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Discipline and Spontaneity

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Fr. Francis Kline, OCSO

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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Patrick Henry: Reflections on the chapter in the book on discipline and spontaneity will be given by Francis Kline, Abbot of Mepkin Abbey. He was reminding me that, in 1996, at the Gethsemani Encounter, he was simply Brother Francis at Gethsemani and served coffee—and perhaps as Abbot he still serves coffee sometimes. In addition to being a profound student of monasticism, he is also, Sister Meg said I should say, a world-class organist. He said I should just say he's interested in music [laughter], but he is very well known for his ability to make the organ sing. So, Abbot Francis, we are delighted to welcome you here and look forward to what you have to say.

Francis Kline: Thank you, Patrick. It's wonderful to be here with all of you. Let's reflect on this wonderful book. It's so full of ideas and experiences that I wouldn't really know where to start. I was taking copious notes as I read, and I think that's probably the best thing to say about the book. It's a springboard for reflection and, for those of us who have been in monastic life for a while, for remembering monastic experiences. Those of us who are new to this kind of spirituality are preparing our own treasure trove of experiences, ideas, and perspectives.

I'd like to start with the individual practitioner's need of community and the structures of community, which is very well addressed in this chapter on discipline and spontaneity. I raise the issue, at what point does the community take on a life of its own in our individual concerns, or does it? Is it always a structure, a kind of walking stick, that I lean on or, at some point, as the later chapters of the Rule of St. Benedict indicate, does it start to become a reality precious in its own right? In



Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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Fr. Francis Kline, OCSO, served as abbot of Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, until his

the latter case, we would start to experience the community as its own kind of person and insert ourselves into this larger corporate reality even as we find fulfillment in our practice. That's certainly in the Rule. I know it was Adalbert De Vogue who tried to say in his book *The Community and the Abbot* that the Benedictine abbot is the master around whom the disciples gather, and that that's the desert laura, that's the main understanding of the role of the community. It exists as a by-product, almost, in the main relationship between the master and the individual practitioner. Of course, when he wrote that people got furious, because usually in the Benedictine community the community itself has such a viable, living, pulsating reality.

Another perspective is that the individual, even in the Rule, works through mountains of experience—a whole lifetime, maybe several lifetimes of experience—before he or she can pass off into the hermitage to be alone in that kind of liberation. I noticed that Sarah this morning mentioned that her desert day is not so much a day of freedom, if I'm quoting her correctly. Back in the community there's another kind of experience altogether and we don't necessarily want to get free of it—pointing again to the fact that it eventually takes on a personality of its own. In the Benedictine tradition, we vow stability in the community. So I'm interested in posing this issue to the Buddhists here, and I'd like to hear more on that.

Another perspective, and I was very edified to see this in the book, is the experience of spontaneity within discipline. They're really not opposed, as we all know. It's unthinkable to have a kind of discipline that gets rigid to the point where we're not alive to the things that are going on around us, and that's exactly what Judith says: "We find in our practice a kind of natural discipline." I'm interested in the definition of the word "natural," even when she gets to the next page and talks about a "sacred character" to discipline. Because, in the Benedictine and Cistercian perspective, the idea of spontaneity is the liberation, I think, that we find at the end of Chapter 7 on humility: this total transformation experience, that what was a rule, what was counter to what we wanted to do, becomes natural, becomes so much a part of us that the love of virtue, the love of Christ, becomes who we are. Then discipline takes on a new meaning. But the word spontaneity is not used so much, as far as I know, in the Christian West, in monastic circles. I'm sure you can find it in places—but what I think it's pointing

death in 2006. He was a member of MID's Board of Directors and participated in the Benedict's Dharma conference in September 2001.

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to is the surprise in life, how flexible we can be in the face of situations that are bound to come up all the time. Here art may help us, because you never have a total surprise or something that's totally spontaneous in true and great art. I mean, you do have it, but the one who is surprised is not the viewer or the listener so much as the one who's creating the work. The discipline itself prepares for surprise. The Rule itself gives rise to something greater than itself, if we're being honest and true to the practice.

I point to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite were not able to be spontaneously compassionate. Perhaps they didn't have the kind of preparation that was necessary to jump cultural boundaries, to be Jews and take care of whoever was injured in the pit. But the Samaritan, who wasn't supposed to be generous to whoever was in the pit or suffering from the robber's wounds, was the person who jumped all of these rigid rules and went to help the individual. And not only was he generous, but he was generous to an exaggerated degree—yet his generosity was not inappropriate, it was not unfitting, and I think that's what I'm trying to say about this view of discipline and spontaneity. No matter how much of a surprise things may be and no matter how spontaneous they are, they're still prepared for somehow, in the outreach that we may make to them. We come prepared to do this, even in mystery.

Another idea, another experience that I saw in this chapter has to do with the whole idea of speech and the restraint of speech—we called it silence at one time in the monastic tradition in the West. We are so confused, I think, about this aspect of monastic observance. I noticed of course that it's the fourth Buddhist precept, and I also noticed how careful those Buddhist texts that were quoted in this chapter are to delineate what is good speech and what is not. In the Rule, we've had a lot of commentaries on the recommendation of silence, whether it's Chapter 6 on taciturnity, if that's a good translation, or whether it's steps 9, 10, and 11 of Chapter 7 on humility. It seems there are two ways to understand the discipline of silence. You have it precisely as a discipline, but then you also have it as a transforming experience, or maybe a map of transformation, where after living a life in which silence or certain rules of silence are imposed by the Rule and by community practice, after a long period of time, or maybe just after a transformational experience, one becomes silent as a response to

something greater. So silence can be many things. It can be a kind of contemplation in itself. It can be a transformational experience; it can be the result of one's conversation with God that goes unseen and unheard because we're busy being caught up. Whereas silence as a discipline, as something that I try to obey, is something quite different. I think that both traditions are struggling with that at the present time. Maybe it's unfair to say the Buddhists are struggling with it, but I know the Christians are in our present-day monastic communities.

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