, distinguished from traditional monks with the title of “friar” applied to their members. They emphasized active engagement and ministry over the contemplative ideal of the traditional monastic orders, dynamic living over the cloister, and absolute poverty over the self-sufficiency of cenobitical monasteries. At the same time, they continued ascetic practices, valued the same community order and occasional contemplative solitude, and adhered to the same vows and fraternal regulations as the monks. Thus, though they constituted a break with traditional medieval monasticism as it had flourished for centuries, the mendicant orders remained within the monastic tradition, founding a “new type of monasticism,” just as the young men and women of today’s movement aspire to create.

The Context of the Mendicant Movement

The friars appeared at a crucial moment in the history of the Western Church, during a confusing period of social and cultural transition wherein the Church was facing significant crises on all fronts. When placed in historical context, the emergence of the mendicant orders was one prominent feature of a monumental transformation in the course of European history and the development of modern Christianity. This transformation began in the eleventh century, when the West entered a period of rapid change and cultural revival that continued to gain

momentum for the next two hundred years. An economic revolution of increased commerce, industry, and agricultural activity allowed for corresponding demographic booms, widespread urbanization, and increased affluence. These changes supplied the material means and physical opportunities for the blossoming of European culture that occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was these centuries that saw the rediscovery and celebration of ancient philosophy and science, the establishment of universities, the rise of scholasticism, the formation of Western jurisprudence and political theory, Europe's first ventures into global exploration and expansion, and the flourishing of distinctively Western art, architecture, technology, drama, and literature. These bright innovations and intellectual developments are often cited as the products of the 16th century Renaissance, but medieval scholars are quick to argue that they rightfully belong to the medieval era.⁴⁴

In the same way, many of the positive changes in the Christian faith associated with the Protestant Reformation, from lay knowledge of Scripture to clerical criticism and reform, actually belong to the 12th century as well, to a reformation movement with arguably the same potential for dramatic change and schism as the 16th century movement.⁴⁵ However magnificent the developments of the twelfth century Renaissance were by themselves, they presented unique and unprecedented challenges for the Christian church. The increasingly urban nature of society in itself made for extensive intellectual and social changes. City life provided fertile ground for the spread of ideas and dissent. It fostered a more critical and independent population, freed from the intimacy of living in a rural community, affluent and competitive, and more mobile, ready to

⁴⁴ Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927). James Franklin. "The Renaissance Myth." *Quadrant* 26 (Nov. 1982): 51-60.

⁴⁵ Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

engage with their faith on their own terms.⁴⁶ The demands of their commercial obligations and the resulting wealth allowed for more widespread literacy and subsequently a higher demand for secular education. Previously the domain of the Church and her clergy, learning became a commodity, proffered by scholars in the rising institution of the university. The intellectual leadership of the monasteries, the Church's control over the curriculum, and the limited pool of scholarship—it was all passing away.⁴⁷ And an articulate, educated, and less conformist laity was increasingly aware of the faults of the Church, the hypocrisy of the now affluent clergy, and the Gospel in its pure form.⁴⁸

This newly literate laity sought personal religious fulfillment in an unprecedented individualistic manner. “The drama of Christian morality was starting to move from the open field of bad actions and penitential counteractions to the private chamber of intention and contrition,” an uncontrollable and dangerous arena even for the imposing edifice of the medieval Catholic Church.⁴⁹ The traditional Church, the mature institutions of monasticism that pervaded Western society, did not fulfill the laity's needs. Large numbers of the European population turned to heretical revisions of the Christian message or new religions altogether. The dualistic heresy of Catharism, in particular, gained enough strength across southern Europe to warrant a papal call for a Crusade into southern France. Many devout remained at least ostensibly within the folds of the Church, but were part of a heavily anticlerical rejection of the Church in its present state, turning instead to personal worship or to a variety of unorthodox practices of mysticism or extreme asceticism. A variety of new forms of religious life began to pop up

⁴⁶ C.H. Lawrence. *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society*. (New York: Longman Publishing, 1994).

⁴⁷ John W. Baldwin, “Masters at Paris from 1179-1215: A Social Perspective,” in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991): 138-172.

⁴⁸ Barbara H. Rosenwein and Lester K. Little. “Social Meaning in the Monastic and Mendicant Spiritualities.” *Past & Present* 63 (May 1974): 18-32.

⁴⁹ Rosenwein, 19.

throughout Europe, many choosing to withdraw from society and the organized church, at least temporarily, in hopes of renewal and reform. These included monastic reformers of the eleventh century like the Cistercians, the hermits of northern Italy, wandering evangelical preachers with no official authority from the Church, and lay monastic fraternities like the Humiliati and Waldenses, which were actively suppressed and persecuted by the church as schismatic.

Each of these new forms of religious life conveyed certain themes in common—a need for simplicity and disengagement in contrast with the worldliness and heavily structured communalism of the monasteries, a desire to return to a more primitive and literal version of the monastic lifestyle in contrast with the institutionalized version of the present so intertwined with Church and secular politics, and a deep attraction to a more rigorous ideal of voluntary poverty and active service, in contrast to the growing affluence, selfishness, and materialism of the world around them. Each expressed discontent with the state of the Church in general and monasticism in its present state in specific. This discontent did not usually entail a rejection of the overall monastic ideal or the Christian faith in entirety, but it reflected the character of the era, with its openness to a variety of new religious activities and ideas, its desire for a more genuine, inspiring, and comforting faith, and its widespread access to the model of the primitive Church. Literate and educated reformers and their devout followers sought out the past in order to interpret for themselves the exact nature of religious life and its application to all Christians. Although the Church’s negative issues, from corruption to simple irrelevance, did fuel the efforts of these dissenters, their movements did not signify the waning of Christian faith or the monastic impulse in this period. “Heresy is not a symptom of apathy, but of religious fervor.”⁵⁰

The most prominent concept related to monastic and personal reform in this period was that of *vita apostolica*, or the “apostolic life”, an appeal to the model of the early Church founded

⁵⁰ Lawrence, 6.

by the first Apostles as described in the books of Acts. This was not a new notion. It had been constantly referred to in reform efforts throughout the history of the Church, and it was a common theme in monastic literature. Traditionally, the life of the apostolic community was interpreted as a standard of ascetic, cenobitical behavior. This interpretation formed the basis for the legitimacy and superiority of monastic living, earning monks a venerated and authoritative position in medieval society. Within the new spirit of the reformation, however, laymen and scholars began to look back at Scripture and early Church writings for themselves, and they came away with a variety of interpretations of what the apostolic life meant. *Vita apostolica* became a newly controversial term, used apologetically by opposing religious factions within the Church and heretical outsiders as the ultimate defense for their ideas and practices. No longer did association with this model of the primitive church exclusively distinguish the religious elite within the hierarchy of the Church. It had become accessible to clergy and laity alike.

As individuals and new religious institutions claiming the apostolic life arose across Europe, the Church had to decide whether to treat this phenomenon as dangerous dissent or legitimate diversity. It was the wisdom of the papacy to recognize some of these new forms of religious life, synthesizing them with existing Church practices and thus preserving the unity of the Christian faith. The mendicant orders were one element of this new synthesis, and the Church's acceptance of their values and mission constituted a de facto acceptance of the validity of the active life as part of the ideal Christian life, settling a multifaceted controversy over the proper place of ascetics within the hierarchy of the Church and society as a whole. The friars incorporated all elements of the previous centuries' dissenting forms of religious life—they were monastic reformers advocating a more rigorous life, wandering preachers and missionaries without accreditation, extreme ascetics in their commitment to complete poverty, scholastics, and

spontaneously formed lay fraternities of devotion. Everything that the so-called heretics offered could be found in the efforts of the mendicant orders, but the friars remained connected to the institutional church and amenable to its direction.⁵¹

For the Church was indeed acutely aware of its crisis. Two months after his accession, Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) wrote in his letters, “The little boat of St. Peter is beaten by many storms and tossed about on the sea.”⁵² He became a particularly dynamic reformer during his reign, bringing the Church to her greatest height before his death in 1216, but his actions reflected an already strong tradition of self-reform that had intensified in the twelfth century in response to the crisis.⁵³ Church authorities pulled no punches in combating the growth of heresy, working with political authorities to fight dissenting factions, enacting general reform and consolidating its authority. Their efforts ranged from an early Inquisition movement to ecumenical councils grand in scope and purpose. The Church gained limited successes, but the faults and weaknesses of the system, ironically pointed out most capably by the Gregorian reform in the eleventh century, remained to incriminate the Church and give strength to the opposing messages of dissent. Until the rise of the new monastic orders filled in the gaps and presented an uncorrupted and inspiring gospel, the heretics were the less encumbered and more capable side of the conflict.

⁵¹ Contemporaries apparently recognized the continuity the friars represented, as well as their function in being adopted by the Church. “In the early 1220s, James of Vitry, a knowledgeable reporter on the religious life, would describe the Franciscans as an order of preachers. Another early thirteenth-century observer, Burchard of Ursperg, stated—inaccurately but not without historical interest—that Pope Innocent III approved the Dominicans as a replacement for the Humiliati, and the Franciscans as a replacement for the Waldenses.” With references, Rosenwein, 18

⁵² Innocent III, “On Heresy: Letter to the Archbishop of Auch, 1198.” *Letters on Papal Policy*, Medieval Sourcebook Online.

⁵³ Frans Van Liere. “Was the Medieval Church Corrupt?”. *Misconceptions about the Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen J. Harris and Byron L. Grigsby (On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies, 1999-2001). Van Liere emphasizes the constant push for self-reform that characterized the medieval church.

Awareness of the crucial role of St. Francis and his brethren in turning the tide is reflected in the hagiography surrounding the movement. Francis' biographer, Thomas of Celano, recounts the legendary story of the saint coming to Rome to ask for papal recognition for his group. Having dismissed the ragged ascetic wearing beggar's clothes the day before, the pope is said to have had a dream on the night of April 16, 1208, in which he saw the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the seat of the papacy and the mother church of all Christendom, tottering on the brink of collapse. Then he saw a small man in beggar's clothing physically lift the church on his back, saving it from destruction. He recognized his supplicant from the day before and gave his qualified approval to Francis' order the next morning.⁵⁴ This sense of the "cosmic significance"⁵⁵ of St. Francis (he was canonized only twenty years after his meeting with the pope) was already present in his lifetime and has continued up to this day, as so vividly illustrated in the new monastic movement's reverent and adoring adoption of the saint as their ultimate example and historical hero.

St. Francis and the Founding of the Franciscan Order

Francis of Assisi was born into an upper-middle-class merchant family in Italy in 1182 AD. According to his earliest biographers, he lived an indulgent, less than pious youth.⁵⁶ In his early twenties, he was captured and wounded in battle fighting against a rival city. Soon after his release, he suffered a serious bout of illness. These hardships proved a turning point in his life, after which he devoted himself entirely to God with revolutionary fervor. He began to undertake radical acts of charity and to withdraw often for contemplation. He took a pilgrimage to Rome,

⁵⁴ Thomas of Celano, *First and Second Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, trans. Placid Hermann (London: Franciscan Herald Press, 1962.), ch. 11.

⁵⁵ Lawrence, 27. "St. Bonaventure and others identified him [St. Francis] with the 6th angel named in the Apocalypse."

⁵⁶ Thomas of Celano, *First and Second Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (1247), trans. by Placid Hermann. (London: Franciscan Herald Press, 1962).

where according to tradition he experienced a vision in which Christ Himself said to him, “Francis, Francis, go and repair my house which is falling into ruins.”⁵⁷ He took this command as referring to a literal church building in his area, which he undertook to rebuild with his own funds. His wealthy father, displeased with Francis’ deviance from the course of life he expected him to follow, sought to bring him back in line by having him brought before the bishop on legal grounds. At this point, Francis stripped naked before his father and the bishop, renounced his possessions and his family, and began a life as a beggar, restoring ruined churches throughout the area. Inspired by the apostolic commission in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 10,⁵⁸ he wandered as a preacher, gradually gathering a following of brothers who joined him in his lifestyle. After attracting about a dozen like-minded disciples, Francis wrote up a simplistic rule of life for his group and soon after travelled to Rome for his legendary meeting with Pope Innocent III to seek his approval (1210). Upon tonsure, Francis labeled his small order the “Friars Minor,” reputedly as a mark and reminder of their true humility.

Francis preached and was driven by a very literal identification with Christ’s life on earth. As Jesus and the apostles had wandered the earth, with “no place to lay their heads”⁵⁹, Francis exhorted his followers to do the same. Missionary activity, compassion for humanity, and absolute poverty were to be the distinctive marks of their lifestyle, each based simply and directly on Gospel imperatives and the example of Christ Jesus and His followers. Each compulsion, when carried out without hesitancy, proved to be radical and extreme in its obligations. Franciscan poverty was more risky than the personal poverty required by traditional

⁵⁷Thomas of Celano, *First and Second Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (1247), ch. 2.

⁵⁸ “And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give. Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat.” Matthew 10:7-10, KJV.

⁵⁹ “Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’” Luke 9:58, NIV

monasticism, wherein monks relinquished their possessions but remained secure and comfortable in the corporate property of the community. A friar depended entirely on divine providence and the generosity of others, an existence Francis described as a joyful means to the end of becoming completely open to God's direction. Compassion for the poor and oppressed brought the friars to the ugliest parts of the world, the most hopeless and sorrowful populations, and identified them with these sections of society. They were outcasts from their families and social environments, despised by many, and often in danger. Francis himself in his conversion process began to nurse lepers, the pariahs of the medieval world, at great risk to his own health. His commitment to missionary activity took him across Crusader battle lines to preach to the Muslim Sultan at risk of martyrdom, and Franciscans henceforth continued this quest for conversion and service or martyrdom in Muslim lands with great passion.⁶⁰

Although the early Franciscans recruited from all sectors of society, they, like the new monastics, found that most of their willing followers came from more affluent and educated classes. Like Francis, most of these men had never experienced real want in their lives. The radical nature of the Friars Minors' demands upon a novice was able to appeal to them as a willing choice, a sacrifice, and a living protest against the emptiness of the ends they would otherwise have devoted their lives to. These men were disillusioned with their affluent, comfortable backgrounds in contrast to the ideals of Christianity and the poverty they saw around them, and nothing spoke more effectively to them as the pure ideal of poverty Francis offered. And so the Franciscan order grew by leaps and bounds in its early years, despite its severity. In 1212, it added a Second Order for women, founded by St. Clare of Assisi, at that time a wealthy eighteen year old heiress and one of St. Francis' most exuberant early followers.

⁶⁰ Norman Johnson, Rachel Fulton, Bernard McGinn, and Paul Lachance, "Franciscan passions: Missions to the Muslims, desire for martyrdom, and institutional identity in the later Middle Ages," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2010).

Ten years later, a Third Order of tertiaries was founded, consisting of laymen living out the Franciscans rule as far as possible while remaining within the “world”. The popularity of the Franciscan tertiary order, alongside other mendicant lay orders, demonstrates the resonance of Francis’ rigorous ideals in the 13th century and the widespread acceptance of his more active vision of the Christian life, even for those who could not or would not commit entirely to the monastic life.

From its charismatic founding, Francis’ small religious movement underwent a difficult transition to an institutional religious order. Francis himself was no great legislator or organizer. He gave his first handful of followers a simplistic rule steeped in Scriptural justification, but short on practical organization and specific regulation. Within his lifetime, his vision of poverty and simplicity had already been compromised in some respects by followers undertaking the difficult task of reconciling their ideals with the practical demands of their mission and service to the Church.⁶¹ Tradition holds that Pope Innocent III had warned Francis and his first followers of their eventual fate before granting his approval to the order, saying to them “...your life appears to me too severe. I see indeed that your fervor is great...but I ought to consider those who will come after you, lest your mode of life be beyond their strength.”⁶² Absolute destitution and spontaneous service were possible for the small band of followers collected by Francis’ compelling personal example, but for a growing, scattered movement now officially recognized by the Church, supported by enthusiastic donors, and sought out by needy laity, the ideal was harder to enact. Benefaction was given that was meant to be used and handled by the friars for

⁶¹ Disappointment with the dilution of his ideals and the scholarly direction his order was taking led Francis to first resign his leadership of the order in 1220, then to draw up a new rule, his 1221 “Testament,” which was relaxed and modified by papal prelates, and finally to withdraw into mostly solitary contemplation and prayer until his death in 1226. Upon his deathbed, he left a will instructing his brothers to avoid compromising his ideal of poverty and his original rule. Will Durant, *Age of Faith*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950): 799-801.

⁶² Paul Sabatier, *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (1893), trans. Louise Seymour Houghton, (Project Gutenberg, July 8, 2006): 97.

noble purposes, and thus a loophole was engineered that vested all the goods of the order in the Church, allowing the friars to stabilize themselves in houses and churches with communal property, like traditional monasteries. This was necessary in enabling them to train and educate their initiates for missionary and pastoral work, but it conflicted with Francis' vision for the order. He preferred his monks living in poorer houses and huts, untied to any communal property, and he was very opposed to his order taking a scholarly direction. Accumulation of books conflicted with absolute poverty, scholarship bred pride, and the Franciscan mission was meant to be one of example rather than superior knowledge. However, not only did the mission of the order require education of its monks, but the appeal of the order tended to be strongest in the rising class of educated clerics and scholars. Compromises, "the inescapable consequences of growth,"⁶³ were thus made by Francis' colleagues and successors, often with the founder's expectations looming uncomfortably over their heads, sparking protests and schisms.

St. Dominic and the Dominicans

The need for Francis' high standards to bow to institutional measures for the success of the order was highlighted by the Franciscans' interaction with the more organized Dominican mendicant order. The Dominicans were founded around the same time as the Franciscans, motivated by the same spirit and perceived needs, and received papal approval six years after them in 1216. However, St. Dominic was not the heroic, charismatic founder that Francis was. He, like Francis, was of aristocratic background, but where Francis left his secular life in a dramatic personal conversion, Dominic's efforts were acceptable rather than scandalous and radical. As an educated priest, he originated from the religious life. He gained a reputation as a

⁶³ Many have observed the similar priorities and language between Dominic and Francis and have concluded that Dominic was inspired by Francis' earlier work. However, while both heard of each other and were likely influenced, affirmed, or encouraged, their simultaneous espousal of the *vita apostolica* and the ideal of poverty is more due to the surrounding intellectual and spiritual Church culture of their day— "...at the beginning of the thirteenth century such ideas were in the air..." Lawrence, *The Friars*, 40.

particularly devoted and zealous man, committed to emulating the *vita apostolica*, and he encountered the ideal of poverty through the efforts of his superiors to reach the Cathars.⁶⁴ Unlike Francis, Dominic set out from the beginning to create an ordered brotherhood devoted to preaching and missionary work. While he also committed his group to radical poverty, mendicancy, and new methods of ministry and devotion, his priorities mirroring Francis', his movement was less revolutionary and spontaneous. It immediately undertook the task of regulating itself and connecting officially with the Church in order to serve her purposes. In doing so, it remained a generally monastic order outside of its primary ministry of preaching, an unorthodox but sorely needed mission for monks, earning Dominic's followers the label of Friars Preachers. After receiving papal confirmation in 1216, Dominic organized general chapters and a representative government to regulate his order, set clear priorities and a general strategy for the friars' mission, and flexibly altered regulations and practices as needed when challenges or long-term issues arose. Having thus made his expectations and ends clear in a pragmatic fashion and established a system of governance not dependent on his own charismatic leadership, Dominic's ideals were not later argued over by his followers the way Francis' were. Although canonized and respected, he also did not receive the beloved and legendary status of Saint Francis.

The differences between the two orders are apparent in a comparison of their respective initial missionary endeavors. In 1217, a year after receiving papal recognition, Dominic sent his brethren on a preaching mission aimed at capturing the leading intellectual centers through recruitment and conviction. He sent his friars out with letters of papal accreditation instructing local clergy to render the group all necessary assistance, and with instructions to establish self-sustaining communities practicing traditional monastic regimens in balance with their pastoral activities, studies, and missionary efforts. Within a few years, the order had established a system

⁶⁴ Ibid. 69.

of checks and balances, including regular inspection of these houses and the friars' activities. The Dominicans quickly achieved a well-established presence in most major urban centers and particularly in the new scholastic world of the universities. They soon dominated most theological faculty in the academic world.

The Franciscans' first efforts at missionary activity were more spontaneous and encountered innumerable problems, sparking the controversies and compromises that so disappointed their founder and changed the character of the order over time. The first missionary Franciscans sought to expand beyond Italy and found themselves stranded without contacts, accreditation, or even the ability to communicate, as many did not speak the language of their foreign mission fields. The second wave of missions was better prepared in these basic areas and, like the Dominicans, focused on the urban field, but it still encountered serious issues. The friars had debilitating difficulties reconciling their ideal of poverty with their needs in ministering to the people. They either lost sight of that ideal in trying to establish themselves effectively, or, committed to begging and refusing to accept gifts of needed residences and churches, failed in their mission. Their commitment to simplicity and humility seemed to preclude academic efforts, which also inhibited their ability to appeal to sophisticated urban audiences in preaching, to gain valuable recruits from the intellectual population, and to serve the people in priestly capacities. On the other hand, the Franciscans were able to expand faster in their informal "grassroots" fashion, albeit with a higher failure rate, while the Dominicans carefully established their communities in a regulatory fashion.⁶⁵

Growth and Impact of the Orders

Regardless of their difficulties, both the Friars Minor and the Order of Preachers found widespread popularity and had an immediate and staying impact on the religious consciousness

⁶⁵ Lawrence, *The Friars*, 102.

of their age. Several additional mendicant orders sprang up throughout the century—the Servite Friars, the Crutched Friars, the Mathurin Friars, the Friars of the Sack, and the popular Carmelite and Austin Friar orders. Tellingly, many of these groups began as traditional monastic or devotedly eremitical communities. They evolved into mendicant orders in imitation of the Franciscans and Dominicans, and this reorientation in purpose was often difficult, fraught with pressure from recruits or patrons more committed to the ideals of mendicancy and tension with their original desire for solitary contemplative practices. The Franciscans and Dominicans had firmly established the ideas that the imitation of Christ demanded active missionary and service efforts and that the proper attitude for those pursuing the religious life was absolute poverty and simplicity. “No subsequent religious organization could wholly escape their influence.”⁶⁶

The dynamic mendicant influence and its multitude of offspring were helpful to the Church in many ways, as will be discussed shortly, but still threatened her order and control over Christendom. The popes wisely approved and guided these upstart orders, but they also “displayed a constant concern to harness and control the anarchic tendencies of these self-generated religious movements.”⁶⁷ In addition, the mendicants’ success prompted a heavy wave of criticism and hostility from the established traditional monastic orders and clergy, who saw their livelihoods and status threatened by the new movement.⁶⁸ The friars’ ideals implied that traditional monks and clergy were less than fully devoted or correct in their efforts. Their pastoral activities and popularity drew parishioners and patrons away from the parish churches and the lucrative services offered by the monks and clergy. Many responded to the success of the mendicants by obstructing their activities and casting them as villains and false prophets in

⁶⁶ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed., (London: Pearson Education, 2001): 269.

⁶⁷ Lawrence, *The Friars*, 98.

⁶⁸ Jurgen Sarnowsky ed., *Mendicants, Military Orders, and Regionalism in Medieval Europe*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999): 19-23.

tracts, sermons, and literature. Their purposeful dependence on benefaction, hospitality, and begging was characterized as thievery or laziness, their wandering as aimless, irresponsible, and a burden to honest people committed to hospitality, and their mission of preaching as false and misleading, lacking authority, and self-promoting. The theology behind what they preached and did was discredited as unbiblical in academic treatises. Their attitude was stereotyped as sly and deceitful, prideful and boasting, and worldly and selfish.⁶⁹ The papacy stood behind the friars and supported them in these controversies, but the stereotypical complaints and principled opposition remained a strong faction. Bitterness, ridicule, satire, and criticism continued to follow the growth of the mendicant orders throughout the centuries, but the friars nevertheless carried out their mission with full papal sponsorship and great success.

However, episcopal pressure combined with the need to contain the mendicant movement was capable of prompting some papal concessions to the opposing side of the controversy. The Second Council of Lyons in 1274, presided over by Gregory X, prohibited the founding of any more new religious orders and abolished several small or recently founded mendicant orders, exempting only the original orders (the Dominicans and Franciscans) and the illustrious Carmelites and Austin Friars. Other groups were suppressed and their property and recruits parceled out to the established orders. The only other group to be recognized officially by the Church as one of the original “great” mendicant orders was the Servite Friars, who were

⁶⁹ The leading spokesman of the movement against the friars was William of Saint-Amour, an academic and theologian. His 1255 tract, *De periculis novissimorum temporum*, was a well-reasoned tirade against the friars’ behavior and theological justifications. It evoked a defensive response from many friars, including academics and papal lobbyists. Since the mendicants’ theological defense of their mission supported the central power and authority of the papacy, and the popes in power at the time supported the mendicants on principle, the end result was the papal condemnation of William’s tract and his excommunication and exile. Nevertheless, William’s arguments and words repeatedly surfaced in future attacks against the friars and even in literary stereotypes, like Chaucer’s sly friar. William of Saint-Amour, *Brief Tract on the Dangers of the Last Days*, trans. Jonathan Robinson, 2008. (Accessed 15 May 2012, individual.utoronto.ca/jwrobinson/translations/De.periculis-master.pdf).

definitively approved in 1304 after years of back and forth between condemnation and praise depending on who was pope at the time. The constitution produced by the council exempted the Franciscans and Dominicans from the prohibition on the basis of “their evident advantage to the universal church,”⁷⁰ a reality recognized and quickly appreciated by the popes and secular leaders of the 13th century.

The mendicants were ideal candidates for both pastoral and administrative roles by virtue of their holiness, education, and incorruptibility, for

You could not threaten to starve a man who was ever striving to fast. You could not ruin him and reduce him to beggary, for he was already a beggar. There was a very lukewarm satisfaction even in beating him with a stick, when he only indulged in little leaps and cries of joy because indignity was his only dignity. You could not put his head in a halter without the risk of putting it in a halo.⁷¹

The friars had “opted out of the race for preferment,”⁷² removed themselves from the standards of the rest of the world, and stepped outside of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Their unique position and positive example made them the chosen agents of reform-minded popes facing the crises of a changing world. Their very nature as radicals and outsiders seeking only papal and divine approval validated the newly centralized role of the papacy in a newly centralized world moving past the organized local hierarchy of the previous age. Thus they were appointed as judges, emissaries, reformers, financial officials, propagandists, negotiators, educators, missionaries and ministers by both the Church and secular governments. Gradually, as they were absorbed into the establishment and ordered to the Church’s needs, their ideals and revolutionary fervor relaxed, sparking controversies, protests, revivals and schisms. However, they remained effective servants of the Church and the people.

⁷⁰ “Second Council of Lyons—1174” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Norman P. Tanner, ed. (Accessed 14 April 2012, *Papal Encyclicals Online*, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum14.htm>): II, 23.

⁷¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, (New York: Image Classics, 1987): 124.

⁷² Lawrence, *The Friars*, 220

The friars were “a revolutionary answer to a potentially revolutionary situation.”⁷³ They answered the challenges of heretics and dissidents with their sincerity and passion and met the needs of a changing world. They awakened mass fervor in the urban centers of Europe through specific ministry to the poor and preaching tours that emphasized the ability of laity to live a holy life within their secular vocations and family lives. They reclaimed the universities for the church, becoming entrenched in the medieval academic environment, improving educational standards for both the clergy and the laity, and bequeathing a significant theological and philosophical legacy to the West (namely Thomism). They followed the example of St. Francis’ evangelical journey to minister to Muslim leaders with dangerous missionary activity into distant cultures and hostile religions. Once the mendicants’ existence and purpose was officially vetted by the Church, the religious enthusiasm of the era could be linked to the friars’ example, ministry, and regulations, and thus directed into orthodox channels. Thus the mendicants, initially an outburst of the prophetic spirit, a revolution and a rejection of the status quo, became a force of order and peace. “Together they saved the Church.”⁷⁴

The friars’ less noble legacies included the heavy Dominican participation in papal Inquisitions and the friars’ strong role in preaching support and fundraising for the Crusades. Both efforts compromise the later reputation of the mendicant orders as disinterestedly peaceful, but they also fulfilled the friars’ vow of obedience to papal authority and aligned with generally accepted interpretations of what was justifiable in service to Christ. The catastrophes that afflicted Europe in the fourteenth century impacted the orders along with the rest of the Church, leading to further divisions and changes. And time passed, dulling in turn the once revolutionary spirit of the friars. When the next cultural and theological crisis confronted the church in the 15th

⁷³ Lawrence, *The Friars*, 225.

⁷⁴ Durant, 802.

and 16th centuries, the ideals and societal impacts of the mendicant orders were present in the reform and revival⁷⁵, but the friars themselves were part of the scenery, unable to prevent the split of Christendom.

⁷⁵ Martin Luther was an Augustinian friar, not a monk. His theses were developed and posted out of pastoral concern, in the preaching tradition of the mendicants and espousing similar ideals and concerns. The friars' initial spontaneous preaching mission developed into sermons that became a staple of the church environment, offering doctrinal and moral instruction, an outlet for the longings of the laity, and an articulation of their concerns and frustrations with the Church. In their approach to sermons, the friars expressed a new theological direction, rehabilitating the previously unfortunate "secular life" as equally replete with opportunity for devotion, service, and spiritual perfection. They gave spiritual advice related specifically and optimistically to married life, the requirements of various secular occupations, and the perspectives of different social and economic classes. For the especially devout, they offered the opportunity of tertiary status. In this way, they began the process of taking the order out of the cloister and setting it in the world, of applying monastic requirements to the entire church and spectrum of life, a process that would be continued or completed more radically in Luther and the Protestant Reformation's rejection of monasticism in entirety.

Chapter Three: Comparative Analysis of the Two Movements

New monasticism is a historically situated movement that claims a long heritage in its association with monasticism and intentional connection with the mendicant movement. The similarities between the friars and the new monastics allow us to place the present movement in perspective, to understand its direction, possible impact, and the meaning of its appearance, and to make conclusions as to its viability. Further consideration of the unique characteristics and different situation of the new monastic movement illuminate its distinctive vision of the religious life and its future challenges and possibilities. Beyond the particularities of the new monastic movement, however, the parallels also demonstrate the general historical and social meaning of new radical religious movements that exist happily, if controversially, within the wider church, as a renewing response to the challenges of a new age.

Parallels

The most obvious parallel between the two movements is new monasticism's conscious modeling of their purpose and activities on the example of the friars, and specifically on the heroic example of St. Francis. St. Francis is repeatedly described and mentioned in new monastic literature, mission statements, and related emerging church literature as the primary example of what the movement is striving to be and do. He is portrayed as controversial, countercultural, radical, and sincere in an age of decadence, reflecting the new monastics' vision of their own role in the Church today. "The life and witness of Francis is as relevant to the world we live in today as it was 900 years ago," Shane Claiborne writes. "He was one of the first critics of capitalism, one of the earliest Christian environmentalists, a sassy reformer of the church, and one of the classic conscientious objectors to war."⁷⁶ Francis' priorities and vision are aligned

⁷⁶ Shane Claiborne, "St. Francis, Pray for Us," *Sojourners*, Oct. 3, 2011, accessed 13 March 2012, <http://sojo.net/blogs/2011/10/03/st-francis-pray-us>

with the present movement's concerns in today's world—"turning one's back on the 'American dream'"⁷⁷, environmentalism, opposition to current wars, and proud, creative protest ("sassy" reform, as Claiborne puts it). Francis' trip to convert the Sultan during the Crusades is boldly compared to the 2003 Iraq Peace Team protest effort, in which the leading new monastics visited Iraq, and the "war on terror" campaigns are negatively aligned with the crusading environment of Francis' day, "where Christians and Muslims were killing each other in the name of God. Sound familiar?"⁷⁸ Francis' love for "Lady Poverty" is used to anoint the Occupy Wall Street movement.⁷⁹ He is considered a kindred spirit in line with the attitude and style of the new monastics—a radical and extremist marked by simplicity and joy. Shane Claiborne muses that if he could spend one day with any dead person, "I'd visit the Crystal Cathedral with St. Francis ... and then hitchhike to the beach to turn some somersaults and hear him preach to the seagulls."⁸⁰

Of course, this admiration of and sense of familiarity with St. Francis is nothing new. Nor is it limited to the new monastic movement. Francis of Assisi has been one of the most popular saints or heroes of the faith since his death, achieving almost immediately the legendary and beloved status he still holds across denominational lines. In the 20th century, he was often hailed to as the patron saint of ecologists, environmentalists, anti-war protesters, protesters of any kind, those opposed to capitalism, and animal lovers. He was especially popular in the worldwide countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and just as with the new monastics today,

⁷⁷ "The vows of celibacy and submission to the authority of the church were not the thing that drew...me to the monastery. It was the Franciscan ideal of rejecting the materialistic life and serving the poor: turning one's back on the 'American Dream' and a life of conspicuous consumption, and turning toward God's dream of a life of simplicity and compassion toward society's rejects." Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006): chapter 1.

⁷⁸ Shane Claiborne, "Praying with St. Francis, the Radical Christian Peacemaker," *The Huffington Post*, Oct. 3, 2011, accessed 13 March 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-claiborne/st-francis-radical-christian-peace_b_992545.html

⁷⁹ "One of the quotes attributed to Francis is a simple and poignant critique of our world, just as it was to his: "The more stuff we have the more clubs we need to protect it." It does make you wonder if he'd be on Wall Street protesting today." Claiborne, "Praying with St. Francis..."

⁸⁰ <http://www.thesimpleway.org/shane/>

parallels were often drawn between his ideals and work and the ideology and purposes of those movements.⁸¹

The use of the saint's image to anoint cultural causes has often prompted iconoclastic efforts from scholars and Franciscans seeking to transform Francis from an adaptable religious pop icon, so to speak, to a realistically complex and faulted three-dimensional historical human being. "Sentimentality so disfigures the historical Francis as to make his commitment to penance seem more like the lifestyle of a pleasant medieval hippie than the constant struggle against sin of a sincere and sometimes scary penitent," complains one modern Franciscan friar.⁸² The penitential, ascetic, and hermitical aspects of Francis' walk are often emphasized by concerned historians and Franciscans, along with his intense concern for papal approval and his devoted service to the Pope and the Church, in an attempt to balance out his image as a "stick it to The Man" radical and an utterly unconventional monastic.

Critics with more moral and theological than historical concerns have been so bold as to criticize the beloved saint's attitude and work as a flawed spirituality. Historian Kenneth Baxter Wolf, for instance, casts St. Francis as concerned less with genuine service than his own journey and experience. According to Wolf, Francis imitated the poor in order to gain recognition and admiration for himself, while not really affecting any substantial change for the poor themselves. He "hung out with lepers to make a statement to his former social class...This did nothing for the lepers, but everything for Francis."⁸³ Wolf presents this less-than-favorable interpretation of Francis out of concern for the example it sets for his many admirers, including the wealthy

⁸¹ A good example of the cultural attraction to Saint Francis in the 1960s and 70s, secular and religious alike, may be found in the 1972 Franco Zeffirelli film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* about Saint Francis' life with strong themes of connection to contemporary counterculture.

⁸² Friar Francisco Nahoe of the National Shrine of St. Francis of Assisi in San Francisco. Quoted by William Lobdell, "Scholars are Reassessing Saint Francis of Assisi," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/mar/22/local/me-religfrancis22>

⁸³ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis Reconsidered*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 3-4.

Christians of today who are attracted to St. Francis' ideal of poverty as a path to their own salvation and transformation, while their efforts fail to actually address the socio-economic plight of poverty. Christian commentators on new monasticism often express the same concern for the influence of Saint Francis on the movement, alongside recognition of his faith, virtue, and work.

However, new monasticism's focus on Saint Francis as their example illuminates not only the priorities of the movement, but also its inhibitions. While attracted to the monastic tradition and willing to follow through on the monastic impulse, the Protestant Christian leaders of the movement justify their revival of monasticism with an emphasis on active mission over the contemplative, ascetic, and obedient aspects of the monastic lifestyle. St. Francis is a more relatable character, with less strings attached than other recognizable monastic founders, and the term "friar" less burdened with negative association for the average Protestant than the term "monk."⁸⁴

Thus some self-classifications of the new monastic movement may be less historically significant than oriented to current popular understanding of "monasticism" as a term and a practice. For most American Protestants, the very idea of monasticism has to be rehabilitated and justified to even begin the conversation. The distinctions between the friars and monks help to bridge that gap for both the practitioners and their evangelical audience. Thus the self-identification of the new monastic movement reflects the charismatic, proudly controversial, and non-traditional character of the movement, its social and cultural values, the theological priority of active ministry over contemplative asceticism, and perhaps a pragmatic approach to a

⁸⁴ As reflected in Scott Bessenecker's careful explanation of why he chose the title "New Friars" for his book: "I chose the term friar rather than another term, monk for instance, because the friars were noted not only for their strong sense of mission but also for their mobility. They were willing to travel anywhere that God might call them." Bessenecker, interview *Intervarsity Christian Fellowship/USA*, (November 17, 2006) <http://www.intervarsity.org/news/scott-bessenecker-the-new-friars>.)

Protestant legacy of discomfort with the more traditional monastic orders. The historical realities of this conscious comparison may reveal more deeply the meanings and possibilities of the new monastic movement.

As dramatic, inspirational historical phenomena, the two movements fit into a similar historical context. Both emerged in an uncertain and confusing age of rapid economic and social change, transformative periods marked by questioning and rejection of previously secure cultural and intellectual foundations. Both came from within an introspective Church facing its own corruption and inadequacy in the face of unprecedented challenges from a changing cultural and social scene that is itself engaged in thought-provoking and controversial conflict with outside or newly discovered cultures and religions (which for both periods included Islam and newly discovered knowledge). Overall, the postmodern (or post-postmodern) age shares much in common with the High Middle Ages in which the mendicants made their appearance. Each was preceded by a demographic boom, widespread urbanization and globalization, and an economic revolution.

The results of these trends of rapid change included a rise in disconnected individualism and personal mobility, growing emphasis on money and commodification, a widening gap between rich and poor, and widespread disillusionment, cynicism, irony, and fear. In both ages an apocalyptic sense of the future, the idea that “the end of all things” is at hand in one way or another, pervades society and the Church. People, believers or not, were and are aware that the Church environment they were raised in does not meet the needs of their time. In the 11th century, “the whole machinery of the Church polity had been formed and was adapted to deal with entirely different conditions of society from those which had now arisen,”⁸⁵ prompting

⁸⁵ Augustus Jessopp, D.D., *The Coming of the Friars and other Historic Essays*, 6th ed., (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1953): 6.

many Christians to leave the Church for “heretical” but devout and severe factions like the Waldensians or Cathars, while others desperately sought reform and renewal measures. Today, the controversial “emerging church” is defined by its disillusionment with the evangelical church as-is and its concern for meeting the needs of the current postmodern generation, or presenting an “experience” of Christ that is vital and engaging to an increasingly secular and disdainful culture. Both environments, fraught with disillusionment and rejection of the organized or institutional Church, spawned numerous renewal and reform movements and new directions in religious life. The mendicants were the most notable and long-lived of these developments in the High Middle Ages. The new monastics are the most recent and perhaps the most organized movement in the 20th century revival of the monastic impulse across denominational lines. Their long-term viability and impact remains to be seen, but the popularity and organized nature of the movement is already significant.

The friars and the new monastics both embody a general reaction to uncertain times. Each formed a popular countercultural movement that pushed back specifically at the current of its times. Traditional values were reasserted, but the priorities of both movements were most oriented to the excesses of the age and the problems their leaders pinpointed as being at the root of present turmoil. In the face of hyper-individualism and the unraveling of previous dependable social structures, both movements responded with an affirmation of community. In response to homogenization of globalization and the quick rate of change, resulting in unfamiliarity and discomfort, both movements looked back to the past and reasserted or rediscovered anew traditional values and practices, especially those that emphasized the heart instead of the mind. Their complaints were not theological, but moral, and their appeal experiential and dramatic more than practical and analytical.

In particular, both movements responded to the shallowness and corruption of the contemporary economic situation with repudiation of the dominant ends of the age and embrace of the exact opposite condition—humble poverty. The late 20th century saw an incredible leap in affluence and consumption, as did the 11th and 12th centuries, and the children and grandchildren of those who achieved this higher standard of living were the ones to see its darker side, dead ends, and shallowness. The leaders of the monastic movements in question, mostly belonging to the upper middle class themselves, took “a calculated departure from the lure of the acquisitive spirit”⁸⁶ by choosing to live their “extremist” lifestyles. The extent to which these movements are part and parcel to their contexts is demonstrated by the fact that the friars and new monastics are not the only ones calling attention to these problems or championing the opposite values in their respective centuries. St. Francis and St. Dominic had their predecessors (the Cluniac reformers, for instance) and their competitors from outside the Church (the Waldensians and Cathars), championing similar lessons and priorities. The new monastics share their values, priorities, and even their style with the countercultural movements of the 1960s, both religious and secular, and current youth culture.

This connection is not surprising, given the very nature of monasticism—repudiating the world’s ends to affirm heaven’s priorities. As Walter Capps puts it, “monasticism is the West’s most venerable form of counterculture.”⁸⁷ In transitional periods, disillusionment with the prevailing culture has regularly sparked monastic developments and other new forms of religious life. Postmodernism, which has seen such ideological phenomena as anarchism and a general culture of protest flourish, is particularly flavored by the spirit of revolution and counterculturalism, embracing rebellion against the status quo for its own sake, regardless of

⁸⁶ Walter Capps, *The Monastic Impulse*, (New York: Crossroads, 1983): 9.

⁸⁷ Capps, 4.

purpose. Both the mendicant movement and the new monastic movement have promoted themselves as revolutionary and radical, and their appeal for many of their adherents and admirers has been rooted in this extreme character. Of course, in the twelfth century, innovation was not as attractive an adjective as it is today—“heretics were often accused of novelty, and innovators were doubtless often suspected of heresy.”⁸⁸ And understandably, just as is often the case today even in an age more friendly to the spirit of protest and freshness, the mendicants were often dismissed as a youth trend.⁸⁹ Both movements were sensitive to such charges and sought to overcome natural opposition to innovation from the conservative and wary with appeal to venerated traditions, lost practices, and ancient wisdom, all uncovered and freshened up for the new world and promising to bring about something “different” nonetheless. The mendicants modeled themselves on the *vita apostolica*, and the new monastics look to retrieve traditional practices, liturgy, and the very concept of the religious life for the evangelical community, each building on longer trends within the reform spirit of the Church of their time. Both exist within the tension between “backward-looking ideals based on models from the past...and the forward-looking vision that opened the way to real innovations,”⁹⁰ a tension between conservative and radical that the Christian mindset is capable of accepting as a whole as “part of God’s emerging plan for the present and the future.”⁹¹

Both movements were rooted in a critique and rejection of the Church in its current state, but sought to remain connected to it nonetheless. Their dissatisfaction and concern with the Church’s standards does not necessarily reflect the Church’s decadence in either period,

⁸⁸ Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991): 65.

⁸⁹ “Great men smile at the craze of the monomaniac. Old men shook their grey heads and remembered that they themselves had been young and foolish. Practical men would not waste their words upon the folly of the thing. Rich men, serenely confident of their position, affirmed that they knew of only one who could overcome the world—to wit, the veritable hero, he who holds the purse-strings.” Jessopp, 15-16.

⁹⁰ Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966): 43

⁹¹ Benson and Constable, *Renaissance and Renewal*, 66.

however. While the friars and new monastics embarked on their respective searches for change and a better religious experience, their contemporaries and critics were often no less eager or confident in their own religious directions. While suffering problems and often equally aware of their own shortcomings, their fervor was real, their ranks growing, and their own efforts at reform and renewal creative. The traditional monastic orders of the High Middle Ages were reforming themselves and still strong, as evidenced by their burgeoning renewal movements, even as the friars threatened their supremacy over the religious life. The friars themselves shared the stage with other mystical and heretical movements demanding serious piety and zeal. Today, the appearance of the new monastics and their complaints with the mainstream evangelical church has not dulled the strength, growth, and enthusiasm of that mainstream, which has been similarly marked by efforts at renewal and interest in new varieties of religious experience. As noted by medieval historian John Van Engen in direct reference to the emergence of the mendicant orders, “a new vision of religious perfection need not require the decadence of another; two or more may well flourish in the same era.”⁹² Both movements emerged in a general environment of religious fervor and search for fulfillment in unorthodox directions. The significance of their emergence therefore may reflect more the transformative nature of the age than the actual condition of the Church.⁹³

However, this is not how their members appraise the significance and meaning of their efforts. The mendicant movement is widely credited with saving the medieval Church. This may or may not be a historically credible reality, but more important is the fact that the friars

⁹² John Van Engen, “The “Crisis of Cenobitism” Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050-1150,” *Speculum* 61, No. 2 (Apr. 1986): 274.

⁹³ “New religious movements are keys to where a society is spending its religious energy. The monasteries are a good indicator of religious vitality because without it they could not have come into being in a church which has traditionally considered them anathema.” Linda K. Fischer, “The geography of Protestant monasticism,” PhD diss., (University of Minnesota, 1990): 23.

themselves believed at the time that this is what they were doing.⁹⁴ The followers of St. Francis cast their leader and movement as a providential intervention in Christian history, using the then socially acceptable hagiographical technique of describing miraculous affirmations of their founder's purpose in their histories—the vision of Jesus Christ directing him to “rebuild My house, which is falling into ruins,” Innocent III's dream, the stigmata, etc. Throughout the centuries, Francis has remained one of the most beloved Christian saints, representing an affirmation of the Gospel and its potential impact.

As for the new monastics, their authors and spokespersons portray the movement's purpose as providing hope for the future of the Church and the world it is meant to be serving as “salt and light”. Jonathan Wilson argues for “the recovery of a faithful church” as a purposeful goal in his call for new monasticism. While rejecting characterization of the new monasticism as a “pragmatic” venture or a “survival strategy,” he believes that new monasticism is the proper and “necessary” response to the current situation, “a contingent tactic,” a means of recovering faithfulness to the Church's mission at a point of crisis—specifically, the “fragmented” world of postmodern transition and the compromise and corruption of the life of the Church.⁹⁵ Throughout his elaboration and defense of the new monastic vision, Wilson insists on the genuine and sincere nature of the movement. He does not want it to be cheapened by descriptions that cast it as an ideology or an organized program with a clear plan. Instead he insists upon the description “a gift of the Holy Spirit to the church and the world” and rejects any other.⁹⁶ The confident and enthusiastic vision of the new monastic, like that of the mendicant, involves a providential role in

⁹⁴ Contemporaries of the friars often held the same cataclysmic view of their times, the crisis the Church faced, and the significance of monasticism in general in its recovery. “Many writers in the twelfth century saw the spread of monasticism as a revival and renewal after a period of death, cold, and darkness.”

⁹⁵ Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue*, (Trinity Press International, 1998): 44-45, 60.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 66

Church history, a prophetic and saving role that is affirmed by the genuine fervor of the movement.

This role is supported by a historical understanding of the role monasticism has always played in Christian history as a response to uncertainty, dissension, or corruption. Both observers and members of the new monastic movement look back at the history of monasticism and find its developments revolutionary, inspiring, and fateful. “Monastic communities represent the ‘leaven’ which can revive the larger organization when reviving is needed,” one such observer muses.⁹⁷ A popular quote shared by authors and supporters of the movement comes from prominent church historian Adolf von Harnack:

It was always the monks who saved the Church when sinking, emancipated her when becoming enslaved to the world, defended her when assailed. These it was that kindled hearts that were growing cold, bridled refractory spirits, recovered for the Church alienated nations.⁹⁸

Each major era in monastic history is thus connected in a cause and effect relationship with church crises. The era of the desert fathers is considered a response to the institutionalization of the Church in its marriage to imperial power under Emperor Constantine. St. Benedict is a response to the chaos and uncertainty of the passage from the late Roman Empire to the medieval age. The Franciscans and Dominicans, of course, were the salvation of the High Middle Ages and the crisis of the medieval church. During the Reformation and the rising secularism of the modern age, the devout efforts of the Jesuits, Anabaptists, Moravians, and other ascetic or intentional groups are credited with the relevancy and purity of the modern Church. The new

⁹⁷ Fischer, “The geography of Protestant monasticism,” 17.

⁹⁸ Adolf von Harnack, *Monasticism: Its Ideals and History*, (London: Williams & Norgate, 1901): 64.

monastics see themselves as the latest stage in this venerable history of prophetic correction and salvation.⁹⁹

Monastic Movements and the Church

This heroic self-appraisal is to some extent supported by the patterns of religious development observed and described by historians and sociologists. Interpretation of the role of asceticism and monasticism alongside and within the mainstream Church and surrounding culture in Christianity is a popular topic. Medieval historian Jeffrey Burton Russell has described the climactic emergence and impact of the major religious orders as a primary example of the ongoing tension between the spirits of “prophecy” and “order” in Christianity. According to Russell, the spirit of prophecy proclaims religious truths and seeks the end of the world with uncompromising fervor, while the spirit of order more patiently works “within the world and with the imperfect materials at hand,” elaborating institutions and organizing.¹⁰⁰ Both are necessary for the growth of the Church, balancing each other out with positive results—“The prophetic spirit...created Christianity, but the spirit of order was needed to preserve it.”¹⁰¹ Eras of monastic expansion are simultaneously periods of rapid imposition of greater order and organization. “In each era, the advance of the spirit of order called forth a corresponding thrust from the spirit of prophecy.”¹⁰² Thus the High Middle Ages saw extremes in religious devotion (particularly the fervor of Francis, “the perfect manifestation of the prophetic spirit,”¹⁰³ and his brethren), the popularity of heresies, and intense orderly repression along with the growth of central papal power.

⁹⁹ Jerry Truex, “Sermon on New Monasticism: Part One,” *Menmonite Church of the Servant*, August 21, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Medieval Christianity: Prophecy and Order*, (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1968): 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 143.

In the American evangelical church, the reassertion of monasticism may be considered a manifestation of the prophetic spirit, rebelling against the order-seeking fundamentalist movement as well as the compromising laxity of the mainstream church. However, within the unique situation of the Protestant environment, where monasticism is a rejected and unfamiliar tradition, the new monastic movement and similar trends of returning to liturgy and traditional practices may actually represent the reassertion of order in response to the chaotic fragmentation of the postmodern world. Still it presents itself in the prophetic guise, belonging to the spirit of prophecy through its very association with the uncompromising fervor of monasticism and its intended purpose of providing “missionaries to the church.”¹⁰⁴ Historically, the ongoing tension between the two forces is illustrated by the compromises made by the second generation of religious orders as they realistically institutionalize and organize themselves, bowing to the need for order.

Russell’s historical observance of the interplay between prophecy and order may be compared to the typologies of Christian religious groups outlined by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch. Weber outlined three groups in Christian society, exerting subtle tension upon each other but coexisting and interacting nonetheless. The “religion of the masses” encompasses the majority of the Church—reasonably comfortable and making no difficult demands upon its adherents. The religion of the “virtuosi” includes the extremists, those who strive for perfection by rigorously pursuing all ideals of the belief system. This includes the ascetics, saints, and founders of religious orders. However, there is a distinction between virtuosi and the religion of charismatic figures. The charismatic leader introduces a new concept, vision, or gift, breaking with the order of tradition and established authority in the Church, and inspires a cohesive following. The virtuoso may go to such extremes in their fervor that they become a charismatic,

¹⁰⁴ Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

offering a new or more extreme interpretation of their ideals or being rejected by the authorities of the Church. Thus charismatic and virtuoso religions often overlap, but virtuoso religion bows to the spirit of order while charismatics belong entirely to the prophetic spirit. “Charismatics proclaim a message, virtuosi proclaim a method.”¹⁰⁵ Charismatics are short-term phenomena, the truly “prophetic,” while virtuosi exist constantly within and alongside the mainstream Church. In the Catholic and Orthodox churches, for instance, religious orders stay within the church, accepting the permissive and imperfect religion of the masses alongside their own virtuoso standards humbly. St. Francis may have been a charismatic counter-cultural figure at the start, but he and his order quickly placed themselves under papal supervision and evolved into another instance of virtuosi religion.

Through various cultural transitions and points of crisis in the mainstream Church life, the virtuosi, embodying the prophetic spirit and providing an example and opportunity to strive for the ideals of Christianity, have provided an outlet for religious energy. Along with the charismatics, the virtuosi have protested the secularization of the Church and prompted revivals and reconsiderations, but they have remained humbly devoted to tradition and the fallible institutions of the Church. Thus they have provided a stabilizing effect for the Church, calling it back to its “primitive fervor” when needed and providing an opportunity for those who feel a “higher call”.¹⁰⁶ This has been the role of monastics throughout Church history, a role they themselves have embraced and described. The Protestant Church’s rejection of monasticism, however, has led it to take “the order out of the cloister and set it in the world. Whereas in Catholic cultures the average is within the Church and the man of exceptional vocation within

¹⁰⁵ Michael Hill, *The Religious Order*, (London: Heineman Educational Books, 1973): 2.

¹⁰⁶ Mervin Monroe Deems, “The Place of Asceticism in the Stabilization of the Church,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Oct. 1930): 563-77.

the order, in Protestant cultures all men are called to be tertiaries.”¹⁰⁷ The rediscovery of monasticism by young Protestants thus faces the unique challenge of determining the proper role the movement will take in its relationship with the mainstream Church. This task will involve confronting the Protestant Church’s theological objections to and long-seated prejudice toward monasticism.

Weber also elaborated the sociological classifications of church and sect, concepts which were clarified and popularized by Troeltsch. The Church is a universal institution, “necessarily including both the just and unjust”¹⁰⁸, working within the world and the existing social order. The sect comprises a small and exclusive community that considers itself the truly devoted, adhering to higher standards and refusing to accept worldly concerns.¹⁰⁹ Sects are generally formed out of dissatisfaction with the standards of the parent church or denomination. They advocate a return to “true religion” and are initially marked by a tone of protest and genuine spontaneity. As they develop past the stage of original formation, sects face inevitable change in their nature. They may wane in popularity, face controversy or further schism, and eventually dissolve. If, however, membership is maintained or continues to grow, the sect will have to institutionalize to some degree, adopting norms to govern its activities and maintain its doctrine. In doing so, it inevitably loses some of its spontaneity and its prophetic voice to achieve order

¹⁰⁷ D.A Martin, *Pacifism*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965): 136.

¹⁰⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons, (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications, LLC., 2010): 144.

¹⁰⁹ The theological classifications of modalities and sodalities illustrate the same tensions as the descriptions of varying expressions of religious life offered by Jeffrey Burton Russell, Weber and Troeltsch . Modality refers to the structured or stable universal or local church—i.e. the Catholic Church or the settled Protestant denomination and local congregation. Sodalities are movements or organizations, task-oriented, looking for a deeper commitment and either independent or on the margin of the mainstream, including monastic orders, missionary or charity efforts, societies and groups. Missologist Ralph D. Winter argued that both structures were necessary to the health and effectiveness of Church life and specifically called on Protestants to recognize their need for permanent sodalities. Ralph Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” (Campus Crusade for Christ, accessed 15 July 2012, http://resources.campusforchrist.org/images/4/48/The_Parachurch.pdf)

and thus continue its existence and work. Catholic religious orders are successfully institutionalized sects, existing within and alongside the church.

The Unique Situation of the New Monastic Movement

However, the Protestant Church as a whole also expresses the characteristics of a sect. After its initial protest and separation from the Catholic Church, it institutionalized itself and developed into denominations, a halfway religious type between the prophetic sect and the orderly church. Throughout Protestant history, however, particularly in America, members have sought to retain the Reformation's spontaneity of protest and sense of adherence to the correct or most fervent standards by refusing to tolerate the perceived shortcomings of their denominations. Sects have been formed at a much higher rate and have been able to simply step outside their current church and form a more pure group. The stigma of innovation and schism were overcome when Reformers committed to their course, justifying their separation on doctrinal terms and the concepts of the holy "invisible" Church and the universal priesthood of believers. Besides several main Protestant denominations, encompassing themselves many individual churches only connected in name and still subject to local schism, hundreds of smaller denominations and thousands of individual non-denominational communities exist in the Protestant community, constantly growing and subject to the consumer tastes of the individual member.

Reform and renewal efforts do not upset the general climate of the Protestant church—it is perfectly acceptable for a small community of like-minded members to break off on their own in the name of spiritual truth or higher standards of devotion at any time. It is in fact almost considered a virtue. There is to be no interplay between church and sect in the Protestant environment, on the charge that it constitutes a double standard. Thus the traditional relationship between monastic communities and the Church is precluded on the same variety of theological

objections that resulted in monasticism being rejected by the Reformers in the first place. Those Protestants who have overcome those objections to reach an acceptance or appreciation of the value of religious orders face a difficult question on the future of such institutions in their own denominations: “*How can we create a productive and positive place in the Church’s permanent structures for its lay members who have been called to lives of greater Christian intentionality?*”¹¹⁰

Even as Protestant Christians become more comfortable with the concept of monasticism, the very nature of the Protestant environment presents very different conditions for the evolution of the new monastic movement. So far, Protestant monasticism in truly traditional forms has been most successful introduced in those denominations with the greatest number of “church” traits—Anglican, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and most recently, Methodist—and in Europe, where there are more national churches and the presence of Catholic monasticism remains strong. The presence of authority and hierarchy in these denominations (or example and precedent) eases the path to institutionalization and allows the monastic communities to approach the role of the virtuosi in relation to the wider church. The new monastic movement, in responding to usual Protestant charges on the negative aspects of monastic theology, must clarify and demonstrate how they fit into the wider Church and into the world, a difficult task in the informal and unbounded Protestant church. They may be considered just another sect or option, and their relationship with the wider Church is harder to establish, which will make it difficult for the scattered communities of the movement to move past the initial charismatic or sect phase.

New monastics remain proudly “new,” “emerging,” “radical”, “controversial,” and “extremist.” The young movement sets out with the stated purpose of providing “the church with

¹¹⁰ Ivan J. Kauffman, *Follow Me: A History of Christian Intentionality*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

a means to recovering its life and witness in the world.”¹¹¹ However, as widely inspirational as the movement is able to be through its publicity, it remains in reality a handful of individual small communities of like-minded individuals, spontaneously formed, held together, and organized by a small group of charismatic leadership. For the wider Protestant community, those who know about it are inspired but do not see viable options for their own participation. It is relegated to one option or faction out of the wide variety available to open-minded Protestant Christians. For those unfriendly to its style or principles, it poses no real threat and is just as easily condemned or dismissed as one of those many competing sects or factions. The movement also recognizes the need for accountability and connection to the Church.¹¹² However, the exact nature of that relationship remains open to the individual community, and it is not necessarily reciprocated in any sort of commitment from the Protestant local or denominational structure. Within the Protestant environment, the connection is informal and the promise of accountability tenuous. The community simply needs to find a church that suits its own taste.

The phenomenal impact and quick growth of the mendicant orders so admired by the new monastics followed papal approval and support, the laying down and refinement of a “rule of life,” and general benefaction and interest in their endeavors and ideals. The path of the new monastic movement may be more humble and halting in the absence of an approving and supporting hierarchy, a clear path of institutionalization, and significant benefaction and interest from a wider church community that may view them more as a novelty than an official or usual enterprise with a clear purpose. It is one thing for a Church with allegiance to an executive approving authority and monasticism as part of their daily lives to accept a new version of the religious life that is devotedly faithful and obedient to the Church. It is quite another for a

¹¹¹ Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, 62.

¹¹² Ivan Kauffman, “Mark 5: Humble Submission to Christ’s Body, the Church,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 68-79

disjointed tradition with a strong prejudice against all forms of the religious life to accept any version of it into their usual way of doing things.

New monasticism also faces unique challenges and opportunities in its postmodern context. In recent decades, scholars have argued that the conditions of the postmodern world are leading the world back to a medieval-like environment and simultaneously reviving interest in the historical narrative of medievalism as a coping mechanism in popular culture.¹¹³ However, as many similarities as the medieval and postmodern share (most generally their identification vis-à-vis modernity), the 13th century was obviously an entirely different environment from the young 21st century. This age has its own challenges, concerns, priorities, and memories, not to mention the unique conditions fostered by modern advances and developments, from the size of the world to technological abilities. It seems that leaders of the new monastic movement are conscious of their historical situation and the need to respond thoughtfully and strategically to the surrounding postmodern culture. Jonathan Wilson writes that “new monasticism must constantly think through the form of its life and the direction of its mission in light of our cultural history, the fragmentation of our life, the failure of the Enlightenment project, the Nietzschean temptation, and the continual ‘recovery’ of its life as rooted in the good news that God is redeeming creation in, through, and for Jesus Christ.”¹¹⁴ Other authors, from members of the new monastic movement to Catholic advocates for traditional monasticism, describe the current state as their argument for the renewal of monastic values, so uniquely necessary in these times. The open focus on postmodernism throughout new monastic literature and mission statements is

¹¹³ Stephen J. Korbin, “Back to the Future: Neomedievalism and the Postmodern Digital World Economy,” *The Journal of International Affairs* (Spring 1998): 361-386.

Lee Patterson, “On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies,” *Speculum*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Jan. 1990): 87-108.

Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality*, trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1987): 62.

¹¹⁴ Jonathan Wilson, “Introduction” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005): 3.

often used as evidence by critics who identify the movement as a temporary postmodern expression of the faith instead of simply a response.¹¹⁵ Supporters point out in return that “...part of the era itself are the living responses to it.”¹¹⁶

It is true that the movement embodies many elements of postmodernism, for better or worse. It reaffirms the experiential component of Christian discipleship over academic, reason-driven Christianity—the poet over the metaphysician. It is a spontaneous, independent, and laity-driven movement that rejects the control, authority, and hierarchy of traditional monasticism, even as it does concede its need to submit to the Church, reflecting postmodernism’s suspicion of overarching hierarchy and comprehensive control. It eagerly accepts a diverse plurality of local communities as brethren, reflecting postmodernism’s embrace of the local, the diverse, and the many. The communal impulse itself is very postmodern, as is the revival of ancient and more mystical traditions. The critiques, protests, and rejections of the new monastic movement, however valid, often line up with anti-modern themes found in postmodern culture. And the methods of protest, the style of manifestos, and the cultural imprint of the new monastic movement tend toward the postmodern-emphasized showmanship—“don’t tell me, show me” and playful style.

New monasticism also shares priorities with a wider trend of monastic revival that has built throughout the past century, across religious and denominational lines, with distinctively postmodern traits, in response to the confusion, fragmentations, and disillusionment of the cultural transition from modern to postmodern. This overarching movement, termed “new asceticism” by scholar Walter Capps, shares several distinguishing concerns unique to recent

¹¹⁵ “It may very well be that the turn to contemplative religion should be viewed as being more symptomatic of the larger plight than an adequate response.” Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, quoted in Walter Capps, *The Monastic Impulse*, 40.

¹¹⁶ Evan B. Howard, “Evangelical Monasticism in a Postmodern World: Preliminary Considerations,” (paper presented to the Evangelical Scholars in Christian Spirituality, 2007): 36.

generations in their emphasis: “strong and renewed respect for the earth....discipline of one’s daily eating and exercising habits...cherishing and safeguarding times of silence...heightened sensitivity to the various harmonies by which human life can be principled...increased awareness of the negative and debilitating effects of aggression...the serious casting about for models of life independent of the familiar success syndrome...the craving for enduring health...the desire to live more simply,” and the recognition of a lack of satisfaction to be found in affluence.¹¹⁷ These characteristics are not specific only to those who are willing to commit to the monastic lifestyle; they are common reactions to the postmodern climate, often elaborated in different trends secular and religious, and their familiarity helps to explain the attraction to stable ancient practices and monastic values that has allowed new monasticism to appeal to the Protestant church after centuries of vehement and well-reasoned rejection.

Capps interpreted the monastic revival of the late 20th century as the descendant of the 1960s’ counterculture, which was “too strong to simply pass from the scene after its initial dramatic dawning.”¹¹⁸ Disappointment over the results and achievements of that movement, which included a multiplication of short-lived religious communities, led to further cynicism, anxiety, and a greater reliance on individual resources for humbler endeavors. Young people continued to exhibit a spirit of protest, rejection, and desire for something “different,” but they also displayed an urge “to affirm and not just to criticize.”¹¹⁹ Late anthropologist Paul Hiebert identified a similar spirit within the “post-postmodern” worldview that is supposedly replacing postmodernism in the past couple decades—a rejection of and response to the “Nietzschean

¹¹⁷ Capps, *The Monastic Impulse*, 32.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 7

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 36.

temptation” and replacement of the emptiness of postmodernism with meaningful positives, while continuing to exhibit its skeptical spirit of rejection.¹²⁰

The new monastic movement has emerged in the midst of these shifts in worldview and as an heir to this longer tradition of counterculture. It distinguishes itself from the failed communities of the 1960s on the basis of its vision—not a “rejection of the past” or an attempt to do better, but a humbler “embrace of the past and an acceptance of responsibility for our history”¹²¹—mirroring postmodern skepticism and rejection, but with the priority of affirmation and humble engagement that marks the post-postmodern era. Like the 1960s communities, it shares this worldview shift, many of its prominent values, and its style with the secular groups and trends of the same generation, garnering the new monastics immediate admiration and recognition or repulsion and incredulity, depending on their audience. Hippies and devout members of the Jesus Movement often looked, sounded, and acted alike, and critics of the new monastics are quick to point out how identical they seem to today’s countercultural and socially engaged “hipsters”—“the unlikely beards...the unusual fusion of earnestness and irony, the religious zeal about creativity and cool, and the bourgeois experiment in slumming.”^{122 123}

Worldview transformations have been driven and influenced by the cultural changes wrought by current globalization processes, modern political systems, hyperpluralism, and the intense increase in information technology. Each of these phenomena presents new monasticism with unique opportunities and disadvantages, as well as marking the movement with a distinctive twenty-first century flavor that separates it from older monastic undertakings. The mendicants

¹²⁰ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008): ch. 4-8.

¹²¹ Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, 45.

¹²² Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “Pulp Sociology,” *The New York Sun*, (March 14, 2008).

¹²³ “They seem to be a conglomeration of trendy Christian-Hippie expressions...” T. Justin Read-Smith, “Monasticism and the habit: To habit or not to habit? That is the question,” (*From the Priory* blog, October 20, 2008), accessed 12 July 2011, <http://tjustinreadsmith.wordpress.com/2008/10/20/monasticism-and-the-habit-to-habit-or-not-to-habit-that-is-the-question/>

were also shaped by processes of a similar nature in their time—greater international integration and mobility, changing political realities within both the Church and European society, a sudden influx of new religious and intellectual options, and an intellectual revolution that included increased literacy, the rise of the university, the advent of rediscovered ancient knowledge, and a trend of wider information dissemination throughout society. The similarities between the challenges and opportunities confronted by the two movements speak to the essential connection between cultural transitions and monastic transformations, but the specifics of each age’s separate challenges affect the character, viability, and impact of either movement in a distinctive way.

For instance, the challenges and opportunities provided by the revolutions of information and its dissemination in each age—for the friars, it prompted both a desire to defend the faith within the scholastic environment and an early rejection of that world’s values and the changes wrought by it. St. Francis was initially very opposed to members of his order engaging in scholarship. In his own lifetime, however, the Franciscans took on the same academic flavor as the other major mendicant orders. One of the greatest achievements of the mendicants was their capture of the universities, conversion of popular ideas previously assumed hostile, and the extraordinary heritage of scholarship they bequeathed the late Middle Ages. For the new monastics, advancements in information technology are used to spread the movement’s message and increase the strength of the movement¹²⁴, and at the same time are treated with postmodern disillusionment and contempt.¹²⁵ Confident in their message, the leaders of the movement are

¹²⁴ “These communities’ eager use of the Internet reveals some of what is new in the new monasticism. They do not reject technology as such. They embrace the Internet, as it serves their purposes of linking similar Christian communities to one another and sharing resources.” Jason Byassee, “The new monastics,” *The Christian Century* 122, no. 21 (2005): 42.

¹²⁵ “We have wasteful technologies used by billions of people growing exponentially, more expansive exploitation, more powerful bombs...Our tools have ‘advanced,’ but we haven’t advanced spiritually or morally. And so we, normal people, with the tools of destruction and wastefulness available daily for purchase, cannot handle the power.

happy to utilize the possibilities of today’s technology while continuing to question its cultural impact. In doing so, they have been capable of spreading their ideas and gaining acceptance throughout the evangelical community despite the actual small size of their “community of communities” and the lack of the approving, supporting hierarchy enjoyed by traditional monastic orders. At the same time, their ability to self-advertise, promote, organize, travel, and serve in creative ways is now common, and the new monastics must fight a global sea of voices and an ever-shorter cultural attention span to establish themselves as more than a temporary “blip” or a trend.

For, as we have seen, the new monastic spirit of rebellion, counterculture, and radicalism is now an acceptable and attractive trait in the surrounding culture, available from a multitude of sources. Stylistic and creative tactics of living out the Gospel practiced by the new monastic movement—from mission trips and service opportunities to more radical “prankster” type operations like handing out free pizzas at the mall or sleeping with the homeless in the park—are staples of Christian youth culture, carried out eagerly by youth groups and Christian college students. Opportunities to pursue the sociopolitical causes that the new monastic movement emphasizes are also numerous and openly available to the average churchgoer without judgment. The ideals of religious tolerance, the more mainstream ecumenical movement, and popular negative stereotyping of the “fundamentalist” type make the movement’s desire to reach across aisle lines and embrace Catholic and Orthodox rituals and forms of religious life less of an innovation. The proliferation of sects and fragmentation of the church in American evangelicalism allow both eager acceptance and easy dismissal of the movement without significant disruption in the Church’s usual way of doing things.

With all of the destruction that has ravaged the earth since the Industrial Revolution, one wonders if we can even call it advancement.” Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008): 192.

The mendicants, on the other hand, emerged in a much more unified culture. Their ascetic acts, fervor, imitation of the apostolic life, and ideal of poverty were familiar and popular values in Europe at that point, but their formation of religious orders based on living out these values in mendicancy, begging, and preaching still constituted a significant break with traditional monasticism. Even after they received papal confirmation, they were considered a threat to the traditional system and were obliged to defend their way of life. Acceptance of the friars into the religious system was therefore a hugely transformative event for the Church and its popular understanding of the holy life. Their only other competitors were sects that had already been branded heretics and targeted by Church inquisitions. The friars' inspirational mode of life, officially approved and successfully enacted, could not be ignored, and their movement necessarily had a hugely transformative impact on the Church and European culture. The new monastics emulate this impact and its salvation of the Church, but their context—Protestant, American, postmodern, 21st century—and the opportunity it presents to make such an impact is radically different.

Differences and Distinctions

Also radically different from their predecessors is the new monastics' approach to the revived religious life. An oft-heard complaint from commentators on the new monastic movement, from established Catholic/Orthodox monastics to skeptical conservative and conscientious Church historians, is its distance from traditional forms of monasticism, including the mendicant orders. Even those who apprise the movement as a positive phenomenon question whether “new monastic” communities may even rightfully call themselves truly monastic.¹²⁶

Despite emulating and reveling in historical monastic leaders, values, and orders, the new

¹²⁶ “Anyone who wants to live in community, implement the gospel, and become more Christ-like, whatever that looks like, is to be commended.” T. Justin Read-Smith, “Monasticism and the habit: To habit or not to habit? That is the question,” (*From the Priory* blog, October 20, 2008)

monastics themselves in no way claim to be aspiring to the exact same forms of religious life.¹²⁷ This is most obviously indicated by the repetitive use of the word “new” in their literature. The extent of their adoption of traditional marks is decided community by individual community, but in general the movement sees itself as a “fresh” expression of the monastic impulse, building a new culture, or as a distinctive and unprecedented phenomenon, interpreted through historical understanding of monasticism rather than determined or guided by it.¹²⁸ This raises questions as to the purported significance of the movement and its potential impact. Does it truly represent the reemergence of monasticism in the Protestant faith? Can it claim to be a providential revolution in the monastic tradition on par with St. Francis? Can it hope for the same role, influence, and results monastic leaders and their orders have achieved through the centuries? Or is it a temporary trend? “Are we using monasticism, its novelty to most Protestants and evangelicals in particular, to experience a new aspect of our Christian faith? Is this simply a post-modern expression of Christian faith on which we will look back in fifty years as a phase or short-lived blip on the screen of history?”¹²⁹

“New monasticism” may be more properly classified as part of the long tradition of intentional communities in the Protestant faith, or “the Protestant religious-community movement,”¹³⁰ which has been especially fruitful in American society throughout our history, alongside similar secular endeavors. Belonging to a community and adhering to higher personal standards does not necessarily equate to a monastic vocation. “Frugality, fidelity, and consistency are very good things, maybe even essential things, but they aren’t the *same* things as

¹²⁷ “...it will be disciplined, not by a recovery of old monastic rules, but by the joyful discipline achieved by a small group of disciples practicing mutual exhortation, correction, and reconciliation...” Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, 72-5.

¹²⁸ Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*, 148.

¹²⁹ T. Justin Read-Smith, “Monasticism and the habit: To habit or not to habit? That is the question,” (*From the Priory* blog, October 20, 2008)

¹³⁰ Francois Biot, O.P., *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism*, trans. W.J. Kerrigan, (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, Inc., 1963): 4.

poverty, chastity, and obedience.”¹³¹ While asserting the communal impulse and decidedly devoted to a religiously-motivated life, the specifics of new monastic communities do not quite parallel the staples of traditional monasticism. Awareness of this has led their authors to call upon the friars as a more pertinent historical example of their heritage. However the friars are still more closely aligned with monastic priorities, and where they do differ, the new monastics often do not. Their communities tend to be self-sufficient, like monasteries, rather than committed to absolute dependence on charity like the friars. They generally chose a neighborhood or property and remain in that area, rather than travelling around from location to location like the friars.

The essential different between monks and mendicants that the new monastics wish to affirm is the active aspect of the religious life over the contemplative, including an evangelical mission. But this difference is not as clear cut as it is portrayed—the friars celebrated contemplative and ascetic practices, while the monks often took active and evangelical roles in their areas. While the differences between traditionally active and contemplative religious orders are recognized, the heart of life in all varieties of religious community remained prayer and serious commitment to “a life of self-conversion and renunciation for the sanctification of the Church.”¹³² The new monastic movement does not place the same priority on the discipline of prayer, life-long commitment, or personal contemplation. It lacks the truly sacrificial foundations of monasticism—the serious nature of the vows (particularly obedience and celibacy) and the

¹³¹ Alan Jacobs, “Do-It-Yourself-Tradition,” *First Things* (Jan. 2009)

¹³² “What are the Differences Between Religious Orders?” *Religious Vocation*, http://www.religious-vocation.com/differences_religious_orders.html

absolute abandonment of personal preferences, ambition, and control represented by the donning of the traditional habit.¹³³

The most obvious characteristic of the mendicants—their absolute poverty—is one of many ascetic endeavors connected to the monastic tradition that the new monastics do not share. “Thomas Merton said that ‘a monk becomes a completely marginal person to break through the inevitable artificiality of social life.’”¹³⁴ Asceticism functions as “a kind of shock treatment” to release one from the pervasive seduction and confusion of the world, thus allowing the ascetics to humbly provide a contrast. A monk or friar repudiates usual ends and desires to the extreme because these ends and desires have been carried to excess and become all-consuming in the culture around them. Their radical stance thus serves to dramatically pinpoint the problem they perceive at the root of present turmoil or the failure of the rest of Church to effectively serve, however seductive and ethically a “grey area,” as undeniably wrong or dangerous. In this way the extreme poverty of the mendicants called out wealth and love of money in its time as a primary temptation. The new monastic movement does seek this impact and example. They proudly claim the labels “ordinary radicals” and “extremists for love”, use the words “scandalous” and ... as positive adjectives. But their situation does not approach the extreme state of vulnerability that historic monastic saints considered necessary for their mission. St. Francis begged for his very sustenance, even though he had resources at his disposal, and refused to accept donations of property and benefaction, even on the grounds of furthering his ministries. St. Dominic walked miles barefoot. The new monastics may wear homemade clothes, eat

¹³³ “Set the bar for monasticism as low as Wilson-Hartgrove sets it and you might as well call a Christian college dormitory a monastic institution...A key assumption of all these books is that the beliefs and practices of other traditions that we like are detachable and transferable: It’s a buffet, not a home-cooked meal.” Jacobs, “Do-It-Yourself Tradition,” 11.

¹³⁴ Capps, *Monastic Impulse*, 10.

homegrown food, donate and share their money, and sport dreadlocks, but they are certainly not advocating or undertaking extreme poverty measures or radical acts of self-denial.

There are many theological reasons for rejecting asceticism, but these are not necessarily the source of the difference. New monastics certainly seek to shock and reject at times. They also seek to identify with and appeal to outsiders from the faith, while inspiring and confronting the mainstream evangelical culture. In doing so, their “extremism” remains within the bounds of appropriate and inspiring countercultural action. They pick up causes that others sympathize with and argue for their lifestyle and viewpoints with attractive, exciting ideals and experiences. In addition, in today’s world, extreme actions are common. Pushing the envelope or shocking one’s audience into a response is a usual agenda. Extreme fervor and protest, especially in a religious context, are notoriously rampant today, and the new monastics seek to both answer the needs that drive it and the crises it causes and to distinguish themselves from the negative extremist stereotypes within their own fold with a more appealing agenda. Informality, simple enthusiasm, and flexible “marks” are also easier for the Protestant community to accept than obvious symbols of the monastic historical tradition. Even so, the new monastic way of life is already considered strange enough to conservative Protestants to warrant the inclusion of “Are you a cult?” on The Simple Way’s Frequently Asked Questions page.¹³⁵

Historically, the new monastics’ level of commitment and sacrifice is more on par with the tertiary or “third” orders that exist alongside the monastic and mendicant orders, composed of lay persons who seek to live out the same ideals while continuing their “secular” lives. They do not take the vows and may leave the order at any time, but while they remain they place themselves under the accountability of the monks or friars and undertake similar disciplines and service. Whether the new monastic movement or its Protestant context are prepared to sanction

¹³⁵ <http://www.thesimpleway.org/about/faq/>

any kind of institutionalization allowing for the support of both those committed to some manner of intentional community life and those who wish to undertake full vows is a questionable and as of yet unaddressed issue.

Overall, it remains to be seen what level of institutionalization the new monastic movement is willing or capable of undertaking. The history of monasticism has been called a story of “the complex interplay between religious idealism and worldly necessity.”¹³⁶ The mendicant orders began as an idealistic, spontaneous venture in the imitation of Christ, unreservedly rejecting previous standards and present compromises. But after this charismatic founding period, the leaders of the movement accepted the humbler and more pragmatic path of obedience and service to the established Church, “which meant that they and their followers had to involve themselves fully in lay society and accept the implications of a place within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.”¹³⁷ They followed the precedent of the established traditions of the older monastic orders in seeking approval and guidance, organizing themselves into official orders under official rules of life with supervising hierarchy, and immediately undertook specific missions by making necessary sacrifices and pragmatic considerations.

The new monastic movement, by comparison, also had idealistic beginnings, prompted by inspiring words and organized by like-minded individuals in small close-knit groups. It proudly proclaims itself a radical, controversial, world-changing, spontaneous and Spirit-led phenomenon. It has articulated itself through publications and speaking tours, and it has undertaken initial organization in the 2004 conference that put forth the “12 Marks of New Monasticism.” There is a precedent for most of these communities, as many come from the Mennonite/Anabaptist heritage, which includes a strong intentional community tradition and a

¹³⁶ Lawrence, *Friars*, x.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* ix.

habitual focus on values of social justice, pacifism, etc. Most also harken to the same theologians, philosophers, and heroes, embracing a standard collective memory. However, there is no true process of institutionalization taking place beyond the very general “12 Marks.” Participating communities remain “independent communities in conversation.” There is no hierarchy or denominational oversight. The communities are ecumenical or non-denominational and keep individual community church affiliations while remaining independent. Strict rules of life are rare and life-long commitment even more so, although the movement has commented extensively on the discipline of stability and their hope to evade the fate of the short-lived communities in the 1960s.¹³⁸ Achieving the level of organization and control of the mendicants and other traditional orders is unlikely and undesired. The method and extent to which the movement *will* order itself is yet unknown. If measures are taken to bring the movement to the height and impact its leaders imagine for it, the specifics of its institutionalization will no doubt constitute a truly “fresh” expression of monastic development.

Conclusion

Overall, the viability and significance of the new monastic movement has yet to be decided. If it survives, grows, and becomes an established phenomenon in the evangelical landscape, the current movement and its background may be counted among the significant monastic developments in Christian history, alongside the emergence of the mendicant orders. Regardless of its fate or true character (monastic or intentional), however, the self-proclaimed “irresistible revolution” of the new monastics is undoubtedly fueled by the monastic impulse. Its concerns, causes, and development may thus be understood to some degree by the example of the friars with which its leader self-identify. As discussed, the two movements share many

¹³⁸ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010).

similarities. Some are intentional and many arise from the similar historical situation of the two movements. Both presented a new vision of the religious life for their respective Church communities, a fresh outlook and devotion to the ultimate ideals of the Christian faith, in response to a transitional age. The friars thus provide a helpful historical precedent with which to understand the new monastic movement, and the differences between the two movements highlight what is truly “new” and significant about the “new monasticism”. The mendicant tradition and the ideals of St. Francis are again making history as the young movement intentionally bases their purpose, actions, and lifestyles on the medieval movement.

Conclusions

“Almost everywhere I go these days, people agree that something is wrong in American Christianity... Somehow we’ve lost our way,” Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove laments.¹³⁹ Wilson-Hartgrove represents an entire generation of Protestant Christians reclaiming as the monastic tradition their own, in search for an alternative to the “self-centered and political culture of many churches today.”¹⁴⁰ The young leaders of the new monastic movement read the legendary commission given to Saint Francis in a dream—“Go and repair my church which is falling into ruins”—with eager empathy and determination.¹⁴¹ Caught up in their own revolution, they see themselves as frontrunners of a movement capable of impacting the world the way the beloved saint’s order did in the thirteenth century. “It is one of God’s recurring dreams to raise up servants intent upon reaching those who have been impoverished materially, spiritually and emotionally,” another new monastic author writes. “I believe we are at the front edge of another missional monastic-like order.”¹⁴²

The new monastics of the 21st century are a historically-minded group. In their manifestos and sermons, the authors and speakers of the movement reiterate the history of Christian monasticism as a narrative of providential counterculturalism. “Whenever Christians are greatly tempted to reduce discipleship to merely fitting into the surrounding culture and embracing its rules for success... God begins to draw them to create, or join, or just learn from

¹³⁹ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “New Monasticism and the Resurrection of American Christianity,” *Missiology* 38, no. 1 (Jan. 2010): 13.

¹⁴⁰ Katy Hirst, “New monastics share community, offer hope,” *USA TODAY*, (June 28, 2011), accessed 11 November 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-06-27-monastics_n.htm

¹⁴¹ “... somehow the divine whisper that he and those young radicals heard in Italy in the thirteenth century was very familiar: ‘Repair my church which is in ruins.’ Now hundreds of years later, another bunch of young dreamers was leaving the Christianity that smothered them, to find God in the abandoned places, in the desert of the inner city. I felt so thirsty for God, so embarrassed by Christianity, and so ready for something more.” Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006): 65.

¹⁴² Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006): Kindle ed.

intentional Christian communities that can maintain a more radical, counter-cultural vision of discipleship.”¹⁴³ The movement self-consciously identifies itself as the most recent defining installment in monastic history and puts forth the inspiring figure of Saint Francis of Assisi and his movement as the most appropriate analogy for their mission and efforts.

The two movements are connected across the centuries not just by the present movement’s purposeful historical identification, however, but by their shared sources, intentions, and results as spontaneous, idealistic religious undertakings fueled by the monastic impulse. Understanding the new monastic movement as a social and religious phenomenon by comparison with Francis and his friars allows us to pinpoint the recurring circumstances that bring about the fervor, repudiations, and altered vision of the religious life that both generations produced. Revival and innovation in the monastic tradition for both groups has coincided with times of cultural and philosophical decadence and transition, economic and political shifts, and religious crises. Both took a revolutionary tone, desperately seeking something more genuine and inspiring, fearlessly criticizing, rejecting, and shocking, and yet each looked backward, one toward the golden past and the other into more general “tradition.” Despite their differences in circumstances and priorities, the two movements demonstrate how monasticism as a religious impulse both responds to and reflects its context. Historical clarification of the real and serious differences between the two also allows us to elucidate the true nature of the new monastic movement and its potential. The particulars of the movement—American, Protestant, evangelical, postmodern, 21st century, a conglomeration of traditional monastic values and current priorities, informal and independent organization—are unique, marking these endeavors as perhaps a new chapter in the monastic tradition if they do endure, with exceptional

¹⁴³ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “A Vision So Old It Looks New” in *Monasticism Old and New (Christian Reflection*, Baylor University, 2010 issue): 11.

implications for the Protestant Church and secular society. But will they endure? And if they do, will it be as a truly monastic movement or as an intentional community trend with monastic aspirations and inspirations?

The movement recognizes “communities, congregations, intentional communities, missional businesses, missional orders, neighborhood ministries, organizations” and a variety of other projects that adhere to some measure of monastic lifestyle or values.¹⁴⁴ This flexibility and the movement’s enthusiasm for the traditional practice of monasticism makes sense in the Protestant and postmodern context, but it must also be considered in the light of historical truth and sober self-consciousness as to the cultural sources and the limitations of their search for “ancient-future belonging.”¹⁴⁵ At a 2007 Wheaton Theology Conference focused on the development of this “ancient-future faith” trend in evangelical worship and thought, participants rightly cautioned the audience on how their enthusiasm ought to be tempered by historical understanding. One presenter, Joel Scandrett, articulated the dangers inherent thus:

- (1) Anachronism: Naively interpreting the tradition in light of contemporary assumptions...
- (2) Traditionalism: Being unwilling to see the flaws in the early church’s traditions...
- (3) Eclecticism: Selectively appropriating ancient practices without regard to their original purposes or contexts.¹⁴⁶

The new monastic movement’s bold vision of a world-changing “new” form of ecumenical postmodern monasticism has been aligned with these three errors even by those who hold a positive view of their aims and results. Claiming a place within the monastic tradition runs the risk of dismissing the true character of that tradition, while remaining ignorant or dismissive of the actual worthy heritage of the current movement—lay fraternities, Protestant

¹⁴⁴ <http://communityofcommunities.info/index.php>

¹⁴⁵ Philip Harrold, “The ‘New Monasticism’ as Ancient-Future Belonging,” *Theology Today* 67 (2010): 182-193

¹⁴⁶ Chris Armstrong, “The Future Lies in the Past,” (*Christianity Today*, Feb. 8, 2008), accessed May 17, 2012, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/february/22.22.html>; 23.

communitarian and social work traditions, the Anabaptist/Mennonite denominations, examples like the Catholic Worker movement or the early Brethren of the Common Life, and general evangelical outworking of the ascetic and communal impulses throughout Protestant history and especially American history. Comparison of the new monastics with the mendicants brings the historical distinction into sharp relief. While both movements are inspired by the same religious urges and impelled by similar circumstances, resulting in their familiarity and likeness, they are not necessarily in the same category of historical phenomena, theology, or purpose.

However, the differences between the two traditions and specific movements include an entirely different set of possibilities for the new monastics. Monasticism involves the inevitable tension between idealism and pragmatism, prophecy and order, maintaining the contrast between the monastic sensibility and more specific worldly goals necessarily undertaken—the ultimate Christian tension of “being in the world, but not of it.” The friars, in putting forth their new vision of the ideal holy life, still embraced the overall purpose and character of the monastic tradition, and in doing so, they had to undergo the difficult transition of institutionalization. They started by willingly and eagerly giving themselves over to the authority of the Church, fulfilling the monastic vow of obedience. This process was inevitable and essential to the strength and impact the mendicant orders achieved. Despite the drawbacks of complete devotion to their vows, from the dreadful heritage of participation in the Church’s Inquisition for obedience to the bad reputation and discomfort of begging for sustenance for the vow of poverty, the monastic lifestyle’s benefits are inherently connected to the fullness and seriousness of the entire institution, including its vows, the severity of its commitments, the doctrines and ideals that underlie the practice, and its traditional role in the fallible Church structure and under its authority.

“New monastics” and their particularly fluid models of community life may not need the comprehensive control and discipline the mendicant orders pursued in their journey of monastic development in order to remain viable and have a significant impact. Within the Protestant environment, the movement can retain its spontaneous and informal character, with communities continuing to form independently as others die off, as long as the concept remains attractive to a significant number of evangelicals, a small fraction of which will actually be willing to undertake the lifestyle. If, like the mendicants, the new monastic movement in its charismatic and revolutionary present stage of development is spurred by the cultural, economic, and social context, its long-term outlook might be less weighty than the friars’, however. As the novelty and need fades, the movement may remain an acceptable and inspiring radical fringe option in the wide-ranging evangelical landscape without achieving a usual and productive role in the Church’s structure or attracting the kind of membership that would allow the communities to become an impactful feature in the social landscape, as the friars did in medieval Europe. However, the communities and their ideals will probably continue to thrive individually because the movement is part of a venerable tradition of Protestant revival and intentionality.

At the same time, the movement is truly innovative. It is part of a legitimately “new” or fresh trend of openness to traditional expressions of the faith in the evangelical community and a significant transition in the young evangelicals’ religious understanding and self-definition in response to a new age. Thus it is already significant historically, regardless of its long-term fate, for its eager parallel with monasticism and the evangelical community’s enthusiastic acceptance of this “rediscovery.” The opportunity for the monastic experience to be explored more fully in the previously hostile (or at best, uncertain) Protestant Church is a hopeful and exciting prospect and perhaps an avenue for greater reconciliation and unity between Catholic, Orthodox, and

Protestant. And for many who are confused, hurt, or desperate in the rapidly changing world of the early 21st century, who have received no true comfort, guidance, or resonating answer from the mainstream Church, the new monastic communities provide an appealing alternative.

Although the Church's situation may not be as desperate as the new monastics see it,¹⁴⁷ just as the medieval Church may not have been as decadent as the reforming Popes and friars saw it, there are indeed plenty of the "impoverished materially, spiritually and emotionally" out there in need of the shock treatment and genuine difference that these communities provide. God is indeed faithful, in every generation.

¹⁴⁷ "I believe we are amid a great awakening in the slumbering body of Christ. I once heard someone call us the Lazarus generation, for we are a generation rising from the apathetic deadness of this world, a church that is awakening from her slumber." Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*, 347.

Appendix 1: The Twelve Marks of New Monasticism

1. Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.
2. Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
3. Hospitality to the stranger.
4. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.
5. Humble submission to Christ's body, the church.
6. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.
7. Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
9. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
10. Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economics.
11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
12. Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.

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