

The Future of Monastic Formation: Reflections from an Austrian Monk

by Bernhard Eckerstorfer, OSB

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In this presentation I want to share what I find crucial for monastic formation today, seen against the background of my own life and my own monastery in Austria. Many things I am going to say might not fit for other regions of the world. My limited view of a monastic formator in Central Europe, however, might show that experiences and reflections from a quite different perspective sometimes gives rise to new insights for one's own situation. Out of such an examination emerges perhaps a framework for today's formation.

MONASTICISM IN THE MIDST OF A CHANGING WORLD

The Monastery Facing Change

At Kremsmünster Abbey we have become strangers in our own place. A monk that guided tourists in our observatory was once asked, "Do all tour guides wear these black uniforms?" Other lay tour guides are sometimes asked, "Does someone still live in this castle?" Better informed visitors frequently pose the question, "How many monks does this monastery still have?" The word *still* reveals that monasticism is for many today a remnant of a past that seems distant and unreal, yet all the more fascinating. Whenever a group of tourists spots one of us in his habit, the monk seems much more interesting than the best explanation of our 1,200 years of history. Even the appearance of one of our most ordinary monks beats the eighth-century chalice in our museum, the famous *Tassilokelch!* To most people we have become a distant reality.



Kremsmünster Abbey



The Tassilokelch

My monastery is not seen "the way it was" for centuries. Monks of my abbey have cultivated the land, absorbed a culture and contributed to a civilization that transcended what was already there in Upper Austria. My abbey was an ecclesiastical, artistic and scientific center, an important employer in the region. Let me give you an idea of what I am talking about: In the Governor's residence of our province there are still portraits of abbots of Kremsmünster Abbey. They have been his predecessors! Monks have been rectors of the universities in Vienna, Prague and Salzburg; the abbot once was a landlord to whom peasants of the region had to deliver goods. The *Volkskirche*, a church that dominates culture, society and politics, is falling apart in Austria. This impacts how joining a monastery is individually and culturally conceived. Formerly it was a sign of election, of gaining a special social status. Now it is a rather odd decision that is not applauded even by one's own friends and family; and one's own home parish questions your choice. We have become strangers in our own place.

This is not the whole story, however. We have also become strangers to ourselves. Who are we as monks today? We do not know. What is our calling as an abbey? We do not find easy answers. How should our school and the 29 incorporated parishes be taken care of tomorrow? We do not have a clue. Our communities have become strangers to the world and to themselves in yet another way: in 2010 German and Austrian monasteries were subject to accusations of sexual abuse. This is changing the perception of church and monasteries in people's minds, and since we still have something like a *Volkskirche*, it is changing the perception of the church and its monasteries for a whole nation. Nothing is as it used to be before.

Thus the context in which formation is taking place in my abbey has changed rapidly during the last four decades, and it is continuously changing. Most of my confreres entered at the age of eighteen. Nearly all of them had attended our boarding school. The last two years as pupils they were living in a floor built on the wing for the novices and junior monks. When they graduated from school, they moved only one floor down to the novitiate. In some way their formation to be Benedictine had begun at the age of ten. The eight years in our school transmitted to them a clear idea of what it means to lead a religious life and what Kremsmünster Abbey is all about. Their individual lives were of course different, but their monastic formation could be rather one-dimensional. They all came from practicing Catholic families and were raised in a similar way with far fewer opportunities than today. The last monk who made the immediate transition from our school to the novitiate and who did not leave again entered 25 years ago. The ways into the monastery have become more individual. Eight of nine of the last solemnly vowed monks do not even stem from one of our parishes. This is a dramatic change, calling for different formation.

Crucial for a decent formation today are clear entry procedures. In our monastery a candidate has to write an essay on his life, development of faith, weaknesses and strengths. This helps him to think through his biography and to clarify his motivations to enter monastic life. For the novice master this self-examination can become a point of reference in ongoing formation. Then the candidate is asked to talk with three monks who have received the essay just mentioned. In the course of such a scrutiny the abbot gathers those three confreres (one of whom might be younger, another older and the third living in a parish), the prior and the novice master to talk about the application. This allows the confreres who are not involved in the formation process to express their impression and make observations for the formator. The candidate in turn becomes more familiar with confreres he would not have otherwise engaged in such an intense dialogue.

The entry procedures have to be transparent for both the candidate and the community. Postulancy has regained its value and necessity. When monks were recruited directly from the boarding school, candidates were not required to do a postulancy that lasted longer than a few weeks, if there was a postulancy at all. This proved to be inadequate in recent times, when candidates came from outside the school. We felt the urge to set up a clearly structured and longer period before a candidate receives the habit. Monastic formation is set on its course already at this stage. Formation, to be sure, actually begins long before that. In my case, for instance, it began in American monasteries that I was visiting as a lay student several years before I applied for admission in my abbey.

The New World of Candidates and Young Monks

The change that calls for a new formation is especially seen and felt on the level of the individual who becomes a monk. In Austria we used to draw on a homogeneous Catholic milieu that assured a uniform religious identity well into the 1970s. This has definitively disintegrated. Formerly, my monastery could rely on a communally transmitted socialization into the Christian paradigm. Increasingly candidates knock at our doors without a clear identity, not to mention a strong Catholic identity. What has in former times been regulated by fixed social and religious patterns, as well as institutions, is increasingly up to the individual to realize. Shared expectations of behavior have eroded; communal traditions define only to a small degree the identity of an individual. Men and women of today are trained to build up their own identity, every day anew. Hence profession, relationships, matters of everyday life, become projects. This opens up opportunities previously unheard of, regardless of one's origin and gender. We are no longer confined to certain traditions and restricted to entertain only a given set of ideas. A multitude of cultural and religious possibilities is waiting to be put into effect. Life sometimes even appears to be a novel or a sequence in a soap opera, eventful and boundless.

In this way the church, and especially religious life, are seen as an obstacle to growth and self-realization. It appears to be an infringement on liberty and personal development, a withdrawal into self-imposed immaturity, like the German Enlightenment put it. Seen in this context we can perhaps understand better why there are, relatively speaking, less vocations to the religious life in Catholic countries like Austria, Italy and Spain than there are in the U.S. In my country one more easily leaves the church aside when travelling on the road to modernity and personal autonomy, because the church and its institutions such as monasticism are conceived as being part of the old system.

Despite that, if someone is still interested in monastic life, s/he approaches it quite differently than the older generations in monasteries did. Having been raised in a fragmented society that expects the individual to produce and perform his own life on this world's stage, candidates to monastic life are often looking for a community that fits their own way of life. The monastic principle "We join a monastery in order to be changed and to die to our old self" sounds nowadays alienating and repressive. Postmodern men and women rather think: "If this or that does not immediately appeal to me, I let it go or I even give up monastic life as a whole." In the current cultural climate we are inclined to judge things on the basis of an exciting existence full of pleasure. Endurance seems outdated; things have to prove themselves meaningful at once. What has been handed on is being questioned, and monastic life is increasingly seen and lived as an experiment.

Yet it is a mistake to lament that young people are not prone to embrace monastic life as it used to be. We should look into their lives and desires with greater empathy and then suspect that their changing world is the ground on which future monasticism will blossom again. Most candidates bring far more experiences to the monastic life than did their older confreres. They have for the most part already finished an education, have often had a job, housing of their own, a car, and various relationships. They are highly competent in modern technology. Most of all, they bring into monastic life experiences of ambiguity unheard of in former generations. They have experienced ambivalence in their family and their relationships; they have had to choose in a free market from many possibilities in education and profession. Frustration in these fields is not unknown to them. Thus they bring a new dynamic badly needed in the monastery: They question what was self-evident for their ancestors and do not want to take over a form of life that does not also address their needs. To be immersed into monastic life today means that these young men and women might on occasion even feel left out and cheated by both world and monasticism. In their monastic life, they can neither take advantage of the inexhaustible market of life options in today's world, nor find orientation, meaning and a stable net of healthy relationships within their community.

Monks remain children of their time. There is no formation that is untouched by the *Zeitgeist*. This is in some respects unfortunate because monasticism has to be by definition countercultural. But on the whole it is necessary to be part of this world and to be literate in today's way of life and thought. Otherwise monasticism would not be able to stay in contact with the world, nor be meaningful and attractive to newcomers. It is up to the young monks to make this contact, to make the monastic life comprehensible and meaningful to the world. Formators need to be aware of the contribution newcomers make to monastic life as it can be lived in today's world. The things they find meaningful, as well as their needs, cannot be disregarded.

For the novitiate this implies both a new liberty and new commitments. An adult person who enters at the age of thirty with considerable educational and professional experiences cannot be treated like an eighteen-year-old boy entering monastic life immediately after having left the abbey's boarding school. Yet he needs to be thoroughly acquainted with and trained in the monastic way of life. To give just one example how both dimensions can be accounted for, in our abbey we have introduced a three-semester system. Whereas there used to be a one-year cycle with various subjects on fixed days over the whole year, confreres who give classes in the novitiate are now asked to limit themselves to around ten hours. This has brought about that each class is given more weight and more courses can be offered. This fits better the individual's needs to have more variety, more challenge, and a clearer vision of what the core elements of monastic life are.

Inadequate Reactions of our Formation to the New Situation

Formation should recognize what contributions our time and sensibility can give to monasticism. In accordance with this it should seek to transmit faithfully the monastic tradition to the younger monks. I see, at least in Central and Western Europe, the danger to leave formation one-sided. For the sake of clarity, we can detect two distortions of formation. They can never be found in pure form, but we can identify traits of them in one or another formation program. There are two inadequate solutions to cope with our transitional period which do not equip formation for the current social, cultural and ecclesial settings. Naturally, most formators employ a mix of the two distortions, leaning more toward one or the other, and they include a third more adequate paradigm that I will propose in the next section. Whatever model is predominant, identifying

the different types in a simplified version helps to see where one's formation is headed, and in which direction it should be adjusted.

The "Elastic" Model

First, the elastic model of formation espouses thoughtless adaptation to the *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the time). It is ready to give up distinctive features of monastic identity with the excuse of trying to be 'normal' and not sectarian. An elastic outlook can be found in the candidate or monk who thinks: "I am looking for a community that suits me and where I can articulate my own religious feelings." Hence the images, stories, rites and rituals of monasticism are seen merely as optional tools to enhance one's own inner self-awareness. If they do not serve my needs, I simply get rid of them. According to this model of formation, a monastery is the same as a team, a party, an association to achieve something good.

Both as a monastic formator and a relatively young monk, I see the attraction of this kind of formation: We really do not know what the future will bring, so why not leave it up to the young monks to decide what is best for them? Certainly the Spirit is guiding them; let them choose what is pleasing to them and what seems right to them! Healthy young people, in turn, feel drawn to experiment, and decide for themselves how they want to pursue their search for a monastic lifestyle that suits contemporary sensibilities and needs. The elastic model rightly keeps asking the questions: Do people find in our monasteries an appealing environment to develop their true self? Are they not put off by inflexible structures? Do we not too quickly disqualify their authentic search for religious experience and new forms of its expression as esoteric individualism?

However, this elastic approach has run its course. Late modernity is tired of a hermeneutics that absorbs everything into the banal Western establishment. Ours is a time in which monasticism is once more called to create its own culture and shape a distinctive set of behaviors and beliefs. Sympathetic observers warn monasticism not to get rid all too easily of its distinct practices. Who cares anymore about a bunch of men or women living together and leading their own lives? Monasticism erodes all too easily if the formation is not integrated into a community and a tradition that transcends the individual person. A monasticism that wants to avoid everything that might be misunderstood or appear strange, sadly enough, leads young people (who are full of enthusiasm and willing to sacrifice a lot!) to questionable traditionalist rivals of the anti-elastic [Strict Traditionalists] type.

The "Strict Traditionalist" Model

This strict traditionalist model of formation leads the individual, and thus the whole monastery, into an enclosure of a monastic exile. Monks trained in this mindset act as if the world were meaningless to them. Correspondingly, they do not particularly aim to be meaningful to the culture. Established traditions are modified not at all and archaic language is employed (for example, monasticism as "angelic life" or "lifelong martyrdom," religious life as the "higher state of existence"). What has been handed down is often regarded as a kind of fetish that per se transmits magical power. The world of the monastery is seen as holy in its form, and therefore its customs are changeless. What really matters is to fulfill one's duty. In other words, to lead a monastic life means to conform to monastic rules and rituals, whether they make sense to the individual or not. This type romanticizes monastic life in a particular shape and does not realize that it is utterly modern under the skin. Restoration is more geared toward an aesthetic existence than one would suspect at first sight.

However, its traditionalism is in reality the end of tradition. Empty forms selected in a privatized manner lead to a formalism that is the death of a sound identity, because a vigorous identity is ultimately grounded on an ongoing process of building tradition. Once-lively forms get de-formed and cry out for reform.

I can well understand that this second type of formation is attractive to novice and junior masters. They want to claim in the name of their communities to transmit as faithful fully as possible the glorious past of their abbey and monasticism as a whole. Nothing should be lost that was once meaningful. As a monk of the younger generation I can also understand the attraction of this kind of formation for candidates and beginners in the monastic life. Young people are seeking strong guidance and orientation in the middle of the current upheaval. They want to exchange their ambivalent lives in this world for the secure identity of the timeless existence of a monk. And they think that the church and monastic life in its modern guise have sold out everything that contributes to a mystical and truly religious way of life. A great many of the vocations to the monastic life in Europe feel drawn to such abbeys. They are thriving, and in some way they might point toward the future. Yet the future does not on the whole lie in a restoration of monasticism. We have to be cautious what kind of candidates we attract if we give way to a strict traditionalist formation program. Signs of this type can appear when young monks care more about fancy liturgical garments and exterior appearances than their theological studies or personal prayer life.

The lack of Christian initiation in an increasing number of candidates calls for a new formation that is not limited to postulancy and novitiate. The years after first vows are not meant only to wait for solemn vows, but they have to be creatively organized. Formation in this period should encompass human growth, spiritual maturity, theological training and pastoral ministry. Monastic life should be embodied and enacted as a tradition from the past that makes sense today. Monastery and contemporary culture are neither identical nor totally separate. God speaks also in worldly terms, but we have to gain a clear monastic identity, to discern critically the spirit of our time. Neither uncritical embrace nor rejection of this world does justice to what an authentic monastic formation should be about in our time.

TOWARD A THEORY OF FORMATION

The Monastic Tree

Theories need images. To illustrate the role of formation, it might be helpful to think of monasticism in terms of a tree. This tree grows, but it also goes through the seasons. At this point of history many monasteries experience late summer or fall, or have we already passed a great deal of winter? We simply do not know. The average age of the community is one indication, but surely not the only one. We should not be too much preoccupied because we are losing leaves. We can trust that there will be spring again, probably not for each monastery but most likely for monasticism. And even if monasticism should perish (which it could theoretically), the kingdom of God, and thus the church, will not. Formation should not be too preoccupied with how many people it will introduce to monastic life. Formation is not recruitment and only successful if the numbers increase; rather, it follows a different purpose. When we talk about vocations, we should not judge the success of our effort by numbers. This gives us the freedom to see that we are not in a period of decline, but of change.

For the monastic tree the roots are of utmost importance. They make sure that the tree, the branches and the leaves are alive. The roots consist of our monastic tradition, but interestingly enough, this image makes clear that the soil is provided by the world. No monastery is totally independent of the respective society and culture. Monasticism in Austria, Germany, Italy, France and the United States is connected with the history of these countries. The image of monasticism as a tree can tell us that we cannot live only for today. In fact, we are building on a long tradition, an impressive chain of the faith and monastic practices. Formation has to acquaint postulants, novices and junior monks with the tradition of monasticism and the monastery. The monk is called to become part of this tradition and to transmit, in turn, this heritage.

My abbey has existed without interruption for 1200 years. It has been a powerful experience for me from the beginning when at Lauds a long list of confreres is being read who died on a given day. Every day we glance by means of this list through the centuries and are reminded that we stand in continuity with a long tradition. From this perspective we realize that our abbey has borne much fruit, but there were always branches that died and fell off. This can tell the young generation a lot. We live in a time that thinks it has invented everything on its own and does not stand on the shoulders of other generations. Monasteries can teach contemporary men and women that we stand in the flow of a long history and that we receive more than we give. Perhaps a contribution of monasticism to civilization today consists in creating an awareness of the importance of tradition and its transmission.

The image of the monastic tree can tell formation that it has to envisage the whole plant. This can help us understand that we are part of a larger entity and it can help us see our own monastic reality in relative terms. Hence formation should open up to young monks the experience of Benedictine life in both the Western and non-Western world. We are living in a time of globalization, especially by means of electronic data transfer. They should be exposed to different experiences, of course with a monastic spin. Just as young Catholics meet Catholics from other countries at World Youth Day or in Taizé, young monks should be given a similar experience. Whereas being a monk in Beuron sixty years ago was a rather local experience, today being a monk in Alabama should be part of the wider monastic world, by means of meetings in one's own congregation, via Internet, etc. Then the young confrere will realize that monasticism has always been a global experience and that his own monastic experience is not the only valid one.

The image of the monastic tree finally tells formation to always point toward heaven. Without the light from above, the tree perishes. That's why the tree and all the leaves are directed toward the sun. While faithful to our roots, we have to be open and flexible, ready to modify according to our needs, always growing up, pointing to what is above.

Formation in a Blended Way

To avoid the elastic or the strictly traditionalist pitfalls, we can adopt the concept of a [blended] third way. If we see religion as a language or a culture, monasticism and the task of formation can be newly conceived. To become a monk means learning a language and skills that are being exercised by a community and that form a tradition typical of monasticism. Specific practices as well as the rhythms of time and space in a monastery are not merely decorations (traditionalist) or an unnecessary embellishment (elastic), but they are and bring about the embodiment of an interior life that reflects the transcendent God.

The *blended* approach to formation puts a new focus on community and tradition. It can best account for apparent opposites existing together: the given objective system and subjective experience, identity and change, unity and plurality. This model is able to grant everything a formative power that is meaningful in monastic life, without giving it the status of an unchanging proposition. Rituals, clothing, places, daily customs shape a storied and tradition-bound communal identity in a monastic way. Monasteries seen this as schools of Christian life for those living in community, for those associated with the community (e.g., oblates), and for visitors. Monastic life exerts a formative power simply by the way we live. We are concerned here only with the formation of monks in the narrow sense. For them it is crucial to learn the given monastic language, to realize that its grammar is operative in simple things such as seniority or table reading and a fair amount of vocabularies used in narratives and rituals. The key word for the blended understanding is *practice*.

Monastic life in this perspective is able to build up its own culture. Life, place and time are an integrated totality. In many respects, monasteries are places of cultural learning and exchange. It is told that during the two World Wars religious men and women from nations that were at war with one another could live peacefully side by side in monasteries. Nowadays individuals with diverse ethnic and social backgrounds succeed in living in unity because monasticism embodies a culture of its own. This is important for the future of formation. Monks are not left alone to manage their lives. According to the image of the tree we employed, they are rooted in a communally transmitted identity that builds on a tradition which is primarily received by the individual, not invented; which is enacted, even embodied and not received as an external set of principles and theoretical concepts. This gives a new weight to what has always been the task of formation. The monk is being immersed into a monastic cosmos. *Lectio Divina* and liturgy should become the lenses of his new worldview, the two focal points of his existence. Then there is the structuring of time and space, the places that become associated with certain practices (refectory, oratory, or garden) and the stories about memorable events and confreres that convey the identity of a particular community across generations.

This approach, unlike the other two, comprehends what is needed in our current paradigm shift of church and monasticism. In Austria, where our work in schools and parishes is predominant, we are discovering that monasticism is called to gain self-awareness unheard of in previous decades. It cannot presuppose, as in a Christian culture, that people are familiar with the life in a monastery. Candidates lack even basic features of the Christian faith, not to mention monastic decorum. Formation has to start from scratch and not presuppose that those coming to the monastery already know everything. Since Christianity in Europe is increasingly on the fringe, monasticism has to take over certain functions that were exercised in former times by the culture and broader church. In order to initiate young people in a certain [monastic] way, monasticism has to make explicit what has been happening all along in the monastic tradition, otherwise it risks losing itself. The monastery is being forced and freed to investigate how faith and a certain way of life are transmitted. A new understanding of monasticism self-consciously tries to avoid the traditionalist and elastic views which both presume, in our current situation falsely, that the Christian form of life is shared or at least understood by all.

In the past, formation could successfully limit itself either to establishing and monitoring monastic rules and religious propositions (traditionalist), or to facilitating the self-conscious unfolding of one's perception of the monastic way of life and the expression of one's own religious sentiment (elastic). Christian values (even monastic ones) were shared by the environment! By prolonging this mindset of the traditionalist and elastic

mode into an increasingly post-Christian setting, monastic life would be subject to internal meaninglessness and external disintegration. And it would, contrary to its intentions, render itself meaningless for the wider culture.

Unfortunately in most monastic communities the false alternatives are still prevalent: exterior form (traditionalist) or interior experience (elastic). The blended model has not yet gained a strong enough foothold. This contributes to a generation gap. The older generation, shaped by 1968, experienced the Second Vatican Council as liberation from a static worldview and has consequently devoted itself to some kind of an elastic outlook. It fears an alternative which appears to be only a reactionary step backward, and it then takes pains to prevent this. Those monks accuse younger confreres, who desire cleared external forms, of wanting to go back to the period before the Council. The proponents of a new third way are labeled as the anti-elastic type and too easily dismissed. The traditionalists, in turn, see these proponents of the third way only in the category of the elastic type. Hence, they are unable to pay attention to the proponents of the third camp who, for instance, openly engage with contemporary culture while trying to be rooted in a new way in the monastic tradition. We can see that the third way (blended) has no easy task today. This is even more so, because the various types cross generational boundaries. Monastic renewal in conjunction with attentiveness to our culture at large is not the prerogative of any one generation.

In this context it is crucial for monastic formation not to assume all too easily that newcomers are already conversant in the monastic idiom with its implicit rules, rhythms and techniques. When I entered at the age of twenty-nine, both my abbot and novice master thought that I already knew most things about monastic life because I had earned a doctorate in theology. However, the language of the monastery is not the language absorbed by merely studying philosophy or fundamental theology. It consists rather of unique practices that require training in the monastic way of life and religious familiarity, both of which I was utterly lacking. On the other hand, formators should be cautious not to control everything, for this would prevent the young confrere from being immersed in the monastic paradigm in his own way, a way that would shape and enrich, in turn, the monastic life of his community. To find the right balance here, we need some further reflections before setting up principles for a formation with a promising future.

Immersion vs. Self-Development

Monastic formation means first of all an initiation that has a passive component. One does not make oneself a monk, but the monk is being made a monk by plunging into a communal tradition. Does this mean that he or she simply has to undergo monastic formation like a patient who goes through an operation or an automobile which undergoes a car wash? By no means! Community and traditions should not become oppressive; they rather should enable the newcomer to participate in a language game by which the new monk discovers new depths and horizons. Here we touch on the active dimension of monastic formation on the part of the novice or junior monk. It is a personal decision to become a monk and to take over a given tradition. This requires of him commitment. This also entails that the monk has to make alive, on his own, what has been handed down to him. His skills and creativity are needed, not to invent everything new, but to take up the monastic world on his own.

To learn the monastic language means to absorb it creatively into one's own life and thought, which is certainly a lifelong process. Thus the candidate to monastic life is not thrown back on himself to make sense on his own of the monastic paradigm only according to his own experience and need for religious expression (like the elastic model would have it). Nor is he forced into keeping the rules of a system that remains foreign to him (like the traditionalist model). Rather he is, or should be, free to re-invent, re-imagine and re-form the monastic heritage of his community according to its inherent logic. Formation has to keep a healthy balance here that does justice to both the individual person becoming a monk and to the monastic realm. While formation has to safeguard a meaningful monastic framework that is not up for question, it has to create a space in which people can approach and challenge monastic life as they experience it in a given setting. And they should be encouraged to enthusiastically reappropriate the monastic heritage in a way they find meaningful. This not only protects and nourishes their own vocation, but it also brings a new challenge, encouragement and enthusiasm to the whole community.

A theory of formation, therefore, is inadequate that asks only what the formators should teach and what the monks should learn. Rather, formation has to uncover what is unique in a young person that will make him a great monk! This *personal charisma*, even if at times rough and uncomfortable, has to be appreciated, fostered and introduced to the community. This is the art of formation leadership. Over time, the charisms of the monks, if they are supported, will become the charisms of the monastery. At this point we capture how formation can bring about change of a community and how newcomers to the monastic life continuously contribute to its update.

This is demanding for superiors and the whole community. They are geared toward maintaining what has been established, be it the schedule of the day, the way of praying of the tasks assumed. In any congregation, most monasteries have a goodly number of parishes. We can observe young men who do not have a charism for parish work, but they would like to follow their monastic calling and stay in the abbey. They resist following blindly the well-trodden path of the older generation which would lead them to a full load of teaching in the abbey school or parish work, or maybe even both at once. Rather, they feel drawn to use their ingenuity, time and energy to refurbish the monastic liturgy, to take care of guests, offer retreats, spiritual direction or youth programs. Should they not be allowed to follow their intuition and enthusiastic projects, even if this means changing the community traditions? Following intuitions and desires of these people would perhaps free monasticism again from being concentrated too much on achievements, commodities, and exterior traditions that are all too often only makeup for a face that is aged and bloodless.

Hence, formation could exert a liberating force. It would unmask the pretension to have already arrived and settled once and for all. When we are ready for change, ready even to let go of self-images that are no longer sustainable, we would move closer to what we actually are. At least in Western Europe, monasticism has in many respects lost its formative power on Church, society and the economy. It is now called to offer a humbler project of formation for individuals on a one-to-one basis. In doing so, it has the opportunity to resume its prophetic role in both the world and the church. Such monasticism is able to go off into the distant, uncertain future unhindered by former securities. Thereby it may comprehend again a broken world, understand inconsistent biographies, acknowledge or even share contradictory ways of life. In this perspective, monastic life would prove precarious, as is Christian identity and as is human existence today. This would open up the monastic world to the current search for meaning and fulfillment. People are willing to engage themselves in organizations like Amnesty International or Green Peace. They are ready to sacrifice

a lot. Why not seek fulfillment in a monastery? If we can make clear that through monastic life the people of today can be enriched with a tremendous, elastic tradition that does not exclude but demands self-development, we might be again more appealing to the religiously very talented among them. If monastic formation is able to ponder these questions and does not try to impose easy answers on newcomers, it might give rise to a dynamic that may turn out to be also a formation for the community, exerted by the new monks.

PRINCIPLES FOR FORMATION TODAY

Formation Takes Seriously the Individual Person

A kind of formation that tries to emphasize only external discipline is dated. Rather, a personal formation is needed that initiates new monks into monastic life. They should be enabled to personally appropriate the monastic heritage so they become future generations of monks who may interact creatively with their contemporaries in the world. St. Benedict calls for such an attention to the individual person: The abbot has to know what a difficult and demanding burden he has undertaken: directing souls and serving a variety of temperaments.” For Benedict this means encompassing the individual characteristics of each of the brothers. Then Benedict goes on to say, “He must accommodate and adapt himself to each one’s character and intelligence.” Intelligence is not just knowledge, but also the ability to learn.

We have to acknowledge a shift both in the commitment and in motivations for an entrance. Many young people nowadays try many things – and they leave them pretty quickly. This is also often true for those who try monasticism. A broad mixture of motivations for entering a monastery is not bad, but they have to be sorted out and the novice or junior monk must be led toward the core desire to seek God. Therefore it is important not to disregard personal issues and experiences, because they continue to have an influence on a monk’s life. It would be dangerous to impose on him an idealistic image of monastic life that he has to embrace. Grace builds on nature. (Thomas Aquinas) Therefore one has to guide the candidate to a wholesome and honest view of him/herself.

Since joining a monastery is more of an individual decision today than it used to be, the attractiveness of the monastic life and fraternal love gain importance. The atmosphere for a vocation to prosper was already a concern for Benedict. *Humanitas* is a key concept in his Rule, even if the term appears only once (RB 53.9). Support for the individual is the foundation of a good formation. Everyone needs healthy relationships. If a monk cannot find these relationships in his community, he moves to the margins of the community to seek them outside. Young people are especially sensitive to this point; they quickly realize when a community is only superficial. *Humanitas* comes from *humus*, soil. Thus enough sleep, physical exercise and manual labor are issues for the formation program. Interestingly, the various attempts of monastic renewal in Europe stress manual labor as part of monastic life.

In our age of transition we simply do not know what will be essential in the monasticism of the future. The younger generation can give hints as to where to go, because it leads the way into the future on an existential level. The clash of monasticism and contemporary culture takes place more in their lives than anywhere else. As the church is becoming increasingly a church of pilgrims and converts, sparks of new life are enkindled in old monasticism when candidates discover the Christian faith in a way former generations took for granted.

We are again getting closer to St. Benedict's situation when attraction to or even entry into monastic life often accompanied conversion to a vividly Christian faith. This can lead us to a new appreciation of each individual who is being led to a thorough conversion. Each monk is a sanctuary where God dwells and tries to reach out to others. Therefore formation should first of all lead to a personal relationship with God. It is so easy to get caught up in things which ultimately do not matter, but which prevent the newcomer from appreciating monastic life as a way to heaven. If we are too farsighted, we lose what we are called to and cannot comprehend the individual quest: We need a little more passion and slightly less logic!

Formation Needs Much Time and Attention

The present social climate puts such an emphasis on the individual person that monasteries have to consider what this means for monastic formation. Fewer vocations make the question even more pressing. When a fair number of people entered monastic life together, they supported and corrected each other in a way that is normal and healthy. Now that there are fewer vocations, formators can hardly fill this gap. Therefore the whole community should be concerned, more than before, what the story and ongoing development of a new monk's vocation is, where he currently struggles and in which way he finds a new appreciation of monastic life. Sound relationships and personal exchange are essential for an initiation into the monastic way of life.

Today the maturation process is delayed as compared to former generations. It takes until the age of thirty and even beyond to develop one's personality. There are many values and forms of life that compete with the monastic paradigm. Friends and family, the media and communication by means of modern technology continue to exert an influence, as well as distraction. We arrive at a holistic personality when the elements of one's (RB 3.3). For this to happen, we have to openly engage them and their world. It is one thing to cite this famous phrase by St. Benedict, yet it is another thing to really put it into practice.

If someone leaves the monastery, s/he should be asked in detail what he would suggest for improvement of the community life, liturgy and labor. Certainly, the abbot and the monk in charge of formation should have enough time for the new monks to listen.

Formation Means Practice – within the Confinement of “Formability”

Monastic formation has to lead to a new identity. Certain practices are internalized, others abandoned. Candidates to the monastic life have to learn first of all a new time-structure of the day. Monastic formators have the great chance to be together with the young monks for most of the day and to observe them in various situations. No teacher or company offers such a vast formation program for pupils if employees. Our formation is grounded in living together in a structured way. Prior to any explanation, the monastic day and the example of the confreres, tell me what monastic life is all about.

As hard as a formator and the whole community try to build up a monastic life-culture, “formability” on the part of the candidates has to be considered realistically:

Formators and leadership need to be willing to discern the “formability” of candidates, particularly in terms of their capacity to establish and sustain a primary intimate relationship with God and to minister to others out of that relationship, their generosity in putting the needs of others and the community ahead of their own, their willingness to be formed and led and their disposition and competency for the work of justice and conversion.

(Luisa Saffiotti, “Forming Ministers for the Twenty-First Century,”

Human Development, 26 (2005) 5-20, citation 19)

It certainly does not suffice to emphasize only commitment. Today we have highly motivated candidates with strong zeal. What is lacking might be the openness to engage the contemporary and monastic culture in a mature way that will affect their personality. It is senseless to stress commitment if interior liberty is missing. A tense and rigid person risks using the monastic paradigm offered to close himself off from the exterior world and its challenges. They have to be led, sometimes against their will, to an intentional self-development of their character and a self-appropriation of the monastic life. Otherwise they do not find a meaningful life in their monastery, nor do they lead it into the future by being in touch with the contemporary world. The one best equipped for monastic life is not someone who knows a lot about the church, monastic history and the like, but rather someone who is able to adjust to various situations, who knows his strengths and limits and is willing to go the way of personal conversion, personal growth and lifelong development.

Someone who is open for new things, who is willing to question himself and who is attentive to the world at large, is likely to engage in the formation program. He will succeed, even if he has to grow in various respects, even if he comes to the monastery with a brokenness and internal injuries, even if he was spoiled by his family and has never really learned to work with his hands and endure hardships. He will learn to embrace what monastic life means, even though he fears what he longs for. Many people who come to our monasteries expect stability to give more weight and rootedness to their lives, although they find it difficult to let go what has shaped them. They expect a clear guidance, although they find obedience difficult, having been raised in a society that undermines authority. However, since they show a high degree of “formability,” they will make a difference in the future, searching for new forms of such traditional values as fasting, personal prayer, solitude, silence, recreation and fraternal correction. Granted that formators need a sound psychology and have to be familiar with the human sciences, the center of formation has to be the spiritual zeal leading to an encounter with God. There is no renewal of formation, and no renewal of monasticism, if the spiritual life is not at the core of the individual person and the whole community. Without mysticism there is no monasticism.

Formation Leads to an Appreciation of New Boundaries

We live in a time where happiness is supposed to be a result of the amount of opportunities we have and the availability of material goods and information we can consume. Flexibility and mobility are among the most cherished developments of late modernity. The excessive use of the Internet and channel surfing illustrate our capability and urge to inhabit different worlds at one time. One tries what is available and attractive: if you don't find it meaningful, you just let it go. Endurance is not considered a value in modern life. Everything is or should be possible. From this perspective, there is a big STOP-sign on the road to monastic life. That which is taken for granted in society at large has to be questioned and sorted out in the monastery. It is questionable when a novice or junior monk chooses to participate in Internet communities. Why is he

devoted to Facebook, what is he looking for? For some, their world is virtual. Monks can and sometimes should be active in Internet chats and platforms, but their real world must remain the monastery, their social context primarily the community. [CG note: This may not entirely apply to a dispersed community such as ours, but a large part of our real world should involve some degree of our Community.] Monastic practices demand distance from the world. Monasteries should perhaps be the retreat centers of non-virtual reality. Is it right that novices and junior monks have Internet access in their cells as it is the case in most Austrian abbeys?

The future of a vibrant monasticism will depend to some extent on how the individual and the community is able to handle the many opportunities of modern life, especially with regard to communication technology. It can serve the monk's life or destroy it. The temptation is not new, but what is new is the extent to which the monk has to face it within his four walls he does not have to leave the monastery if he wants to be distracted or inhabit different worlds. The monastic schedule reduces by its mere performance the many opportunities at hand in secular society. If one follows the regularity of liturgy and common meals, the designated time for work, silence and recreation, one finds a basically balanced life. We can observe that new monks sometimes want to escape such a schedule. They sometimes skip dinner or work particularly at night. Creating new boundaries is precisely one of the decisive questions for the future because it is an attack on the prevalent individualism and narcissism of our culture.

There has always been the danger that someone creates his own little world apart from his confreres, family and friends; today this seems an even more pressing issue. Is it not the case that new monks are allowed to retreat into their individualistic life-style because there are only few vocations? It is a matter of stepping back for the sake of healthy monastic life to combat narcissism and individualism. A personality that only cares about itself and takes monastic life as a stage on which to perform has to be questioned and cut back. What has to grow instead is care for others, readiness to take over a task spontaneously, and the ability to give generously. Therefore formators should be cautious not to push novices or new monks into too intense a search for inner peace and personal fulfillment. They have to find the right mixture of support and challenge.

Perhaps there is also the danger that novices and junior monks expect too much of themselves and feel pressured by others to accomplish too much. Monastic existence should not be directed primarily toward human expectation and accomplishment. The present climate of overwork in our monasteries creates an atmosphere for formation that is unfortunate. Like our contemporaries we can hardly stop. We seem to gain self-esteem mostly out of our own effort. Do we perhaps want to make up for deficiencies in our spiritual and monastic life? If we value a monk mostly in terms of work and merit, we create a problem for our formation.

Whereas in former times work was seen as the work of God, today work and merit is seen in primarily worldly terms (success, quantitative increase, efficiency). In our monasteries, a monk who is a fulltime teacher and also runs a parish is considered highly productive, a role model worth being praised and followed, regardless of his personal and spiritual lifestyle. At least subconsciously the new monks are being absorbed into this way of thinking and living. For the future of formation, "reduction" will be a key concept in many ways. On the personal level this means that the human person is capable of refusal and resistance, of an ascetic life.

Formation in a Larger Perspective

Ours is a time in need for leadership and models; we feel the effects of this lack in the family, in society, in politics and in the church. Also monastic formation needs such leadership and role models. Toward the end of this article it might be helpful to widen our perspective and look at the formative role of the monastery as such. By merely living the way monks should live, they make a difference. Often this difference becomes visible in people associated in various ways with a monastery. It is important that beginners in the monastic life realize this. They should not see the ideal of monasticism compromised by the ambivalent nature of its monks. Those who look for the perfect world will not find it and go away. What kind of monasticism was upheld when the church and its monasteries were all too powerful? Perhaps it turns out to be a blessing when abbeys experience again their limits and an age of decline with regard to numbers. What they have to pay attention to is not so much success and fame according to worldly standards, but that they try to establish profoundly human bonds and always point to the faith which cannot fully dissolve in worldly things.

Our vocation crisis in Europe brings a problem for formation. There are only a few young people in the monastery, sometimes only one or two under forty. They adapt too quickly to the views and attitudes of the older generation. In fact, young confreres “age faster” than their peers outside of the monastery. That is, they conform all too easily to the habits and to the ways of thinking of their confreres, who belong to the generation of their parents and grandparents. Therefore we must give them the possibility to meet their peers within the monastic setting. Networks of young people, who want to deepen their faith, should be brought in contact with the abbey’s life, especially with the younger generation of the monastery.

Those who are in our formation programs should be made aware of their monastery’s influence on people. A new vision of the formation process should encompass oblates, people who come for retreats, associates who want to share the monastic way of life in an even more committed way. We should raise in our formation process the questions: Does monastic life as we practice it have any relevance for lay people? In which way could it gain importance for them? If we are not able to articulate our spirituality in a form that becomes meaningful for laypeople like students, then perhaps our monastic formation lacks relevance for our own lives.

For the sake of monasticism it might prove important that formation be put into a larger perspective. In the near future some small Austrian monasteries might not find formators within their own communities. They will turn to larger abbeys for help, but the void in their monastery remains. Probably lay people, who are in some way associated with a monastery, will contribute to keep alive a tradition that has to be handed on to monks in some distant future. Formation turns out not to be a one-way street, but consists rather in mutual enrichment. Thus, monastic formation will in one way or another depend on lay people enchanted by monastic life, even if only in the area of monastic studies. In Europe we notice that lay people are taking over writing about patristic and monastic history and theology; there are currently hardly any younger monks devote to this.

All these issues can be finally bound together with St. Benedict’s words: “One is to be concerned whether he truly seeks God, whether he is eager for the work of God, for obedience and for trials.” (RB 57.8) For those who enter monasteries, what ultimately counts is whether they truly seek God and whether they eagerly

participate in the liturgy and are devoted to lectio and private prayer. They have to trust that the monastic life will not corrupt them, but lead them to the fullness of life, even if they do not understand everything at once. Therefore they can be obedient to their superiors and to the whole community and be ready to empty themselves and even go where they would not have gone by themselves. Then it might become true for the new monk what St. Benedict writes in his Prologue (v.49): “By progress in this way of life and by faith he will run the way of God’s commandments, his heart overflowing with the inexpressible sweetness of love.”

Fr. Bernhard Andreas Eckerstorfer was born in 1971 at Linz, Austria, and studied theology and geography in Salzburg, Vienna and for three years in the U.S. He earned a M.T.S. at Mount Angel Seminary, Oregon, with a thesis on Benedictine missionaries on Vancouver Island that was published in ABR 47 (1996) 175-99 and wrote another thesis on postmodern theology under the guidance of Msgr. Francis Mannion in Salt Lake City. For his doctoral dissertation on American theology he studied at the universities of Duke and Yale. In 2000 he entered Kremsmünster Abbey and spent two years in Rome for post-doctoral studies on patristic and monastic theology. He currently serves in his abbey as director of vocations, novice master and formation director.

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We have deep roots in the past. But the function of roots is to provide nourishment for this season’s new growth, this season’s fruit. We sink roots in the past precisely to nourish the growing edge.

-Br. Mark Brown, Society of Saint John the Evangelist