

## Article

# Monasticism, Monotheism, and Monogamy: Past and Present Expressions of the Undivided Life

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**Abstract:** Monasticism first appeared in Christian tradition in the late third and early fourth centuries as a way to practice true religion. Soon after, it also became a way of eschewing the Church's embrace of political power and the divided loyalties which accompanied that union. Contemporary expressions of monasticism in the Protestant tradition (often identified as new monasticism) have interpreted the *mono* (singularity) not as celibacy or living in a cloistered community, but as abandoning cultural promiscuity in order to live out a monogamous spirituality. Though each monastic community has its own distinct characteristics and context, one can identify two common markers which unite both contemporary expressions of monasticism and historical monastic communities: (1) monotheism or a singular devotion to God which is separate from political, societal, and economic ambitions, and (2) monogamy or a commitment to a particular community, neighborhood, and mission. This article explores ancient and contemporary expressions of monasticism by examining their guiding documents and looking for evidence of monotheism and monogamous spirituality. By giving fresh articulation to the *mono* in monasticism, we are better able to identify the heart of the undivided (monastic) life and discern its presence in reimagined forms.

**Keywords:** monasticism; community; monotheism; spirituality; monogamy

## 1. Introduction

The singularity at the heart of monasticism, the *mono* in monasticism if you will, is a bit of an enigma. In some ways, it is as simple as translating the Greek word, *monazein*: to live alone. Monasticism of any sort implies a certain amount of separation from society. Yet none of the monastics, not even the early Egyptian hermits, totally eschewed human contact; all were in some way connected to a community of like-minded devotees. Though solitude features significantly in Christian monasticism, the religious life has found expression primarily in a communal setting. In the Benedictine tradition, these communities are characterized by vows of obedience, stability, and conversion of life (which includes chastity and relinquishing private ownership). Instead of life alone, monasticism has come to mean life bound to community. What, then, is the singleness (*mono*) at the heart of this particular expression of Christian spirituality?

I ask this question both as a scholar who studies spirituality and as a practitioner involved in the spiritual formation of various faith communities. While I celebrate the renewed interest in monastic practices and disciplines within my Protestant tradition, I am also wary of appropriation or modernization without due diligence. Critics of the new monastic movement such as Martha McAfee suggest that Protestant intentional communities do not qualify as monastic expressions because they do not practice celibacy as *the* school for loving God.<sup>1</sup> However, it seems clear that monastic celibacy is

<sup>1</sup> McAfee (2008) concludes that New Monasticism is not truly monasticism, but a “renewal of the Protestant response to the perceived elitism of the Medieval Monastery,” or a renewal of the Free Church tradition (p. 6).

a means, not an end. My goal in giving fresh articulation to the *mono* in monasticism is to identify the heart of the undivided (monastic) life and thereby discern its presence in reimagined forms.

The manner in which one articulates monastic tenets has implications for the teleological instinct of the community. Is spirituality framed positively or negatively? Is hatred for sin primary or is it compassion for the world? Are discipline and correction viewed as deserved punishment or doorways to restoration? Does a monastic Rule foster fear or love? If we view monasticism as primarily a *turning to* instead of a *rejection of* (though the second will necessarily follow the first), the vows of obedience and renouncing personal property might be better framed as monotheism (love of God), a life of devotion to the Divine Source as revealed in Jesus. Similarly, the monastic vows of stability and chastity could be framed as a type of monogamy (love of neighbor), a call to faithful, loving relationship(s).<sup>2</sup>

In order to trace the presence of these markers of monasticism (monotheism and monogamy), I engage with the Rules governing two monastic expressions: the Monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy (founded around 529) and the Order of Sustainable Faith in Ohio (2014), a missional monastic expression of the Vineyard movement. In many ways, these communities represent opposite ends of the spectrum in the tradition: ancient and contemporary, Catholic and Protestant, cloistered and integrated, celibate and family-inclusive. Benedict's Rule is established, its merit proved through centuries of practice. By comparison, Boyd's Rule is still a work in progress, not yet fully tested in community life. Practices differ as well. Benedict combatted fleshly temptation by taking off his garments and throwing himself into a patch of briars (Gregory the Great 1911, p. 55). A member of the Order of Sustainable Faith states that living under the Rule allowed her to have greater compassion for herself, especially her shortcomings and mistakes.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the variance in methods, a common thread runs through the monastic storyline: a desire to pursue an undivided life and find a measure of wholeness. By engaging with two monastic Rules separated by fifteen hundred years, I seek to establish that the heart of the undivided life in monasticism has been and still is expressed through a pronounced singular devotion to the divine (monotheism) and an emphasis on fidelity to a specific community (monogamy).

## 2. Context

Within the Christian tradition, the idea of singular devotion is not limited to monasticism. Before Christ entered history, statutes and ordinances written to the nation of Israel in seventh century B.C.E. featured repeated invocations to monotheism.<sup>4</sup> Faithful relationships were also introduced early on in the story of Israel, most notably in the recurring refrain, "I will be your God and you will be my people"<sup>5</sup> and in the identifying ritual of circumcision which represented the life-long covenant between YHWH and Abraham's descendants.<sup>6</sup> While all followers of YHWH are called to singular devotion, Christian monasticism represents an intensification and intentionality which goes above and beyond common religious practice.

In both ancient and contemporary contexts, the monastic vocation is a call to an alternate way of living, what Thomas Moore (1998) calls "making a life apart from the crowd, in a style at odds with the norm" (p. xv). Saint Antony of Egypt (c. 251–356) is often cited as the seminal example of the monastic impulse, fleeing to the desert in order to renounce sin and encounter God. Historian Marilyn Dunn (2003) notes that Antony's life in the desert was characterized by solitude, self-denial, and asceticism (p. 3). Aspects of these same elements can be identified in what is known as new monasticism. In 2004, a group of Protestant "practitioners, scholars, and dreamers" (Stock et al. 2007, p. 4) gathered in North Carolina and composed the twelve marks of new monasticism. The list begins with a call to "relocate to the

<sup>2</sup> Jesus identifies the love of God and love of neighbor at the core of the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:40).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a member of the Order of Sustainable Faith, July 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:1–2 and Deuteronomy 6:4–5 are two well-known examples.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 6:7, Ezekiel 36:28, Jeremiah 7:23, Jeremiah 30:22, Jeremiah 31:33.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 17:10–14.

abandoned places of Empire” (Claiborne 2006, pp. 363–64). This phrase intentionally echoes what has been understood as part of the early monastic mindset: a belief that the Church in the fourth century was losing its way, transitioning from being the oppressed to becoming the oppressor (Dunn 2003, pp. 1–2). Similarly, those who identify as new monastics condemn unholy alliances between politics and religion, calling their adherents to denounce empire-building and dedicate themselves to building the kingdom of heaven (see Rutba 2005). Like Antony, the new monastics seek to affirm monotheism by turning away from the cultural gods of their time.

For the monastics, rejecting unholy pursuits is not an end in itself, but the means by which one becomes free to embrace that which is holy and good.<sup>7</sup> Dunn (2003) observes that, “For Antony, the life of an ascetic or *monachos* was a constant struggle for self-knowledge, self-purification, and through these, the return of the soul to unity with God, in whose image it was created” (p. 4). The monastic desire for unity and wholeness is articulated in slightly different language by contemporary adherents. Joan Chittister (2015), a Benedictine nun, identifies the main pillars of Benedict’s Rule as community, peace, stewardship, and equality, invoking the idea of faithful, loving relationships (monogamy). Jon Stock (Stock et al. 2007) identifies the common elements shared by ancient and new forms of monasticism as being that of close proximity and daily accountability (p. 8), both of which are vital to fidelity. In a 2015 interview, Chittister links monasticism to honoring others: “[A] monastic outlook ... says that what we all share in common is this obligation, this desire to live together in a global community in a way that does honor to the will of God for all of humankind. It requires hospitality. It is inclusion. It takes everybody in. It requires accountability to one another as well as to the goods of the universe and of the community itself.” One could take Chittister’s words to be a dynamic description of monastic fidelity: the monk evolves from individual accountability to communal responsibility to dealing honorably with all of humanity and creation. The paradox of monastic monogamy is that in pledging oneself to a particular community, one becomes increasingly connected to the world. Chittister confirms this idea when she goes on to say: “The Rule of Benedict says that you are to treat all things as if they were the vessel and the altar.”

In looking at the history of monasticism, there is a sense of continuity and stability even in the midst of reform and change. In several instances, monastic reform was not an updating of practices to reflect a contemporary context, but an attempt to recapture monastic values. Influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the Cistercians branched off from the Benedictines in 1098 in order to return to a more literal interpretation of Benedict’s Rule (Merton 1949). Teresa of Avila founded the Discalced Carmelites in 1562 intent on recovering the order’s commitments to contemplation and poverty (Bilinkoff 1989). Chittister notes that recycling is part of what makes monasticism sustainable: “Benedictine poverty requires you to use everything in such a way that it is, in essence, recycled for centuries.” I believe this principle applies not only to material goods, but to the very tenets of monasticism. As we examine the *Rule of Benedict* and the *Rule of Life* for the Order of Sustainable Faith, we find that faithful reinvention continues to be part of the monastic story.

### 3. The Rule of St. Benedict (Monte Cassino)

Benedict of Nursia (480–547) crafted his influential monastic rule shortly after he became Abbot at Monte Cassino. Before this, Benedict had spent many years as a monk, becoming intimately familiar with the austerity and solitude characteristic of the Christian hermits. Drawing on his experience and several existing monastic rules (Rule of the Master, Rule of St. Basil, Rule of St. Augustine, writings of John Cassian), Benedict penned a governing document which reflected the strictness of the eremitical practice but tempered it with the stability of communal life (Sheldrake 2007, p. 51). Unlike the eremitical tradition where each monk was viewed as a spiritual athlete, Benedict’s Rule established interdependence and a family spirit at its center.

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<sup>7</sup> Kallistos Ware (1998) argues for a positive interpretation of asceticism.

### 3.1. Monotheism

Benedict fled the trappings of Rome when he was twenty in order to pursue a simple, pure life, so it is no surprise that the themes of purity and simplicity are woven throughout the Rule (Okholm 2001, p. 301). Every directive is meant to help the monk keep his focus on the divine love at the heart of all things. Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century Trappist monk, made this point clear when he explained the Rule to novices.

St. Benedict did not call us to the monastery to serve him, but to serve God. We are not here to carry out the prescriptions of men, but to love God. The purpose of the Rule is to furnish a framework within which to build the structure of a simple and pure spiritual life, pleasing to God by its perfection of faith, humility and love. The Rule is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, and it is always to be seen in relation to its end. This end is union with God in love, and every line of the Rule indicates that its various prescriptions are given us to show us how to get rid of self-love and replace it by love of God. (Merton 2009, p. 6)

The Rule of Benedict (RB)<sup>8</sup> covers a variety of topics, many concerned with mundane communal matters such as meals, times of prayer, clothing, discipline, and work. For those of us living in a culture obsessed with self-determination, the tightly scheduled order of each day seems excessively restrictive. Similarly, our heightened sense of individuality, particularly in the West, is in marked contrast to the over-arching authority granted to the Abbot, an authority verging on the absolute. However, Benedict's Rule claims that it requires "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome" but leans toward strictness in some instances in order to "amend faults and to safeguard love" (RB Prologue). The good of all is cited as central, and Benedict urges those in the community not to be "daunted by fear" but to have "hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (RB Prologue).

There are many instances in the text, some more direct than others, where the monk is called to love God with singular devotion. I will mention but two. The first is rather counterintuitive to modern sensibilities: the pervasive authority and care of the Abbot or Superior. For Benedict, devotion to God is conterminous with a Rule and an Abbot (RB 1). Chapter 2 refers to the Abbot as a representative of Christ in the monastery; he is to be an exemplar of all that is good and holy, he is to love all in the community equally, and he is to govern souls with both gentleness and severity, accommodating the variety of persons in his care. In every way, the Abbot is to embody God's interactions with his beloved subjects. For Benedict, obedience to Christ is primarily practiced through obedience to the Superior as the agent of Christ. In Chapter 4, Benedict writes: "First of all, love the Lord God with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength," and in Chapter 5, he links this love to obedience as a way of "cherish[ing] Christ above all."

A second indicator of monotheism in Benedict's Rule appears in the spiritual practices associated with humility. Benedict lists twelve degrees of humility, which include rather severe measures such as accepting hard and distasteful commands, confessing evil thoughts to the Abbot, believing oneself to be the lowest and vilest of men, practicing silence, avoiding laughter, and keeping one's head bowed and eyes on the ground (RB 7). Benedict compares these degrees of humility to climbing a ladder, the purpose being that "the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear" (RB 7). As Merton so astutely observes, the Rule (including the somewhat harsh steps to humility) is but a means to living in the love of God and freely reciprocating that love.

It is interesting to note how freedom is associated with the constraints of the Rule. While we are accustomed to equating freedom with autonomy, twentieth-century theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1990), notes that there is a second type of freedom to consider, and that is the freedom to consent (pp. 227–42). Basically, a person has the freedom to align their will, their desires, their very

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the *Rule of Benedict* are from the 1998 edition published by the Order of St. Benedict (St. Benedict 1998).

life, with another person. It is this type of freedom that Benedict is alluding to when he calls the monks to practice humility and obedience. Similarly, Thomas Moore (1998) notes that the Rule can be harsh but it is also liberating because “It frees a person from the unspoken rules of the society at large and offers an alternative” (p. xvii). The alternative to self-will or the pressures of society is to align one’s life and will to a community dedicated to loving and serving God.

In the Benedictine Rule, obedience to an Abbot and the practice of humility are two ways one expresses undivided devotion to God, two practices which place love of the divine above all other loves. However, it is important to note that this hard-won liberation to love God fully and freely does not happen in isolation. There is a related love which naturally flows out of divine devotion: faithful love of the other.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2. Monogamy

In the biblical text, idolatry and unfaithfulness are closely linked. Devotion to God is enacted through covenants, promises, and vows. Hebrew scholar Robert Alter (2004) observes: “Monogamy, of course, is a reiterated biblical metaphor for monotheism, and so worship of the goat-demons and other deities is an act of promiscuity, ‘whoring’” (p. 617). Faithfulness is a recurring theme in the Scriptures: God is described as a covenant-making, promise-keeping God (Genesis 6:18; 17:7; Jeremiah 32:40). Because covenants and promises are by nature relational, we also find commands and directives for the people of God to be faithful, to keep vows made not only to God but to each other.

When a monk takes the vows of stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience in a Benedictine community, it is considered a serious matter, not to be undertaken quickly or lightly (RB 4, 58, 60). In Chapter 58 of the Rule, Benedict indicates that when someone arrives at the monastery seeking entrance, he is to be given a room in the guest quarters for four or five days. If he responds well to “bearing his harsh treatment” and the “difficulty of entry,” the man is allowed to live with the novices. After two months in the community, the newcomer is read the Rule and given the option to leave. If the man chooses to stay, he is granted another period of six months in the community before the Rule is read to him again. If the man still desires to remain, the Rule is read to him after a further four months of residence. This year-long trial period highlights the solemnity of the promises made to God and to the community.

Benedict dedicates numerous chapters to guidelines meant to protect the integrity of the monastic community. In particular, he addresses corrective discipline and causes for excommunication (RB 23–29, 44–46). No doubt, Benedict writes about these matters in such detail because he experienced the many ways in which community life could go wrong. According to Gregory the Great (1911), in Benedict’s first attempt at leading a monastic community, the monks tried to poison him (pp. 56–58). Abbot Philip Lawrence of Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico observes that the vow of stability (fidelity to a particular group of people) proves difficult for some. “So many monks and nuns come to the Monastery and begin to want the life of another Monastery . . . Part of the task of formation is simply accepting the life of this community, under whoever is the present superior, with these brothers who are here today” (Lawrence n.d.). When circumstances become challenging, one must continue to accept those to whom one is joined by a promise. This type of faithfulness is not achieved through sheer determination but is meant to stem from relationship with a God who keeps promises.

What does this fidelity look like? Benedict indicates that monks are to treat other members of the community with honor, preference, and love, engaging in mutual obedience (RB 72). “Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God” (RB 71). A 1949 translation of the Rule frames the

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the distinction between monotheism (love of God) and monogamy (love of neighbor) is somewhat artificial; the love of God is shown primarily through love of neighbor and those who love their neighbor are, in many ways, loving the divine image reflected in the other. Nevertheless, I address each one separately.



monks' love for each other as a form of chastity: "Let them practice fraternal charity with a chaste love" (RB 73).

One of the primary ways in which this vow of chaste, fraternal love is enacted is through the vow of poverty by which monks renounce what Benedict calls the "vice of private ownership" (RB 33, 55). Before a monk becomes part of the community, he is required to divest himself of all possessions including personal garments (RB 58). The vow of poverty is often viewed as a form of asceticism, but it is first a demonstration of fidelity to the community, an immersion so total that self-will and self-sufficiency have no place. Merton (2009) observes that "it is a poverty in which proprietorship is renounced in favor of the community (or of the whole Church). The monk becomes poor in order to share whatever earthly goods he may have had with the poor and with the community" (pp. 148–49).

I will mention one final imperative found in Benedict's Rule which fits under the heading of monogamy or faithful love and sacrificial commitment to the other. Though the cloistered nature of monasteries is meant to preserve the sanctity of the monastic vows, especially that of stability, Benedict directs the closed community to receive all guests as if they are Christ (RB 53). Members of the Church and travelers alike are to be welcomed, and monks are instructed to "let Christ be adored in them as He is also received" (St. Benedict 1949, p. 53). The Abbot and the brotherhood are called on to pray for the guests, read them edifying literature, show them every kindness, feed them, and wash their feet. The monk's commitment to the community is chaste but not insular; love and hospitality are meant to flow out of the strength and stability the community has cultivated through bonds of fidelity. This is the dynamic monastic mindset which Chittister speaks of. It echoes the covenant YHWH made with Abraham: to live in the divine blessing so that all the peoples of the earth might benefit from the relationship (Genesis 12:1–3).<sup>10</sup> Fidelity to the community (monogamy) is meant to be fruitful, to produce radical hospitality.

#### 4. The Order of Sustainable Faith

Having traced the presence of singular devotion in an ancient Rule, I turn now to a contemporary Rule: *Invitations and Commitments: A Rule of Life* written by Jared Patrick Boyd in 2014 for the Order of Sustainable Faith. Boyd is part of the Vineyard movement, a charismatic denomination rooted in traditional evangelicalism, which began in 1980 in Southern California. In crafting a monastic Rule, Boyd draws from various ancient traditions (mostly Benedictine and Ignatian) and merges them with Vineyard values and distinctives. Boyd affirms that Benedict's Rule has impacted the *Rule of Life*. In addition, vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, taken by mendicants and other vowed religious as early as the twelfth century, figure prominently. In reinterpreting each of these commitments, Boyd seeks to honor monastic tradition while reflecting the community's Vineyard context.<sup>11</sup>

A modified approach such as this must be done with care in order to avoid selecting only those parts of ancient traditions which are palatable to modern sensibilities. However, done well, the practice of taking the best and leaving the rest can capture the heart of a tradition in ways which resonate with contemporary culture (Boyd 2014, p. iii). Moore (1998) indicates that this kind of adaptation is common in the monastic tradition: "Just as civil laws can be interpreted strictly or in a relaxed fashion, so the monastic rule is open to fresh consideration and readings. Here again we can see the rule as a pattern or model instead of a literal list of dos and don'ts. It is the embodiment of a vision and a philosophy that is perhaps better lived in the spirit of its origins than as a legal document" (p. xvii). A spiritual practice which is both faithful and creative is imperative to the continued viability of monasticism, whatever form it may take.

<sup>10</sup> See also Deuteronomy 6:18–19.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Jared Patrick Boyd, July 2019.

#### 4.1. Monotheism

Informed by a range of monastic expressions, [Boyd \(2014\)](#) manages to forge a unique yet familiar monastic path for the Order of Sustainable Faith. By classifying the community as both missional and monastic, he seeks to bridge the gap between traditions which are cloistered (such as the Benedictines and Carmelites) and mendicant traditions, whose members move more freely in the world (such as the Jesuits and the Franciscans) (p. 1). As a result, missional language is at the forefront in the opening pages: “The Order of Sustainable Faith is a distinctly monastic expression committed to the work of the Kingdom of God” ([Boyd 2014](#), p. 1).

The Rule is divided into sections which address mission and vision, leadership structures, membership, life rhythms, and commitments expected of its members. Though Boyd notes that for each member of the Order, “there is an invitation to seek after God in the consecrated life” ([Boyd 2014](#), p. 3), direct mention of monotheism is mostly muted in the document. I suspect this is because its target audience is those already committed to some form of Christian spirituality. The most overt mention of undivided loyalty and love to God comes in a call to recognize and surrender disordered desires or attachments in order to enter into God’s great love and to journey in God’s way ([Boyd 2014](#), p. 29).

Similar to Benedict’s insistence on obedience to the Abbot as a way of loving God, [Boyd \(2014\)](#) positions engagement with a Spiritual Director and subjection to a Discerning Community as means of practicing faithful devotion to God (p. 39). Thus, monotheism is articulated not so much as undivided loyalty to Christ, but as a commitment to journey through life with people who assist one another in being attentive to the presence and revelation of God. [Boyd \(2014\)](#) writes: “For every other commitment we are making—be it to align ourselves to this rule of life, or to align ourselves toward something to which the Spirit is leading—spiritual direction will provide a context for conversation and discernment” (p. 28).

Boyd’s Rule is deeply influenced by Ignatian spirituality which seeks to find God in all things.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the Rule includes mostly indirect talk about encountering God: “In prayer, in silence, in work, and in relationship—God is speaking and inviting us into his great love and into his way. The contemplative life is a life that is listening” ([Boyd 2014](#), p. 29).

The language of contemplation and action roughly equates to loving God and loving neighbor, but the line between the two is rather fuzzy in Boyd’s Rule. Though there is little overt reference to monotheism, the practices hint at an undivided devotion to God which underlies all the community’s commitments. For example, it is noted that each member “should think of his or her possessions as belonging to the Lord” ([Boyd 2014](#), p. 40). In a section on hospitality, [Boyd \(2014\)](#) echoes Benedict’s directives toward visitors when he asks, “Where do I see the face of Christ in the needs of others?” (p. 43).

The clearest statement of monotheism comes at the very end of the document when Boyd articulates the Order’s relationship with the Vineyard movement. Not surprisingly, it is immediately followed by a reference to mission. For Boyd, contemplation is always linked to action. A commitment to the theology and practice of the kingdom of God is a core value of the Vineyard. Thus, the Order of Sustainable Faith also cites this as a guiding premise. “We view the kingdom of God (God’s rule and reign with Jesus as King) as the overarching and integrating theme throughout the Bible. God’s mission to the world (*missio dei*) is also our mission to the world. We join God in the work of nurturing life in this world, partnering with God to bring all things under the rule and reign of Jesus” ([Boyd 2014](#), p. 46).

#### 4.2. Monogamy

I have already noted that it is difficult to precisely separate devotion to God from devotion to the community in Boyd’s Rule for the Order of Sustainable Faith. I believe this is intentional, a deliberate effort to confront the ubiquitous individualism and self-determination of our age. Boyd clearly views a

<sup>12</sup> Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) sought to cultivate a life of Christlikeness through the use of spiritual exercises, self-examination, and reflecting on the life of Christ.

commitment to stable, communal life as the means by which one practices devotion to God. In a world where people are increasingly mobile, many new monastic expressions place significant value on stability, making it one of the primary markers of love of neighbor (monogamy). Jonathan [Wilson-Hartgrove \(2010\)](#), co-founder of Rutba House, an intentional Christian community in Durham, North Carolina, states: “If we really want to make a difference, stability’s wisdom says to our ambition, we must learn what it means for each of us to do the knitting of life together with God’s people” (p. 115).

Fidelity to a particular community and place reflect the monastic belief that Christ is present in every person and God can be found in all things. [Wilson-Hartgrove \(2010\)](#) observes: “Careful attention to the mundane tasks of daily life is the process by which we exorcise ambition and grow in love” (p. 115). In Boyd’s rule, just as in Benedict’s, much space is dedicated to articulating the details of community, leadership, and rhythms of life. The section called Commitments includes the traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Boyd reframes them for a contemporary context: poverty is interpreted as an invitation to greater simplicity with regard to clothing, food, possessions, and technology, as well as participation in a shared economy (pp. 30–34). Chastity is viewed as sexual expression with one person or consecrated celibacy (pp. 35–37).<sup>13</sup> Obedience is associated with humility and vulnerability as part of a discerning community. Boyd invites members to ask: “Do I trust my community? Do I trust that God can speak in a significant way through others?” (p. 37).

The section on Commitments includes other subjects such as shared work, shared economy, hospitality, restorative peacemaking, and the expression of faults and admirations (a communal form of confession). One substantial difference between traditional monasticism and most forms of new monasticism is the inclusion of married couples and families in the community. For new monastics, celibacy is not seen as the ultimate expression of devotion to God. Instead, marriage is celebrated as a means of experiencing divine fidelity and love. Boyd writes: “For those whom God has invited into a marriage relationship, it is also a place where God’s grace and Spirit are working. In marriage, one is committed to another, as an expression and demonstration of Christ’s love for the church as well as an expression of love and companionship” (p. 36).

Boyd’s articulation of the undivided, monogamous life focuses on mutual submission, mutual love, mutual commitment, mutual sacrifice, and mutual mission (p. 48). It is a constant turning toward the other, day after day, in good times and in bad, in order to knit a life together.

## 5. Analysis

The governing documents of the monastery at Monte Cassino and the Order of Sustainable Faith represent the breadth of monastic expression within the Christian tradition. In them, we find evidence of the undivided life, the *mono* in monasticism, in two positive fidelities: monotheism (love of God) and monogamy (love of neighbor). Both Rules incorporate commitments to obedience, to stability, and to aspects of poverty and chastity. For Benedict, poverty is the renunciation of all earthly possessions. For Boyd, poverty is reflected in the choice to forgo self-sufficiency and self-will by stepping away from consumerism and sexual gratification. Benedict calls the monks to love God through submission to the Abbot and through striving for humility. Boyd’s call to monotheism is more indirect, inviting members of the order to practice their devotion to God through participation in the mission of God (kingdom of God).

In Benedict’s Rule, obedience stands at the forefront of one’s commitment to the monastic community. In Boyd’s rule, mutuality is a recurring theme. In Benedict’s Rule, the language is characterized by compulsion and command. In the contemporary rule, the language is much more invitational ([Boyd 2014](#), p. 27). Each commitment listed in Boyd’s document includes questions for the reader to consider, an invitation for members to engage with the Rule as a conversation partner.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Boyd, July 2019.



One of the main differences between the two Rules is the leadership structure. Benedict follows a more hierarchical model where decision-making, confession, and discipline fall under the purview of the Abbot. Boyd reflects a more flattened, shared approach to leadership. The language of “we” permeates Boyd’s Rule, and the posture is relational. The community acts as the discerning body, and members submit themselves to the guidance of a spiritual director.

The impact of Benedict’s Rule is evident in Boyd’s governing document, especially in three areas: (1) the membership process requires that one spend time as a novice and a postulant before being received as a full member of the community, (2) the rhythm of the community includes prayer, work, study, and rest, and (3) the commitments of community members highlight a shared life characterized by contemplation and action.

## 6. Conclusions

The *Rule of Benedict* and the *Rule of Life* for the Order of Sustainable Faith were written over fifteen hundred years apart. The cultural differences are obvious, yet important similarities bind them together across centuries and traditions, specifically, the call to love God and love neighbor in an intentional, communal, counter-cultural way.

For the most part, new monastic expressions seek to use the gifts of traditional monasticism, such as the *Rule of Benedict*, in such a way that they are, as Joan Chittister says, “recycled for centuries.” Intentional communities such as Wilson-Hartgrove’s Rutba House and Boyd’s Order of Sustainable Faith have sought to embrace ancient monasticism as a “template for spirituality” (Chittister 2015). The form may change. The structures of the communities may vary. The specifics of the Rules may differ, but at the heart of these various expressions of Christian monasticism, we find a commitment to the undivided life: a devotion to one God and to one community; monotheism and monogamy. This is the positive posture of monasticism, a stance which should serve it well for another fifteen hundred years.

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