CHAPTER 1
THE KINDS OF MONKS

1 There are clearly four kinds of monks [1]:
2 First of all there are the Cenobites, who live in monasteries,[2]
serving[3] under a rule and an Abbot.[4]

3 Then there are the second kind, the Anchorites or Hermits:[5]
not in the first fervour of their conversion,[6]
but after long probation in a monastery,[7]
4 these men have learned to fight against the devil,
well taught by the companionship of many brethren;
5 and now well trained, they are competent to leave the ranks of their brethren
for the single combat; [8]
secure now without the consolation of a comrade,
they are able to fight with God’s help [9]
against the vices of the flesh and mind,[10]
single hearted, with their own right arm alone.

6 The third kind of monks are the dreadful Sarabites:[11]
these are not well tried like gold in the furnace [12] by any rule,
with experience to teach them, but softened down like lead,
7 still keeping faith with the world in their ways,
they are known by their tonsure to be false to God. [13]
8 In twos or threes or even alone, without a shepherd,
 penned not in the Lord’s fold but in their own,[14]
they make the gratification of their desires their only law:
9 whatsoever they fancy or prefer, this they call holy,
and what they do not like they consider unlawful.

10 The fourth kind of monks are called Gyrovags:[15]
these spend their whole life going around from province to province,
 staying three or four days at a time in various guest houses,
11 always on the move, never stopping long,
slaves of their own wills and the enticements of the belly,
in every way worse than the Sarabaites.

12 Of the wretched life of all these it is better to say nothing more.

13 So passing them over, let us start with the Lord’s help
to legislate for the Cenobites, the strongest kind of all.[16]

[1] Much of this chapter is taken from the Rule of the Master (RM 1), although greatly abridging the
last section which was a satire on the Gyrovags. St Benedict opens his Rule with a description of
the four kinds of ‘monks’. The Master, and St Benedict elsewhere in the Rule, generally prefers the
term ‘brother’ (frater) to ‘monk’. In Greek, the term ‘monachos’ has a root meaning of one-ness
(single or alone). The monk is ‘one’ in the sense of having an undivided heard, and as being a
person who is seeking the ‘one thing necessary’ (Lk 10:42).

St Benedict is here echoing monastic tradition in listing four kinds of monks: John Cassian
(Conference 18, 8) and St Jerome (Letter 22, 34). The description is of fourth century Egyptian
monasticism rather than Italian monasteries of St Benedict’s own day. St Jerome lists only three
kinds of monks: cenobites, anchorites and sarabaites. Cassian had a fourth category of false
anchorites, which St Benedict (following RM 1) changes to Gyrovags.

[2] A ‘Cenobite’ is a monk who lives in community. The word derives from the Greek ‘koinos bios’
which means ‘common life’, and ‘monastery’ for St Benedict is equivalent to the Greek
‘koinobion’. In the Egyptian desert tradition this cenobitic monasticism is associated particularly
with Pachomius (d.346). The monasteries of lower Egypt, described by John Cassian, followed the
more solitary life taught by St Antony and St Macarius. St Pachomius’s successor as head of his
monasteries spoke of Pachomius as the first to establish ‘koinobia’ (monasteries of common life)
but also developed the idea of ‘koinonia’ or ‘community’ as a monastic ideal.

John Cassian took the origin of the common life as the apostolic community in Jerusalem, soon
after the Resurrection of Christ, which was described by St Luke as being of one heart and one soul,
having all things in common (Acts 4:32-35; 2:45). Cassian wrote, “At that time the whole Church
lived thus, while today only a few are to be found in the monasteries, who lead this life.”(Conf. 18,
15).

St Augustine also looks back to the Jerusalem community as the origin of monastic life. He quotes
these same verses at the beginning of his Rule (2,3).

Common life implies also fraternal love among the brothers who choose to live together. St
Benedict develops this near the end of the Rule at RB 68:4-5; 70:6-7; 71:1-4; 72.

[3] ‘Serving’ here translates the Latin ‘militans’. The word has a root-meaning of fighting (the
struggle for Christ and against evil) but by the time of St Benedict the word ‘militare’ was used
generally of ‘doing service’. But see the repeated use of military metaphors in RB 1: 4,5 below.

[4] Notice the word-order here: the Rule comes before the abbot, since the abbot must himself keep

The corresponding passage in John Cassian does not mention a rule: “They live together in
community and are led by an elder (senior) with the gift of discernment” (Conf. 18,4). By the time
of the Master, monastic rules were seen as an essential summary of the scriptural, spiritual and
doctrinal teaching of former times. Together these formed the ‘Disciplina’.
The abbot belongs to the structure of the monastery. He is a teacher and a pastor, presiding over the ‘school of the Lord’s service’ in a similar way to a bishop presiding over the church community.

[5] This favourable treatment of hermits (there is a similar passage in the Rule of the Master) probably reflects the influence of John Cassian. The monks whose teaching was preserved in the Conferences were hermits. An ‘anchorite’ is literally ‘one who withdraws’ (from the Greek: ‘anachoreo’). ‘Hermit’ comes from the Latin word ‘eremus’, meaning desert or wilderness. The two terms are used as synonyms.

[6] ‘Fervore novicio’: Kardong notes that this is not a criticism of the enthusiasm that beginners bring to a task, but a realistic warning that their fire tends to cool over time. Communal support helps to rekindle the embers (Kardong, 37).

[7] ‘Long probation in a monastery’ is also seen as a necessary prelude to the hermit-life by John Cassian ((Institutes, 5.36,1) and St Jerome (Letter 125.9). Nowhere else in the Rule does St Benedict imply that the cenobitic life is only a step on the way to a solitary life.

[8] St Benedict, even while praising the hermits, is underlining the value of the cenobitic life: without it a potential hermit would lack ‘probation’, ‘training’ and ‘companionship’. He sees the hermit life as a progression from the monastery, not as an alternative vocation. St Augustine said of the Psalm text, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133:1), that the verse gave birth to monasteries.

St Basil (d.379) also addressed the question as to whether it was better to live a religious contemplative life alone or in community. He concluded, “On many grounds it is better to lead a common life with likeminded people.” His reasoning is: 1) Materially we are dependent on mutual help; 2) Because ‘love does not insist on its own way’ (1 Cor 13:5), it turns towards others; 3) Criticism from others is helpful; 4) The precepts of love of neighbor can be more efficiently realized in common: the care of the sick, hospitality etc.; 5) Only as community are we ‘one body in Christ … and individually members one of another’ and can ‘rejoice with those who weep’ (compare Rom 12:5,15); 6) One individual cannot receive all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In a community of charisms a person does not receive them fruitlessly, but can employ them communicatively for others. 7) The (thanksgiving-) prayer of a community is particularly precious, on account of the grace which rests on each single one. 8) The solitary life has its dangers: insufficient vigilance against evil; uncritical over-valuing of self; merely theoretical, instead of practical Christian life; impossibility of an ecclesial life in community in the scriptural sense. (RBasRuf 3, from Holzherr, p.46).

[9] ‘With God’s help” (Deo auxiliante). It is not just a matter of training and experience: even a hermit relies on God’s grace.

[10] Origen (d.253) wrote: ‘Bad thoughts are the root and beginning of every sin.”(Commentary on Matthew 15,19. The teaching of Evagrius was also centred on combating ‘logismoi’ or the thoughts which are focus of the monk’s ascetical struggle.

[11] According to Cassian, Sarabaites are degenerate cenobites. They are without superiors and without training and lapse easily into a false asceticism entangled in material cares (Conference 18,7). The name Sarabaite is from Coptic. It originally had no negative associations and just meant ‘monastic people’. In St Benedict’s presentation they are without the two distinctive marks of a cenobite: they have no Rule and no superior. They are also marked by self-will, compare RB 7:19-22. In place of ‘Sarabaite’ Jerome uses ‘Remnuoth’, apparently with a similar meaning.

[12] (Wis 3: 6)

[13] (Acts 5: 3,4). The tonsure is not recorded in the monastic tradition before the 6th century. At this date it probably refers to the Roman custom of hair cut short but not shaved off.

[14] The reference is not only to the abbot as shepherd of his community but to Christ as the Good
Gyrovags': the word was coined by the Master from the Greek ‘guros’ (circle) and Latin ‘vagari’ (wander). It therefore means a monk who wanders about. St Benedict is here compressing a much longer section from the Rule of the Master, reducing it from sixty verses to just two.

Cassian calls the root of the evil which characterises this kind of monk: ‘the evil spirit of acedia’, an indifference to religious life born from tiredness or boredom. For St Benedict the vices of the Gyrovags are many: self-will, gluttony and instability. Inevitably, the gyrovag who only stays one or two days in any particular monastery also adds nothing to the community by manual work, so it is a parasitic life whereas St Benedict wants his monks to live by the labour of their hands: RB 48:8.

St Benedict shows clearly where his sympathies lie. This ending leads naturally into his chapter on the Abbot.