THE NEW EVANGELIZATION: THE CAMALDOLESE RESPONSE
Keynote for the Camaldolese Assembly 2014
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At the Abbot’s and Priors’ Workshop this past February in Cullman, Alabama, the subject was “The New Evangelization.” I took copious notes, already then thinking about what I might say to you this morning. Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella was there, who is the head of the Vatican Dicastery for the New Evangelization, personally appointed by Pope Benedict XVI. He was on a speaking tour of the US, and he presented four conferences. Then Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, OSB, gave two other conferences on the monastic response. Fr. Jeremy is a well-known and beloved Benedictine scholar from Mount Angel, Oregon, who also teaches half the year at Sant’Anselmo, the Benedictine University in Rome.

The thing that stuck with me from Archbishop Fisichella’s remarks is that he pointed out several times that we need an anthropology based on the resurrection. I want to start out bouncing off of that phrase—“an anthropology based on the resurrection.” But it’s not limited to an anthropology. I would say we need a whole spirituality, ecclesiology—no, we need a whole way of life based on the resurrection! But first we have to re-examine what the moral of the resurrection story is, and clarify what we think it is that the resurrection has to teach us about the end goal of life. Excuse me if this sounds too fundamental, but hopefully in a moment you will see why we shouldn’t assume anything. If we think that the whole point of the story of the resurrection is about me dying and going to heaven, well, that’s one thing, and all I need to do is wait this life out, and try not to commit any sins—or beg for mercy! But my going to heaven is too small a thing; there is a bigger picture and it’s not all about me! The end goal of all things according to Scripture is a new heaven and a new earth. The resurrection shows us that Jesus isn’t just in heaven; Jesus is already the beginning of the new earth! That’s why that empty tomb is so important. Even the matter of his poor crucified broken body wasn’t left behind; that too was taken up into glory—and “your glory shines forth in wounds you still bear”—, which means that the new earth has already begun. If I may quote my current favorite, N. T. Wright: left to ourselves “we lapse into a kind of entropy, acquiescing to the general belief that things are getting worse”—global warming, terrorism, genocide, slave labor—“but there’s nothing much we can do about them.” But we are wrong about that. “God’s new creation has begun and we have a job to do!” Our task is to “live as resurrection people in between Easter and that final day” when God will be all in all, in anticipation not only of heaven but in anticipation of a new earth, as a sign of Easter—a people of hope in action—and as a foretaste of the fullness. Our job is to implement Easter while we wait with joyful hope for that final day when God will be all in all.

If we could get that through our thick heads, everything would change. We’re part of the new earth! Jesus’ resurrection isn’t about death; it’s about new life! That’s why we take care of our bodies, and that’s why we take care of the poor and each other; that’s why we

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2 N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, 29-30.
write songs and plays and poems; that’s why we work to change political structures and grow beautiful gardens and build energy efficient homes—as a sign of Easter and in anticipation of the great day when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, because the new earth is already happening in us too, through our living out our Baptismal promises. And our evangelization is based on that—already a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth and preparing the way for it as well, “already and not yet.”

And that’s also why we build communities of faith such as monasteries. We’re not sitting around New Camaldoli waiting to die and go to heaven; we’re finding a new way to live, as Easter people! We don’t have the time to focus on how that affects the general view of Christian ministry and mission, nor is that our purpose here. What we are focused on is this, as Jeremy Driscoll asked: “Is there something specific that monastics would bring to this new evangelization?” And of course the answer is already implied in the question: Yes! Why? Because a monastery, a monastic community—and I suppose you could say this about any intentional Christian community—is itself a “word” of evangelization. In other words, the community itself is the evangelization because it is a center, a way of life. It is also an act of inculturation, because it’s the establishment of a way of life in a specific and certain place. Our way of life, our prayer, our life itself, even if it’s not direct evangelization, isn’t just propositional and theoretical: it’s relational, it’s existential, it’s a practical relationship, it’s what we call “primary theology.” The impact of monasticism is in the encounter with the place and the people, with deep, deep roots in ancient traditions but, hopefully, also with the possibility, as John Paul II called for with the new evangelization, of “a new ardor, new methods, and new expressions,” because those deep roots allow our branches to stretch out wider and wider.

Many of the young people with whom I have dealt these past years have been counter-cultural, and many of the young men who come our way at New Camaldoli also are. I think that is a good thing, because there ought to be something essentially counter-cultural (not to say antagonistic) about monasticism. When I saw the movie “Into the Wild” about the young man who left everything and went to live on his own up in Alaska, I said to my friend, “That’s the monastic impulse as I understand it.” So these young folks who come our way, I gently tell them, “You can spend your time and energy knocking down idols and overturning political structures and social systems and protesting, or you can do what we’re doing at our best, trying to find a new way to live on Planet Earth, according to the dictates of the Gospel, according to the wisdom of the monastic tradition. We haven’t escaped life and the world here: we are a little world here, a little village, trying to do it better than we have seen it done in the marketplace thus far.”

All that is by way of introduction to the real content of what I want to share with you, to describe that monastic way to you as I understand it. For a framing reference I am using two expressions: the inner face and the outer face. By the inner face I mean our looking into our life: what does monastic life and spirituality look like to us monks? And by inner face I also mean: how does that translate to non-monastics, to our oblates and friends who have found something attractive in monastic-contemplative spirituality. How can our practices translate into your day-to-day life and practice? It’s only then that we can talk
about the outer face, by which I mean the face we show to the world, whether that be what we monks do in the way of active evangelization or, most appropriately for our gathering this weekend, how you carry that to the world in your ministry and outreach. Because that is what I think of our oblates as being and doing, not only incarnating our spirituality in your lives, but also being the outward face of Camaldolese Benedictine spirituality, carrying it to the church and the world in a way that we cannot and maybe shouldn’t. So, the inner face for monks, the inner face for oblates, and the outer face of Camaldolese spirituality. I am only going to present to you here the inner face for us monks, and then leave it for you to answer two questions. First, how does this translate into your life as oblates, as householders, as working folks in the market place who want to live our spirituality in your own way? And second: what is the outer face of these things; how does this become mission, ministry, evangelization?

And so, the inner face of monastic spirituality… Some refer to the Benedictine triad as prayer, work and lectio. I am going to roughly use those three as my poles, but I will change the order a little: prayer, then lectio, back to prayer and then to work. First and foremost prayer…

I think it’s best to start with liturgical prayer. Please do not read a hierarchy in this approach in the sense that the first mentioned—or the last—is the most important, but simply as what seems to me to be a sort of continuum, or a nest we are building. Why I start with liturgical prayer is because Catholic spirituality is essentially liturgical spirituality at its best. By that I don’t mean simply that we go to Mass regularly. I mean by that the entire liturgical life of the church by which we pass on and interpret our relationship to God and the cosmos. I am using the word “liturgical” here in its rich, comprehensive sense “which takes into account the whole presentation of the Living Word of God through Scripture, Tradition and the Sacraments…” And Benedictine monastic spirituality is even more aptly referred to as liturgical spirituality. Saint Benedict wrote that Nothing is to be preferred to the Opus Dei—the Work of God, the liturgy, and he lays out a detailed schema for it. Admittedly there is the constant polemic between the eremitical or desert tradition and later manifestations of Western Benedictine monasticism which some of our own monks will want to lean on as a reason to be subtly if not overtly anti-liturgical, but, yes, our Camaldolese Benedictine spirituality too rests heavily in the formative nature of liturgical spirituality. I often recall one of our monks telling me when I was still a junior monk and doing all the liturgical planning, including the readings for the Liturgy of the Hours as well as music and Master of Ceremonies, that I was probably having as great an impact on our guys in formation as any of the formators by the mere fact that most of the input we get—theological, scriptural, homiletic, historical—comes through the liturgy. It too is a place of “primary theology,” where theology is not just talked about but done. Again, I mean liturgical in the broadest sense, following the cycle of the Church year, from the strong seasons of Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, through the cycle of feasts of Our Lord and Our Lady, and saints’ days. How much tradition, not to mention dogma and doctrine, is passed on in our liturgies? So in our liturgy at New Camaldoli, we have a lectio continua of the Hebrew scriptures each morning followed by an ecclesial text of some sort, often patristic, but

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least from some profound theological source; the *lectio continua* of the Epistles in the evening, besides the homilies at Eucharist, not to mention our practically swimming in psalms, canticles, hymns and prayers at the Liturgies of the Hours. All of which keeps us rooted in a tradition, learning to think with the mind of the Church. And that is still not to mention the transformative power of ritual itself, the formative quality of all the gestures that make up our liturgical practice, bows, raised hands, clothing a novice, signs of peace, burying the dead…

Now I want to mention *lectio* in two parts, first in its narrower sense, meaning our relationship with Scripture. *Lectio* is an essential element of St. Benedict’s day for the monk—he dictates considerable time to this for his monks, a privileged time with the Word—and that carries over in Camaldolese monasticism. There is a specifically Benedictine monastic Camaldolese contemplative approach to Scripture. For us, *lectio* is not an academic approach to Scripture as much as it is a living encounter with a living word—more like reading a love letter than a reference book. Our tradition teaches that salvation history doesn’t end with Jesus—it continues with me, with you. We are the next word, the next line, the next chapter. Remember the story of Saint Romuald reading one line of Psalm 32—I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will give you counsel with my eye upon you⁴—and the meaning of all of Scripture was opened to him, and he received the gift of tears. This is generally not something that comes from a cursory glance at the gospel of the day once in a while, but from a lifelong relationship with the Word, finding its inner pathways and connections, until it speaks to the heart.

There is a section from *Dei Verbum* (the Vatican II document on Divine Revelation) that means a great deal to us. Remember that the Catholic Church had a certain hesitation about individuals reading Scripture without hierarchical supervision and interpretation, in a reaction against the *Sola Scriptura* of the Protestant Reformation. It was already more startling than we realize that *Dei Verbum* acknowledges that the “Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church…,” and that there is “a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on.” But it’s even more shocking when it says how this progress and growth into insight comes about. There is always a hierarchy (or so I was told) in Vatican documents, and so it is poignant that the first way this growth and progress in insight comes about, before it mentions the hierarchy, is “through contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts,” and “from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience.” And this is very image of monastic spirituality, like Mary pondering these things in her heart, and then experiencing the intimate sense of spiritual realities. And only then does *Dei Verbum* mention “the preaching of those who have received, along with the right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth.”⁵

And then a broader sense of *lectio*. Saint Benedict too meant by *lectio divina* the patristic sources and the writings of the monastic tradition. But even broader than that, I love to point to one of those books whose title sums up the whole of the book, by Jean le Clerq: “The Love of Learning and the Desire for God.” Monks are notorious auto-

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⁴ Ps 32:8.
⁵ *Dei Verbum*, 8.
didacts, self-taught seekers of Wisdom. And here I want to bring in Fr. Bruno’s cherished phrase: a specific sapiential approach to knowledge, not a gathering of factoids for cocktail party chatter or Trivial Pursuit; nor even a pursuit of intellectual knowledge for higher education and academics, but a hunger to know, and hunger for Wisdom herself. The great writer Origen refers to the highest stage of the soul’s progress as *enoptike*, “that by which we go beyond things seen and contemplate somewhat of the things divine and heavenly,” things that are “beyond the range of bodily sight.”[^6] This is the wisdom we are looking for, the wisdom that becomes a window into the eternal mysteries.

When I was reflecting on the words from the Gospel of Luke this Easter season, that Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,[^7] I noted that once we see Christ anywhere we start to see Christ everywhere. And so we have a specific *lectio* approach to other poetry and literature as well. We have been doing a seminar on T. S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” and Christ is leaping off the page of them, for instance. But also the poets that Fr. Bruno introduced us to with a kind of evangelical fervor, like Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. Could this be said for music and art as well? Listening as *lectio*, gazing as *lectio*. I tease our Fr. Robert about this, but I have to say I admire the fact that he sees Christ whenever he sees redemption in films. Maybe a little too often (we have argued about this…) but still… may Christ open our minds to see how everything true and good and holy is pointing to Christ. This is why we consider cultural formation as an essential part of the formation process. The apocryphal gospel of Thomas has Jesus saying, ‘Raise the stone and you shall find me; cleave the wood and I am there.’ And then Saint Anthony tells the philosophers, “My book, O philosophers, is the book of nature!” May we do *lectio* and see Christ when we hike the backwoods of our property! And then something especially dear to me, which I think also ties in with our Third Good: when we talk about a theology of fulfillment in inter-religious dialogue, we think that anytime there is something good, true and holy in a sacred text of another tradition too, that that is not only pre-Christian, as Jacques Dupuis taught, but pro-Christian, pointing to Christ. At some point our minds are opened to understand other scriptures too, and see that they too are pointing to Christ.

I am bringing this up last in this section, but I mean it in no way as least, and that is our **private prayer**. I am not going to say much about silence and solitude here, which I consider and assume to be essential elements of Camaldolese spirituality, partially because I am heeding the admonition of the Tao Te Ching, that *Those who speak do not know, those who know do not speak*, except for this: silence and solitude need to have a good beginning, and they are not ends in and of themselves. My main focus in formation is helping men prepare themselves to approach silence and solitude healthily. We have seen far too many times how men get deformed rather than formed by simply sticking them in a cell without the proper maturity and formation. So solitude is not an idol to be worshipped nor an abstract goal. I also want to add that I was tempted to write “private contemplative prayer” but I don’t want to make you think that I somehow consider that only private prayer in solitude and silence as contemplative prayer. That is a false

[^7]: Lk 24:45.
dilemma in our tradition. I could just have easily said “contemplative liturgical prayer,” and “contemplative lectio” as much as later I could refer to “contemplative work.”

That being said, in some ways you could argue that our “pure prayer” of meditation in silence and solitude may be our most important distinguishing element, but I want to emphasize—and this is why I mentioned all those other things first—that for us Camaldolese, our private contemplative prayer is never not rooted in the rest of the church and the rest of our contemplative prayer, the great triad of liturgy, scripture and tradition. Nor can it ever be divorced from the call of charity, the primacy of love, our work and our communal life. At the same time, with that broad base and deep roots, I think that this may be one of the reasons that we have so many Camaldolese oblates, because of our specific focus on and cultivation of meditation, what we sometimes call pure prayer, the prayer that goes beyond words and images, the fiery prayer that is simply availability to God in sheer receptivity. Our Italian confreres’ erudition and outreach and cultural finesse outweighs ours unreachably, but what I understand of the history of our American presence, from the beginning this has been an important characteristic element that New Camaldoli has cultivated and preserved more tenaciously than they. I have certainly experienced tremendous depth of contemplative prayer in other monasteries, especially among Trappists, but in my mind this is the specific charism of the eremitical tradition, to be available and formed for this encounter, the hermit’s cell as the privileged place for God to lead us into the desert (in solitude) and there speak to our hearts (in silence). *Sit in your cell as in Paradise!*

Now work… I am using the category of work here very broadly. When I gave my first Chapter conference to the brothers I actually changed the sacrosanct Benedictine motto from *Ora et labora*—“Prayer and Work,” to *Ora et amor*—“Prayer and Love.” And that’s of course because of two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor. If prayer is the main manifestation of our love for God, then everything else is in some way a manifestation of our love for our neighbor. What I bring into this category is not only the work itself, but also the sense of place (indeed love of the specific place), hospitality, poverty, and the work of the common life (and believe me—the common life is hard work!).

First of all, for the Benedictine tradition, there is a **civilizing quality to work.** Benedict seems to want his monks to work first of all for subsistence, a word that is very common, please note, in modern times—“subsistence living.” Like many modern counter culturalists, Benedict seems to want the monastery self-contained when he says in the Rule that *The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities... are contained, and the various crafts are practiced.*8 Our Constitutions echo that: “… the brothers engage in their various occupations in such a way that together they may contribute to the self-sufficiency of the monastery.”9 Secondly, Benedict also sees work as asceticism, an **ascetical practice,** as again do our Constitutions. Please note, when I use the word “asceticism,” I do not mean penitential, but simply as a spiritual exercise, a training, in a sense. So work is a **positive asceticism,** as our Constitutions

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8 RB 66:6.
9 Const. 5,108.
quote Laborem Exercens of John Paul II: “…by work they not only transform nature and adapt it to their own needs, but they realize themselves as human beings and even, in a certain sense, become more human.”¹⁰ Not angels! And so Benedict says that even when the work slackens, they are to go wherever other duties are assigned them... whenever they are free, they work wherever they are assigned.¹¹ As a matter of fact he says, and I love this phrase, Then they are really monks when they live by the work of their hands!¹² Third, Benedict also sees work as solidarity with the poor and also as a means of almsgiving to the poor. And in Constitutions of our own constitutions as well, I always marvel in the fact that Chapter Five is about “Poverty and Work.” We have an innate sense that they are inseparably bound together. Finally, there is a mindfulness about work for Benedict’s monks. I just love this phrase too, from Chapter 31 on the cellarer: - He will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected.¹³ And again in Chapter 32 he declares that whoever fails to keep the things belonging to the monastery clean or treats them carelessly should be reproved.¹⁴ Things are holy! Even tools and pots and pans, guitars and computers.

Our former Prior General Don Benedetto emphasizes all this in his own writings about ora et labora. He says that in between the city and the desert there is the land—terra; and that work is the great equalizer of monasticism; and that it is their work that enables the monks to associate with, and even evangelize the poor, the uncultured, the farmers.

The work of the land provokes the birth of a human monasticism, a monasticism less bitter and severe than that of the desert. The land worked transforms the servants into free people, while the monks offer themselves as servants of Christ and brothers of the poor. Primitive monasticism is very firm on this point. The land is possessed by the community not as an exercise of power, as will happen later in feudal society, but as a playground (palestra) of liberty, of equality among the brothers, through the law of work accepted in evangelical liberty.¹⁵

I’ve begun to think of our 900 acres of pristine forest as a big playground!

So, all that to say that work is not something that should be done as quickly as possible so that I can rush back to my cell to pray! That’s why I said earlier, even “contemplative work.” I am still a contemplative when I am doing the dishes, when I’m hiking, and certainly when I am taking care of my brother.

There is a phrase that we picked up from the late Abbot Francis Kline’s book of the same title, “Lovers of the Place.” This goes along with one of Jeremy Driscoll’s points about the specifically monastic qualities that make of it an evangelizing word, inculturation. But this “place” applies both to being rooted in a geographical location, as well as being

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¹⁰ Laborens Exercens, 9.
¹¹ RB 53: 18, 20.
¹² RB 48:8.
¹³ RB 31:10.
¹⁴ RB 32:4.
¹⁵ Benedetto Calati, “Orazione e lavoro” in Sapienza Monastica, 446.
rooted in a specific community. Abbot Francis got this phrase from Cistercian history: “…one bonds effectively with the community where honor, freely given and received, transforms one into a lover of the place, as St. Stephen Harding was called by his brothers at early Citeaux.”¹⁶ This is the aim of our vow of stability; as the old saying goes, “A tree uprooted too many times never grows roots.” Monks instead are called to love the place (the land) and the place (the people). The land and the place then become avenues toward becoming lovers of the most important “place” for the contemplative, which is the depths of the human heart, where we also discover the heart of Christ. Now, having just moved back to the Big Sur less than two years ago, it is not hard to be a lover of that wild and remote place. But I teasingly tell people, when they comment about how marvelous it must be to live in such a beautiful location, “So is San Quentin in a beautiful location! So is Alcatraz!” There has got to be more than the geography. If it were just that, many more men would have stayed. The “place” also needs to be the intentionality of the commitment to the people and the life. I love the line from this recent song: “Home is wherever I’m with you.”

One other important aspect of monastic work, especially given that work is love, is hospitality. In a sense this is so obvious. Benedict makes it pure and simple: All guests are to be welcomed as Christ, and by a bow of the head or a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to adored because he is indeed welcomed in them; and then—and this says as much about the image of the abbot as it does about the reception of guests—the abbot is to wash the hands of the guests and then with the other monks wash their feet.¹⁷ So the abbot is less major domo and more servum servorum—“the servant of the servants.” I was told from the beginning that there is no such thing as a Camaldolese community without a guesthouse. But I want to add something to this. Historically, in Italy, our monks were forced out of their houses after the Reunification under Vittorio Emanuele in the 19th century. And when they returned it is the lay people who were the major encouragers of the revitalization of the monastic life at Camaldoli, through youth groups and student groups and political groups. Learning this only solidified something that has been my intuition all along: guests don’t just come to us like coming to a guru sitting on a mountaintop doling out sage advice. They come to us as the wise men came to Jesus, bearing gifts! They come to us too like the three visitors who came to visit Abraham under the oaks of Mamre, bearing a word of good news. This is one of the reason I love the copy of the Rublev icon at the entrance of our chapel. When I give the “cook’s tour,” I always point to it and tell guests, “See, there’s room for you at the table!” I think that the mutual exchange of gifts is marvelous for us. We don’t have all the answers but we are happy to give what we have in exchange for the gifts that you bring and are.

Let me just touch for a moment on poverty, another one of the characteristics of the monastic way, and as I mentioned, associated with work in our Constitutions. Notwithstanding the fact most Western American monks live a life of middle to upper middle class comfort, that is attenuated by the fact that Benedict wrote quite succinctly about the “scourge of private possession”! Saint Benedict quotes Acts 4:32-35 three times! The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that

¹⁶ Francis Kline, Lovers of the Place, 120.
¹⁷ RB 53, 1, 7, 12-13.
any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. ... There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need. And Benedict issues a strong call for austerity and warnings against over-indulgence, as would be expected. Twice Benedict also quotes that from now on the monk doesn’t even have his own body as his possession! At the same time, in his via media, he also writes “to each as they have need,” so that no one grumbles, and my need may be different from my brother’s need, and that is none of my business. We live much more what we call a corporate poverty rather than a mendicant poverty—each as they have need, modelled on the Acts of the Apostles. Here again I think our own Constitutions are rather brilliant in their steering the middle way (as Benedict says, so that the strong have something to strive for and the weak have nothing to run from):

A conscience sensitive to the value of poverty is essential to monastic life. Lest it be reduced to a mere sham, the virtue of poverty must be practiced consistently; the entire life of the community and of each monk must be poor in a way that all can see.

Just as I left private contemplative prayer to the last element, so also now please read no hierarchy in this ordering, but I have saved this over-arching theme for last in this section. Back to the two great commandments—Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole mind... and the second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself. Not only is the second like it, it is inseparable from the first. And so the overarching theme for a monk is mutual obedience as the basis of the common life. Saint Benedict places such an emphasis throughout the Rule on humility and obedience, as if these two things were the basis for all monastic life, and I think this is why Romuald puts even hermitages under the Rule too, so that even solitude is based on obedience and humility, and so, ultimately, charity. But obedience isn’t just obedience to the abbot (or prior) and to the Rule. Benedict names an entire chapter (Chapter 71) Ut Oboedientes Sibi Sunt Invicem—“That they obey one another.” The blessing of obedience is not only something that everyone ought to show to the abbot, but the brothers should also obey one another. And then he makes a very strong statement that we ought to pay attention to: They know that they will go to God by this path of obedience. This path of obedience—obedience to one another—is how we will go to God! But it’s in the next chapter (Chapter 72, “On the good zeal of monks”) that he really spells out what it means. “Monks should practice zeal with the warmest love.” Then he quotes Romans 12:10: ‘Let them strive to be the first to honor one another’; and he goes on, They should bear each other’s weaknesses of both body and character with the utmost patience. They must compete with one another in obedience. No one should pursue what they judge advantageous to themselves, but rather what benefits others. And that is the hallmark of

18 RB 65:19.
19 Const. 5, 108.
20 Mt 22:34-40.
21 RB 71:1-12.
22 RB 72:5-7.
a Christian monastic community. Talk about an evangelizing word! As I preached to the brothers this Triduum, Saint Benedict famously wrote that the monk’s whole life should be a little Lent, but I think, based on this, we could also say that life in the monastic community is really an extended Holy Thursday, that Christian monks are to live like an apostolic band, a community of disciples living according to the dictates of the Gospel of Jesus, giving their lives over in service to the greater good, supporting each other our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love..., as Benedict writes in the Prologue, as we run on the path of God’s commandments, 23 And Benedict’s famous line, prefer nothing whatever to Christ 24 is written in that context in that same chapter, to make it clear that that’s what it means to “prefer nothing whatever to Christ”—to be patient with one another, to be obedient to one another, in obedience to Christ.

Finally, I feel impelled to say something about the famous Third Good of our charism, especially since our topic is “The New Evangelization.” I could go on and on about it, because I am fascinated by it, but forgive me if I keep this as succinct as possible. This Third Good is a wild thing, and I resist any attempt to tame it and domesticate it, as we Americans have a tendency to do with all things spiritual. It is originally associated with missionary martyrdom, some followers of Saint Romuald who choose to go into the harshest lands to evangelize, the Five Brothers in Poland and Bruno Boniface in Hungary and who are all killed in the process, and who knew in advance that this was a possibility and welcomed it. And let’s remember in the background too that this is one of the original impulses of primitive monasticism, to imitate the total self-donation of the martyrs in a kind of white martyrdom once Christianity was legalized. Fr. Jeremy asked if there was something specific that monastics would bring to mission, and now I want to ask if there is something specific that Camaldolese bring? I am first attracted to the fact that our monks chose to go to the harshest lands; and that leads me to think that it’s not just any kind of evangelization that we are called to do; there ought to be a specific need that only we can address to make us leave the Paradise of the cell and the comfort of and commitment to stability in community. I like the phrase “the soft spots,” the places yet untouched, the places where nobody else wants to go and to those to whom no one else knows how to speak. That’s where I think we Camaldolese are called. Secondly, I want to say that evangelizing may not mean in the 21st century what it meant even 100 years ago and certainly not what it meant in the 11th century. (Hence, a new evangelization.) Sometimes our very presence, wherever we are, not unlike the very presence of a monastic community, especially our very presence in places where we would not be expected, is an evangelizing word. Sometimes it is more important for us to be Christ—in dialogue or in silence—than for us to preach Christ, and, not unlike a contemplative community on a mountain or in the heart of the city, we become an evangelizing word, like yeast in the dough, like salt in the earth, like a seed that falls into the ground and dies and yet yields a rich harvest. Note that these are all things—yeast, salt, seeds—that act by dying, by disappearing, by dissolving. And that leads me to the variation on the great Pauline phrase that is associated with the Third Good in the Life of the Five Brothers, which I have been savoring like a mantra: cupientibus dissolvi et esse cum Christo—eager

23 RB Pro. 49.
24 RB 72:11.
to dissolve and be with Christ. Our Father Thomas translates the famous phrase from Romuald’s Brief Rule as “Empty yourself completely and sit waiting content with the grace of God.” Our Peter-Damian used a stronger word in his translation: “Destroy yourself completely and sit waiting…,” which is probably more accurate. So the advice to the hermit is the same as the advice to the missionary—to forget the self, to go beyond the self, to let the self dissolve. Perhaps in between the two is Paul’s famous phrase, *I, no longer I, who live, but Christ who lives in me,* or the phrase from the 3rd Step Prayer of AA, to be “relieved of the bondage of self.” If we are relieved of the bondage of self, we can be totally available to the Spirit and that, in my mind, is the best description of our Third Good—absolute availability to the Spirit, always asking the question, “Where would you have me go, Lord? What would you have me do, church? How may I serve you, brother, sister?” And this, as our Don Emanuele put it, is the energy that fires our entire life, as a recluse, as a hermit, as a cenobite, as a missionary, as an oblate. As Saint Romuald was called “a martyr but of love,” so we too are available for total self-donation. That’s the real end-goal of our lives as monks, as Christians—even to the point of offering our bodies as a spiritual sacrifice, as a Eucharistic holocaust, even to the point of shedding blood, but at least the martyrdom of unconditional love for God as for our neighbor.

To use another phrase from the *Life of the Five Brothers,* all of this is “the primacy of love.” This, our entire way of life, our prayer, our life itself, our availability, even if it’s not always direct evangelization, is not just propositional and theoretical: it’s relational, it’s existential, it’s a practical relationship, it’s “primary theology.” And this is the reason why a monastic community itself, with its primacy of love for a place, love for a community, love for a way of life rooted in the love of Christ, is—or at least could be and should be—a “word,” an evangelical witness, a new heaven and a new earth, a sign of Easter present and active, and a foretaste of the great day when God will be all in all in us as God is all in all in the Risen Christ.

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25 VF, 2. An interesting variation on Phil 1:23, usually translated as “depart,” here the Latin is *dissolvi,* to “dissolve or break apart,” which the Italians translate as *sciogliersi—*“to break apart or loosen.”

26 VF, 32. The Latin is *destrue* which the Italians translate as *anientati—*“annihilate yourself”!