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How to work together Think Tank

**unMonastery — Relearning the Rules, part three: Mount St Bernard
a conversation between Father Erik Varden and Ben Vickers**

Relearning the Rules: introduction to the project

As part of an itinerant research initiative in collaboration with How to work together, Ben Vickers alongside other unMonasterians has published a series of weekly interviews over the course of May 2015, examining and learning from the various rules and social codes of the monastic orders and religious groups of past centuries. They have brought into conversation representatives from existing practising monastic orders and their equivalent protagonists from the emergent peer-based and commons-oriented communities.

This first interview features a conversation between Father Erik Varden and Ben Vickers.

Part three: Mount St Bernard — a transcript

Following my initial email exchange with Br. Paul Quenon from the Abbey of Gethsemani, it was recommended to me that I get in touch with Fr. Erik Varden of Mount St Bernard – Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, a monastery situated in Charnwood Forest, Leicestershire which is a short twenty minute drive from Loughborough train station.

After a series of short email exchanges Fr. Erik agreed to meet with me and this Saturday just gone I travelled to Mount St Bernard, a monastery set into an area of particular natural beauty. Established in 1835, it was the first to erect an abbey after the Reformation, which brought about the re-establishment of monasticism in this country.

Upon my arrival I was greeted at the guesthouse by one of the monks and after a short while was met by Fr. Erik, who ushered me into a quiet empty room filled with furniture. Having noted the timetable on the monastery's website I was aware that time would be limited before evening Vespers cut our conversation short. But before we entered into the questions I wished to pose concerning the effects of The Rule and the qualities it induces in those who follow it over time, Fr. Erik shared with me a short history of Mount St Bernard. In the course of a few minutes he charted the monastery's historical roots in the Abbey of La Trappe in Normandy, telling the tale of the novice master Augustin de Lestrange who, with the desire to carry further the reform of monasticism which had taken place at La Trappe in the 17th century, founded a small, embryonic community in Switzerland in an abandoned charterhouse called La Valsainte.

With the advent of the French Revolution La Valsainte became a sort of depot for monks in exile, particularly those from La Trappe. However, when the revolution spread further to Switzerland in the 1790s they were obliged to move, leaving on foot in an extraordinary exodus of a group of between 200 to 300 monks. Then walked into Ukraine up through Belarus, then back into Northern Germany, throughout which time they maintained a rigorous monastic life.

When they'd walked back into Germany, Dom Augustin de Lestrange—a man of magnetic charisma—sought to establish a series of small communities in safe territory. At that time England was surprisingly welcoming to French monastic communities in exile. So, he was able to send a small group of monks to establish a proto-foundation at a place called Longworth in Dorset. Later, it became possible again to resume monastic life in France, so Dom de Lestrange strategically recalled this little group of scouts to an ancient monastery in Brittany called Menale, which then started attracting English and Irish groups. And then finally in the 1830s he sent off another group of founders, one to Ireland and one to England.

The English group were put in touch with the landowner Ambrose de Lisle, a fairly recent convert to Catholicism who was very keen to see monasticism re-established. With his good friend Lord Shrewsbury, as well as the architect Augustine Pugin, de Lisle conceived Mount St Bernard. Having explained this complex but short history, Fr. Erik and I entered into a conversation; what follows is an excerpt of that dialogue.

Ben So far in our research we have focused on the Benedictine Rule as a sort of protocol that governs the social interaction of people living together—though I suspect that we may be guilty of treating it too discretely, as there exists a constellation of components in monastic life. There's the Bible, for you there's the Cistercian Constitution, and then I imagine there's other scripture, so I wanted to better understand these elements. Could you explain how these different parts go together formally and how they influence one another in practice?

Erik I can try. I mean, the Rule of Saint Benedict is nothing other than just a practical guide for trying to live a coherent Christian life. I don't know whether you know of a 17th century French bishop and theologian and great rhetorician called Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet who spoke of the Rule of Saint Benedict as 'un sublime abrégé de l'Évangile', a distillation of the Gospel. And for Saint Benedict that was his only aspiration, to make it possible for people living in community to live coherently the doctrine of Christ. I mean, a monk is nothing other than that; he's someone who just wants to try and live a truthful, credible Christian life, a Christian life with integrity.

So, he wanted to codify a way of living the Gospel, and he drew on the best of lived experience from existing monks, and that has been the foundation of monastic life in the Latin Church since Benedict's time.

You asked about the constitutions. Well, they're a particular expression of our order's approach to the Rule. Again, without going into all the historical details, the Cistercian Order is called Cistercian because Cistercians also have a link to a place named Cistercium, which is the Latin transcription for Cîteaux in Burgundy.

Cîteaux was a site on which in 1098 a small group of monks from a Benedictine monastery of Northern France called Molesme settled in order to live a more rigorous life. They felt that the Benedictine life as it was lived at Molesme wasn't as true to the Rule as they would like to be, and that they would like to live it as literally as possible. So, ours is a literalist revival you might say.

But literalist revivals want to slip a little bit with time, so there have been serial reforms. The Trappist reform was one such, the movement of La Valsainte is almost another reform movement, and we're now in the modern world trying to find our place within this history of reforms and reforms of reforms. So, our constitutions, which came out in a new and I think a very enlightened edition only in the 1990s, provide as it were an authoritative statement, a kind of a hermeneutical framework for Benedictine living intended for our order, which is present on every continent now.

Does that answer your question?

Ben It does, and I wondered... That definitely describes the relationship between the Rule and its evolution and how continual reform of the Rule takes place but how does the Bible interface with that?

Erik There's an important distinction to be made here between the Rule, and rules. *[laughs]*

Because... and I'm not saying you said this, but quite often you hear people speak about Saint Benedict's rules, and they take it for granted that what we live by is a sort of a rule book.

Ben Oh, no—I know that's not true.

Erik Then you should know very well that our word "Rule" is a translation of the Latin *regula*, which simply means "a measuring line". So, the *Regula*, Benedict's *Regula*, is a straight path to follow to get from A to B. A is where you start off when you join the monastery, and B is the life of union with God to which you aspire. So, the Rule is... Rather than a book of rules, it's really a kind of an orienteering map; it tells you how to get to where you want to be.

And you also asked about the role of the Scriptures... The Scriptures are everywhere, because the Rule is soaked in Scripture, all of its inspirations come from Scripture. Monks are people who are soaked in Scripture. We spend I don't know how many hours every day singing the Divine Office in church, which is all scriptural text primarily. We

have our daily times of Lectio Divina when we meditate on the word of God and try to understand it, try to be transformed by it. So, the Scriptures are as it were the ocean in which we swim, and in which this little floating raft of the Rule is making its headway, to mix metaphors slightly.

Ben Interesting. In the final Rule of Saint Benedict he talks about, well he essentially says: “If this isn’t good enough, if it’s not sufficient, then you should improve it.”

Erik Well, he doesn’t quite say that. *[laughs]* He says: “This is a Rule for beginners.” So, he says: “This is a good place to start, but at some point you will need to go further.”

Ben Yes, and that’s where I’m going. When you encounter situations, or situations evolve—how you choose to confront a situation, how you get to the point in which you might suggest a reform—I wonder how that has functioned over time, and also over shorter periods of time, if there are ever these moments of despair within monastic life, that there isn’t something to reach for and then on a longer term how observed changes come to be new Rules.

Erik Okay. I think the first thing I would like to say is that... Again, as you know... The sort of microcosm envisaged by Saint Benedict, or the society that he proposes, is to a very large extent a conciliar society. You know that the chapter that follows the second chapter on the abbot is the chapter “calling the brethren to council”. And quoting from the Scriptures, he says: “Do everything with counsel, and you will not be sorry afterwards.” *[laughs]*

So, it is one of the interesting facts about the Benedictine model that to the casual observer it can seem an autocratic model, because there you have the abbot with his staff and everyone else sort of following like sheep. Well, it isn’t quite like that. And Saint Benedict is very clear that any important decision should take everyone’s opinion into account, and he says that thing—which is pretty revolutionary for a writer of antiquity—that sometimes the youngest have the best ideas; so don’t only listen to the greybeards.

And this shows from the inception of the Benedictine model an openness to novelty. Because imagine you’re a young person who enters the monastery in the 6th century. I mean, his elders wouldn’t know about iPads, but he will and what is he going to do with his. So, hear him, and basically that’s how it continues. So, in this house, when we have an important decision to make we have very regular chapter meetings anyway, sort of open forum meetings when anyone can bring up a subject for discussion, or a question or a suggestion for an improvement. And if we have specific decisions to make, either regarding a point of observance, or the management of our finances, or pre-eminently when it’s a matter of discerning the future of a candidate

the community meets together. So, that is a strong current that goes through our entire history.

There is a delicate balance in the Benedictine economy between hierarchical authority and conciliar authority. When it comes to legislation... It's not as if our new constitutions contain new rules. If anything they contain less rules than the old constitutions, because they correspond to a different ethos almost, or certainly a different way of perceiving the ideal way of regulating the common life. Whereas at the beginning of the last century our official documents were stiflingly exact. You know, they would tell you—and this is more or less literal truth—they would tell you how to position your sandals under your bed when you went to bed in the evening. You know, what you should do, what prayers you should say while kneeling by your bed, how you should perform. Absolutely everything was legislated for, the thought being that if every act of our life is ritualised then everything becomes almost an act of service, an act of obedience and so an act of mortification—you know, the mortification of self-will—and so more pleasing to the Lord.

That model worked for a not inconsiderable number of very saintly people, but it drove other people absolutely insane. I mean, you can see why, a number of people felt that they couldn't move, they couldn't breathe, and they felt rather crushed by this over-legislation, this overprovision precisely of rules. So, our present constitutions, while being very radical in their orientation, are much more contextual. They're concerned with forming motivations, informing the will, providing guidelines for decision-making, etcetera. You can find them on the Internet, and it's not a very long document; they're worth reading.

Ben To touch on that sense of oppression, caused by strict rules. Do you think—because obviously they did work very sufficiently for a time—is this oppressiveness a pressure that comes externally to the monastery; that increasingly monks felt that they couldn't follow that degree of strictness as a result of the freedom that was emerging in the world?

Erik Partly, I think, and partly I think it's a matter to do with different mindsets. Just to draw a parallel... Our current most senior monk joined the monastery in 1947. When I joined there were still two who joined in 1935. They both came in very young, and at that point it was perfectly reasonable for someone to choose their path in life at 17 and to stick with it.. Whereas now—what 17-year-old would be able to even decide what he's going to wear for the next week?

But I always get a bit impatient when people talk down about the youth of today, as if they were incapable. I think more often than not young people now have to face such a tangle of complexity so early, that they live through a lot of painful and confusing stuff that our elders didn't have to, because for better or for worse, they lived in a much more

clear-cut world and for that generation it was perfectly natural to live by fairly rigid regulations, and social customs functioned that way.

And the monastic life has got to be livable, and that's something I've always appreciated very much about monastic life, that it is an idealistic way of life, but it's also a very sensible way of life, and I tend to find that monks and nuns, certainly happy monks and nuns are usually very sensible human beings, yes?

Ben Yes, I'm increasingly finding that. Maybe more so than other areas of working and life, particularly in a moment in which the world is losing many of its anchor points, and people are increasingly finding it difficult to navigate.

I want though to move onto the rigorous routine set out within The Rule, but specifically on the distinct rhythm, and I wondered if you could reflect for me on a few aspects of its effect. The first thing I'd like to ask is how it actually affects your body, your metabolism, your sleep, your states of consciousness. And then secondly, what you observe in the way in which it affects your relationship and interaction with others that are living the same routine; this is a fascinating area, as much as it may be culturally unique.

Erik Good question. Well, I think regarding point A... First of all, it messes you up, it's in our tradition to live by a slightly peculiar timetable; we get up early, we rise at three. When you visit the guest house for a few days that can seem quite exciting, and it's sort of a bit heroic, and you stagger into church at three and you feel as though you're having a great spiritual experience, because you don't quite know where you are. And then you enter, and you find that you're actually expected to be there at 3:30, and someone comes and rings a very loud bell outside your door 15 minutes beforehand to make sure you're awake.

Certainly my body rebelled against that. I mean, I was a bit of a night owl before I joined here, and I found myself in a state of almost permanent jet lag for the first four months, and my appetite changed. But then... Obviously I wanted to get used to this new routine and then I started getting used to it... And then I started really loving it. And now I find it marvellous. *[laughs]*

Because of the way in which our day is structured, we have a long period in the morning after we have had our Vigils at 3:30—which lasts about 50 minutes, 50 minutes to an hour—and then we have a space of about two and a half hours for our own Lectio Divina. Are you familiar with that term?

Ben No...

Erik Well, it's one of the sort of the pillars of monastic life. It is the... Have you read *The Seven Storey Mountain*? it's a classic book; Thomas

Merton became a monk of Gethsemani, which you will be aware of. He reflects on precisely these questions, out of his own experience.

Because he's puzzled, when he comes to Gethsemani, and he wants to be a contemplative, and he wants to spend lots of time in contemplative prayer, and envisages mystical ecstasies, and he's rather disappointed when on the timetable of Gethsemani he sees the hours of the office—Vigils—“work, work, work, work, lunch, supper”—and then rather than ecstatic prayer it just says “reading”. And he thinks: “What is all this reading about?! If I wanted to read books—I mean, that's what I've been doing—I needn't come to a monastery for that!” But that's *Lectio Divina*. And it comes back to your question earlier about the place of the scriptures. That constant engagement with the scriptures, of letting them penetrate your consciousness, your intelligence, trying to break one's heart.

So, we have that long period in the mornings, which is really a wonderful privilege, because there is a quality of crispness in the morning, and one is alert, and it's quiet around you. And this leads me on to point B of your question, that obviously a lot of our life is lived in silence. It is often said by the uninformed that Cistercians or Trappists take a vow of silence. That has never been the case, there has never been a vow of silence. There were pretty strict rules about silence, and normally you could only speak to the abbot and to your confessor. But, humans being what they are, Cistercians over time developed a sign language, which is very like the language that deaf people use, and it became extraordinarily sophisticated. It was actually quite possible to have long conversations about all sorts of things without saying a single word.

But still, we do spend a lot of time in silence. We have the Great Silence from Compline in the evening, so about 7:30 in the evening until after Mass in the morning, which is nine o'clock in the morning; that's 14 hours of the 24. I mean, obviously in some of those we're asleep so we wouldn't be talking anyway, except in our sleep; and there are no rules about talking in your sleep. But, things like the *Lectio Divina* in the morning... Here in this house it's not obligatory, but a lot of us do *Lectio Divina* together in our scriptorium, and it's a very powerful thing to do such a private and intimate thing in silence alongside other people.

And that actually creates a very powerful bond. And I think you were talking about the effects of a regular life on relationships and on other people. I think what we find is that living like we do... I mean, we don't have holidays—we're together all the time. *[laughs]* I mean, you couldn't imagine a more unlikely combination of people than the members of our community. You know, if we hadn't actually been spending all our lives together we would never have met.

Because for most of us we would seem to have absolutely nothing in common. And yet, we live together very happily most of the time, and

with a lot of good humour and a lot of appreciation. But, we get to know one another well, and we get to know one another's little ticks and little habits and little ways of doing things, but you also have a wonderful opportunity, when you live like we do, to just observe how faithful people are. And that's very impressive to see day by day, just to see people going about their duties, doing what they're supposed to be doing, being serious about their purpose, being generous, and even when they don't feel like being generous trying to be generous. That actually creates very strong bonds, bonds I would say that go a million miles deeper than many hundreds of hours of superficial chit-chat over cups of coffee.

Ben There's something that maybe follows on from that, aside from the isolation and the daily rhythm, it's perhaps to some surprisingly spoken of in a joyous way, and the word "joy" is often attached to the monastic life. I wondered if you could expand on the specific quality of that joy?

Erik Before I joined here I visited a friend of a friend, who's an enclosed nun and had been 40 years by then, and I asked her the same question, and I said, "Well, after all these years, are you happy?" and she said to me, "If this wasn't joyful... If this weren't a joyful life it just wouldn't be worth it!" And she is someone who radiates joy.

And it is true that part of what makes it joyful I think is—as a purely human, almost a sociological observation—that we're trying to dispense with what is not necessary, because we don't heap up a lot of stuff and we try to have clear-outs fairly regularly, to make do with a minimum of stuff, which means that you do really appreciate what is given you, and the main things that are given to you aren't things that you buy.

They are things like the fact that the sun rises in the morning, and that there are budding leaves on the trees. And the fact that—I mean, that to me was quite stunning. I've never been particularly sensitive to gardens. I'm still not, but just walking through our enclosure every day... I remember the thrill that first spring I was here, of just watching day by day spring burst into this dormant apple tree, and that giving me great joy. And then you come to Joy as a function of gratitude, it's the gratuitous that makes us joyful, and I think that the monastic life, if it works, should foster a spirit of gratitude.

So, you become grateful for all those things around you, you become grateful for all the good things that you've received in your life. You become grateful for your life, and you see that even the mess in your life, you know, in retrospect that's turned into good in some way or another. You see that some of the messes you've made... you've been forgiven, and that's something to be pretty grateful for. *[laughs]* You're grateful for the friends you have, for the monastic community. So, there is that.

But obviously the essential factor of joy for us is our life with God. I mean, today is the Eve of Pentecost, and one of the hallmarks of the Holy Spirit is joy and a certain sort of freedom. I think I would say that those three things go together very carefully: gratitude, joy, and freedom.

Ben And would you say it's those three things that are a stabilising force in being able to exist within this life?

Erik Yes, and the wonderful thing is that you find that your capacity for those things—I mean, obviously one is more receptive some days than other days—that it actually increases with time. Just to give you a concrete example... A wonderful brother in our monastery, he was one of the ones who joined in 1935, he had a stroke two years ago and was fully dependent for about four weeks before he died. He was a wonderfully joyful person, an indefatigable encourager. He always had a kind word, and was full of jokes and full of songs. Obviously he... *[laughs]* Having joined the monastery when he did, most of his songs were a bit out of date, but he would... *[laughs]* He would quite spontaneously, you would hear him sitting in his room singing songs from the shows of the 1920s. *[laughter]* And he was a profoundly good man.

So, he had a stroke, he lost the gift of speech. I had just been appointed superior, so I sort of ministered to him, both in hospital and here. The nurses didn't want to let him go from the hospital, but said: "Can't we keep him?" *[laughs]* But there was one thing he always struggled to say, and it was the only thing he said at the end: "Thank you!" The nurses said that even when they had to shove a tube up his nose, he said: "Thank you!" And I thought to myself: "Good Lord, how wonderful to have come to the end of your life—he was 99 years old—and the only thing you really want to say is: "Thank you!" That's not bad.

Ben *[Pauses]...*

Sorry, that was quite profound, so it's thrown me a little... but, maybe this is connected with respect to a life of obedience and discipline amongst one's peers. What do you think it is that specifically fosters trust between monks beyond faith, if anything?

Erik What fosters trust? Well, I think... seeing people's fidelity and their reliability, and that holds for small things as well as large things. *[laughs]* Again, people quite often presume that we spend our days wafting on clouds of incense, but... You know, we have a large house to look after. We have meals to cook, we have toilets to clean, we have hens and cows to be fed, we have pots to be made, we have any number of guests to receive, and... And during the course of a year there's hardly any human predicament that doesn't walk through that front door.

And we have leaking roofs to fix, we have now 10 brothers over 80. Most of them are pretty fit, but some need quite intensive care. So, there's a lot to be done in the course of a day, and what you come to really appreciate is people just doing... mucking in and helping, and cleaning up when there's a mess, and doing the washing up when it's their turn, turning up to appointments on time, being prepared to lend a hand when someone else is called to do something else; little things like that. Seeing that over time you find that actually people are remarkably trustworthy. And I think that's how we sort of educate one another as well, some people find it easier than others to say, "Yes," when you ask them for something, but we have one or two people in our house in particular who are really quite astonishing. Whenever you ask them anything they always say, "Gladly—I'd be pleased to do that!" And I think even those of us who may be a bit more sort of slouching in our approach, we see that and we think: "I would like to become like that one day by the miracle of grace!"

Ben And that in a way suggests to me that a high number of individuals willing to participate and contribute to a common effort is almost a way of quantifying the health of the community, would you agree?

Erik Yes, I think so. And that's something I thought of a lot since becoming superior, and I've ascertained to be true that, it is pretty exceptional to be living in a human context where you can pretty much all the time take everyone's goodwill for granted.

Ben That's interesting, because St Benedict mentions that there are different types of monks with various behaviours and motivations.

Erik Tell me about it! *[laughs]*

Ben And some in his view are more desirable than others. Why do you think that monasticism attracts such a variety of characters?

Erik Sometimes people talk about vocation or they hear about vocation, and it can seem such an exalted spiritual notion, as if you get some great message. That happens for some people, but for most of us our vocation becomes manifest by a sort of a process of elimination, that little by little everything else just ceases to matter, ceases to be interesting, and this is the one thing.

Ben Purposeful, and perhaps something that potentially is lacking in other spaces.

Okay, last question: in recent decades there's been a quite profound and accelerated explosion in technological innovation, and increasingly people find themselves overwhelmed and it has obviously had a very dramatic effect on daily life, and I wanted to understand in terms of the quiet life whether you've noticed any specific effects as a result of such innovation and if there are technologies that monasticism has adopted or rejected?

Erik It's a question that both we as a house, and our order and I think the monastic world as a whole, engages with very deeply at this moment, and it has for several years. Our order had a general chapter last year and modern technology was one of the main points on the agenda. You know, monks have always been sympathetic to innovations.

Ben Yes. They have been responsible for many of them.

Erik Exactly—often enough they have. And there are many things that are very helpful to us. I mean, email is one: when used sensibly, actually a very monk-friendly medium. I use email a lot, I hardly ever use the telephone; I may make one phone call a week or something in emergencies, or if I have no other. So, I find that I'm actually quite undisturbed, because I can manage the email, I can respond to it when it suits me. And what I'm increasingly learning to do, and that's a conscious decision on my part, is just to switch it off.

I think the risk, when you live like we do is to be swept away by a constant busyness, and there is that... Because you have things coming in more or less all the time and at unexpected intervals, there is that great temptation to think: "Oh, if I deal with this now I won't have to do it tomorrow." Which leaves you doing all of the time and constantly feeling a bit overwhelmed. Whereas now for me personally, I have a time in the day when I deal with correspondence, and then I flick the switch, switch off the Internet, and it's wonderful!

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