International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church
Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2008, 42–54

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Tradition and imagination in the creation of a new monastic model in contemporary Hispanic America

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From an anthropological and historical perspective, and focusing mainly on the Argentinean situation, this article analyses Catholic male monasticism in Hispanic America, with the particular objective of evaluating the crisis, religious change and monastic imagination identified in contemporary Benedictine communities. It is argued that imagination, as a process of symbol production, has been intrinsically related to the practice of a new monastic spirituality; it has in fact been the force behind the appearance of religious experiences ideologically anchored in early Christian traditions. Empirical data on the Benedictine Order in Argentina suggests that at least three models of consecrated life can be identified in twentieth century Hispanic America, namely, the ministerial model, the social model and the patristic model. Research leads to the conclusion that these paradigms emerged through processes of imagination applied to the reinvention of tradition – creatively but, also, conservatively – in a global context in which both the monastic institution and society face changing demands.

Keywords: monasticism; Benedictine Order in Argentina; monastic life in Hispanic America; *Perfectae Caritatis*; imagination; reinvention of tradition; religious change; Latin American Catholicism

Introduction

By comparison with universal monasticism, Hispanic American monasticism has had a relatively brief history.[1] Nevertheless, from the arrival of the first Benedictines on the subcontinent at the end of the nineteenth century, different events demonstrate that local monastic communities responded to changes in local and global Catholicism. The effects of Vatican II (1962–1965) on monastic groups brought about renewed ways of being a monk in the Catholic Church. This was particularly so in the Argentinean situation, as well as in other Hispanic American churches.

The most significant transformation in this regard brought to an end the function of these religious males as agents of the local dioceses, which they had initially been. This change made them independent promoters of a particular spirituality not necessarily

[1]Cf. Borges, *Religiosos en Hispanoamérica*'; Matthei, 'Implantación'. Representatives of the Benedictine Order came to Latin America in the colonial period (late sixteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century); however, none of them was able to establish a religious community. 'If central and south America [...] has occupied an insignificant place in Benedictine history, a principal cause may be found in the comparatively slight Benedictine influence and initiative in the first century of Spanish colonial enterprise. Only in Brazil, Mexico and Peru had any foundations been made, and in the two later centuries they became extinct.' Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*, 191–2.

ISSN 1474-225X print/ISSN 1747-0234 online

DOI: 10.1080/14742250701841756
http://www.informaworld.com

anchored in an involvement in chapels and parishes. This characteristic constitutes the main feature of contemporary Benedictine life.[2] In particular, this article analyses the historical and symbolic processes through which Benedictine communities developed a new social rôle in the Catholic sphere by introducing a new monasticism, that is, a new way of living the consecrated life or an alternative form of being a religious male in the Church.

As becomes evident, change came in response to the implementation of a view of the religious life based on a selective revitalisation of the primitive monastic tradition. By appealing symbolically to the mythical times of the so-called Desert Fathers,[3] these religious men undertook a pragmatic recovery of the past which consisted in recapturing certain attributes of early monasticism.[4] In order to explicate this argument, I have organised the article into three successive parts. First, I give a brief review of the history of monasticism in Argentina and other countries of Hispanic America and draw out what, for merely heuristic purposes, I have called the *ministerial monastic model*. Second, I approach the developments that took place around Vatican II (second Vatican Council), which testified to the coming of two experiences – independent and not necessarily one evolving from the other – namely, the *social monastic model* and the *patristic monastic model*, which later came to predominate over the other two models. Finally, I explain how the emergence of the last model was produced through the restoration of the myth of the desert.

The making of Benedictine ministry

The short historical account that follows here of Benedictines in Hispanic America, focuses particularly on the Argentinean situation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the former rôle of the 'historic orders' (Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans), characterised by their influence in social, political, economic and, certainly, religious spheres, had completely vanished.[5] On the other hand, throughout the whole of that century the secular clergy started to achieve important positions, added to which the ecclesiastical structure directly addressed the 'Romanization' of national churches.[6] This was impelled by Rome and consisted of new norms of discipline and clergy organisation; it found in the Argentinean Church an eminent apprentice. In this extensive process of transformation of Hispanic American Catholicism, which was to become stronger in the following decades of the new century, there appeared, for the first time, a male religious order of monastic tradition. The Benedictines were the protagonists of this bold endeavour in Spanish speaking lands. However, monastic practices of seclusion were not characteristic of the daily activities of these European religious founders. On the contrary, missions and apostolic work compounded the everyday schedule of Benedictine monasteries for more than half the twentieth century.

In this context, the foundation in Argentina of the monasteries of *Niño Dios*, in the city of Victoria (1899) and St Benedict, in Buenos Aires (1915), presented paradigmatic

[2]Although reference is made in this article to Cistercians (Trappists), the research has mainly focused on Benedictines, to the exclusion of other religious orders, such as the Carthusians.
[3]Eliade, *Mito y Realidad*. The concept of myth employed in this article refers to that of Eliade. In other words, myth is synonymous with the founders' primordial times. Moreover, myth does not necessarily indicate a fictionalization of the past. On the contrary, it might bring to actors' minds some event, word, or story, which has deep meaning for them. On the other hand, according to Sahlins in *Islas de Historia*, myths are always historically and socially interpreted.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Di Stefano and Zanatta, *Historia*; Peire, *El Taller*.
[6]Di Stefano, *El Púlpito*. See also Dussel, 'Outline'.

divergences and similarities. As far as the divergences are concerned, the social and geographical settings of living space had a determinant rôle in the type of occupations practiced by each community. Thus, the community in Victoria settled in a rural environment and, making agriculture its source of subsistence, developed its work in this social sphere. This was especially noticeable in its supervision of a small rural school. Moreover, the characteristics of Victoria – with areas not yet urbanised as well as the extension of the Diocese, in which Benedictine priests brought the Catholic presence into many occasions – meant that the evangelising mission of the community of *Niño Dios* took place mostly in rural settings.

The opposite was the case for St Benedict's Abbey. Though initially its experience was similar to that of Victoria, in the sense that the community also administered a rural school, it suddenly changed its situation by moving the community of monks to a growing urban location in Buenos Aires. Their final establishment there set the definitive profile of the monastery's pastoral work. Activities were dominated by the influence of Catholic associations – already widely distributed in the parishes of the city[7] – and the promotion of the liturgy and Gregorian chant.[8]

Alongside these divergences, similarities must be highlighted: both foundations constituted particular adaptations of the same monastic model to the vernacular context, and made ministry outside the monastery their *modus vivendi*. Accordingly, by extending their pastoral practice into the countryside as well as into the city, the *Padres Benedictinos* (Benedictine Fathers) were related to different social groups, through their responsibilities for distant parishes, coordination of lay people, conferences, spiritual retreats and so forth. This involved the implementation of a general strategy of outreach, which placed them within social networks outside the monasteries in order to prioritise disparate services for local dioceses. This paradigm, thus, was defined by the institutional pastoral occupations carried out by monastic communities. These consisted in their accomplishment of functions normally carried out by secular clergy, serving the diocesan ecclesiastical body at times when it was difficult to find enough priests for the structural expansion of the Hispanic Church. This plurality of duties was strongly manifested in their service to diverse parishes and chapels, more in Victoria than in Buenos Aires; in work with Catholic associations of laymen and women, more in Buenos Aires than in Victoria; and in the spread of the movement that gave priority to the liturgy and Gregorian chant.[9]

In view of the general characteristics of an identical *ministerial monastic model*, there were attributes that these expressions of urban and rural consecrated life shared, in terms of their symbolic and sociological dimensions. In relation to the former, it was the prevalence of a mediaeval imaginary that pushed monks to search for a Christian ideal of perfection and sanctity illuminated by virtues of abnegation, humility, sacrifice, asceticism, resignation, heroism and quest.[10] Thus, the religious experience in which these Benedictines were involved was entirely social, in the sense that it did not merely respond

[7]Cf. Lida, 'Iglesia'; Romero, 'Católicos movimiento'.
[8]A similar set of activities was developed in the monastery of the Sacred Heart at Puente Alto in Chile. Matthei, 'Implantación', 54–5.
[9]Ludueña, 'Los benedictinos', 44–52.
[10]On the concept of the imaginary, I follow Cornelius Castoriadis for whom 'the imaginary is not an image *of*. It is an incessant and essentially *undetermined* (social, historical and psychic) creation of figures/shapes/images; and only through these, can the imaginary be *about* ''something''. What we call ''reality'' and ''rationality'' are products of this creation'. Castoriadis, 'La Institución', 29 (my translation); Ludueña, 'From *Fathers* to *Monks*'. More insights on the notion of imagination are given in my doctoral thesis.

to subjective perceptions but to collective systems of shared values that governed the configuration of the monastic *habitus* of the period.[11] In the sociological dimension, within these communities, the hitherto predominant inner hierarchies and segmentations which distinguished lay brothers from priests and were simultaneously present in other male and female orders and congregations, were still relevant.[12] In this restricted universe of divided positions of status the figure of the superior was paramount, that is, the abbot, below whom, following a strict order of activities, were set the priests, lay brothers, oblates, novices and postulants to religious life. To sum up, a few years before the Second Vatican Council this whole organisational landscape changed significantly in the direction of a growing privatisation – that is, withdrawal and retreat – of the Benedictine consecrated life. We will see how the active participation of monks in the public sphere was, progressively, leaving room for a substantial enclosing of the monastic life inside the monastery through the renunciation of previous external responsibilities. This movement withdrew groups from the secular world and, simultaneously, put them into a network of interconnected regional monastic communities. The next section addresses this dramatic mutation of the *ministerial monastic model*.

Social and patristic monastics in motion

By contrast with Europe, where Benedictines had been established since St Benedict (480–547), monastic groups grew up in Hispanic America in the late nineteenth century.[13] Although these communities adopted the European traditions of their original houses in Spain, France and Switzerland, the native generations of monks envisioned and supported new models of religious life from the period during Vatican II onwards. These new paradigms in vernacular monasticism challenged the previous practice of ministerial activity; in fact, this was the main point of discussion with existing local traditions of apostolate. In an atmosphere of Catholic effervescence informed by innovative theologies and historical research into patristics, other forms of consecrated life took shape as a response to both the Council's demands for renewal and Latin American social realities.[14] Consequently, this also implied conflicts and changes in which communities were fragmented and reunified but, fundamentally, transformed – though slowly and progressively – into something new and radically different.

In the short history of Benedictines in Argentina, the years during the Second Vatican Council showed – specifically – the convergence between history, tradition and symbolic re-signification of the Christian monastic past. Pope John XXIII's call to the bishops, as well as his invitation to the whole Church to examine itself, did announce the intention to update and renew, which the Vatican II documents later transmitted. Particularly, it was

[11]See Ludueña, 'Etnografía'; Ludueña, 'Asceticism', on monastic *habitus*. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the *habitus* is a complex system of practices and representations which have been socially and historically constituted in a given society and time and which rule the action of agents in everyday life. In this sense, it also orientates both particular forms of perception of reality and strategies for acting in disparate situations. See Bourdieu, *El Sentido Práctico*; *Cosas Dichas*.

[12]This distinction came to an end with the Vatican II Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. See also Ebaugh, *Out of the Cloister*.

[13]Subsequently, Benedictine communities in the Caribbean region were formed during the second half of the twentieth century in countries like Colombia, Guatemala and Puerto Rico, among others.

[14]Roberts, 'Benedictine poverty'. The context of reflection, principally in relation to poverty, can be reconstructed in Roberts chronicle of the regional meeting of male and female religious – Benedictines, Trappists and members of the Fraternity of the Virgin of the Poor – held in 1970 at *Niño Dios* Abbey.

Perfectae Caritatis, the *Decree on the Up-to-date Renewal of the Religious Life*, which introduced the formula for change into religious orders. This document on the consecrated life led religious men and women to scrutinise the present life of their communities in the light of the mythical pasts of each religious congregation.[15]

> Religious communities should continue to maintain and fulfil the ministries proper to them. In addition, after considering the needs of the Universal Church and individual dioceses, *they should adapt them to the requirements of time and place*, employing appropriate and even new programs and abandoning those works which today are less relevant to the *spirit* and *authentic nature* of the community.[16]

While the first order placed consecrated people in a situation of accommodation with the present and, therefore, in a principle of dialogue – at least limited – with modernity; the second request addressed the history and traditions of orders and congregations. In sum, this led religious people to investigate the foundational and mythical past that legitimated the 'spirit' and 'authentic nature' – charisma – of their orders and institutes. In the case of Benedictines – and, certainly, in many others – this partly involved revision and re-signification but, principally, re-foundation based on a practical recuperation of the myth. This process consisted of revision of the past, of the primitive monasticism of the Desert Fathers, in order to lead it into a present that was of action.[17] It was, finally, the moment of emergence of the *patristic monastic model* that, since then, has identified the systems of practice and representation of monks in the local Church.[18] For the prior paradigm of religious life, many Latin American Benedictines did not look back to the mediaeval period of Cluny but to early monasticism.

In 1948, a new community, from Switzerland, was founded in Argentina alongside the already existing communities of French and Spanish origin. Like its predecessors, this new monastery embraced activities of apostolate, particularly through the administration of a school for children of a rural area in *Los Toldos*.[19] Ten years later, a Trappist monastery was established from St Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, Massachusetts. However, around the mid-1950s, with the first generations of Argentinean monks, movements came into being which were orientated to produce new monastic experiences nurtured in a diversity of religious and social sources. Benedictines native to Argentina, not Europeans, headed these developments. Even before their admission to the religious life, most of these men were behind the search for a monastic model of retreat and, consequently, less associated with diocesan ministerial activity. Behind the vision of these monks was a more romantic and conservative plan about how monasticism should be. In their view, monasteries devoted to ministerial activity could not be perceived as 'true monasteries'. An indication

[15]Bidegain, *Vida Religiosa*; Ebaugh, *Out of the Cloister*; Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*. Wittberg, *Rise and Decline*. See the extensive bibliography on these changes in the Catholic church worldwide.
[16]Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 20 (my italics).
[17]According to Michael Hill, '[v]irtuosi take as their central point of reference a period in the early history of their religion which can be seen as particularly authentic. They then compare this pristine model with their perception of the contemporary reality, and are impressed by the extent to which this comparison indicates a *decline*. Their response is to practice a style of religious observance which aims at *reinstating* the valued tradition'. Hill, *The Religious Order*, 3. See Sahlins, *Islas de Historia*, on the other hand, in relation to the interpretation of myth and action.
[18]See Bourdieu, *El Sentido Práctico* and *Cosas Dichas*, on systems of practice and representation.
[19]Hora, *Los Terratenientes*. The involvement in rural schools by Catholic religious orders was not completely random. According to the interests of the rural bourgeoisie – mainly between 1870 and 1930 – they were perceived as particularly suitable for contributing to the modernisation of the countryside.

of these expectations for a new project based on the reading of primitive ascetics was the foundation of the monastery of *Cristo Rey* (Christ the King) in Tucumán, Argentina. Founded in 1956, it was an attempt by a group from *Niño Dios* Abbey to move in the direction of that primitive charisma. This group made withdrawal the primordial feature of its religious experience, hence they searched for a retreat in the Tucumán hills.

In the meantime, *Niño Dios* continued with an intense agenda of ministerial work focused, mostly, on the diocese, where Benedictines worked with parishes and pious associations. Yet at the end of the 1960s, in the context of the institutional storm provoked by Vatican II, an internal division in *Cristo Rey* fragmented the community into two groups, known as *los de arriba* (top-of-the-hill-dwellers) and *los de abajo* (bottom-of-the-hill-dwellers).[20] The first group was committed to a life of withdrawal in the orthodox sense of its primitive expression. The second group promoted a monasticism inclined to direct action in well defined impoverished areas. This form of monasticism was manifested, for example, in the experiences of the poor monasteries of *Cristo Total* (Total Christ), *La Pascua* (Easter) in Uruguay, and *Puerta del Cielo* (Gate of Heaven), in which the founder, a former monk of St Benedict's, Buenos Aires, hoped to evangelise workers in local factories – the *obreros* – in a dense industrial area. These variants of monastic life inclined towards involvement in, promotion and organisation of small units of impoverished socio-economic groups which might be subsumed within the same monastic paradigm, namely, the *social monastic model*.[21] Like the changes sought by the Argentinian-born male religious who pursued a patristic trend, these new proposals were orientated towards the social dimension of society and were the result of collective processes of imagination very much along the lines of updating and renewal later requested by the Second Vatican Council.[22] Nevertheless, while the followers of the patristic model were intellectually and theologically fed from the life of ancestral anchorites of the Egyptian desert, male religious following the social paradigm, were influenced both by the Post-Medellín political atmosphere in the Latin American Churches and by the growing interest in the poverty present in many areas of the region.[23] This group of Benedictines who took up the *social monastic model* followed, significantly, the monastic experience of the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, who also based their organisation on an ascetic life in close proximity to impoverished people. In spite of the apparent initial force of this movement, its consolidation and institutionalisation as a

[20]These titles were related to the physical place each faction occupied during the community's division. While the top-of-the-hill-dwellers remained in the monastery located at the top of a hill, the bottom-of-the-hill-dwellers lived in a little house at the heart of a neighbourhood of workers close to the monastery. Thus, this distinction did refer to alternative models of living monastically but also to ideological and political reasons.

[21]Matthei, 'Implantación', 116–17. During the 1960s, more examples of this kind of consecrated life were to be found in the foundations of female and male communities of the Fraternity of the Virgin of the Poor in Chile.

[22]Here, I follow the notion of imagination expressed by Paul Ricoeur. He defined imagination as 'a free play of possibilities in a state of no compromise with the world of action and perception. In such a state of no compromise, we test new ideas, new values, and new ways of being in the world'. Ricoeur, *Del Texto a la Acción*, 203 (my translation).

[23]Held in Colombia (1968), 'the Medellín conference was convened precisely with the goal of applying Vatican II to Latin America and thus clarifying the church's proper rôle in the region's continuing transformations'. Levine, 'Religion', 8. At that meeting, 'the bishops reviewed all aspects of religious life, locating them with specific reference to the history and conditions of Latin America [...] Medellín is most important for the way in which the bishops dealt with issues of force and violence and with the more general question of social division and class conflict'. Ibid., 10.

religious experience of the Benedictine Order failed to materialise. Wherever it was established, the *social monastic model* was, however, successful in serving some specific needs of the people, for example in cooperatives, associations or businesses.

For almost three decades, between 1950 and 1980, the three paradigms of monastic life co-existed. Nonetheless, from the early 1970s, the patristic model began to predominate. Slowly but continuously, this form of consecrated life overtook the other two. All three models finally reached a practical – and, not solely, imaginary – dimension linked directly to religious action. As a result, the particular activities implemented in this period found inspiration in processes of imagination whose roots lay not only in the requests of the Holy See but, also, in the expectations of the cohorts of native-born male religious whose interpretations of what monasticism should be sought realisation in alternatives to the ministerial model hitherto promoted by European pioneers. In this vein, the processes of imagination developed around the Second Vatican Council were intrinsically intertwined with practice; in Paul Ricoeur's words, 'there is no action without imagination'.[24] According to the imagined consecrated life of social and patristic monks, monasticism should turn its sights to, respectively, the exploited, poor and underdeveloped Latin American reality or the primitive mythical desert. In this way, the imagination of a new form of monasticism in Hispanic America was not a mere play of representations but an exercise of religious practice where conflict and social dramas – like those of the monastery of *Cristo Rey*, for instance – inexorably emerged.

A number of different events convey the atmosphere of this transformation. Within a consensus formed between monks from Argentina and Chile, the main promoters of the patristic model took three important steps. First, they created a Latin American review for the diffusion of the theological and philosophical principles of monasticism, represented in the *Cuadernos Monásticos* (Monastic Notebooks). Secondly, they developed a regional federation of Trappist and Benedictine monasteries of male and female religious under the title *Congregación Benedictina de la Santa Cruz del Cono Sur* (Benedictine Congregation of the Holy Cross of the South Cone);[25] and thirdly, they gave themselves a Constitution drawn up to regulate and administer the religious life in the region. In particular and as a symptom of this global change, the foundation of the Congregation allowed monks to end their historical isolation. This substantially improved the communication and interchange of experiences among communities in the context of an extensive monastic network. Furthermore, by including other male and female religious within the same Benedictine association, monastic imagination showed its concern for establishing a common experience of monasticism from a Latin American point of view.[26] Historical events like the moving of the urban monastery of St Benedict, Buenos Aires, to the rural area of Luján in Argentina and the definitive closing of its main publication, the *Revista Litúrgica Argentina* (Argentinean Liturgical Review), both in 1973, clearly marked – among other

[24]Ricoeur, *Del Texto a la Acción*, 207. In a similar sense, on a sociological basis, Castoriadis affirmed that '[e]ach thought about history and society belongs itself to history and society. Each thought, whatever may be its ''object'' is a form of social-historical *doing*'. La Institución Imaginaria de la Sociedad', 30 (my translation).

[25]In relation to the association of religious establishments, Vatican II's documents proposed that '[i]ndependent institutes and monasteries should, when opportune and the Holy See permits, form federations if they can be considered as belonging to the same religious family. Others who have practically identical constitutions and rules and a common spirit should unite, particularly when they have too few members. Finally, those who share the same or a very similar active apostolate should become associated, one to the other'. Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 22.

[26]Cf., for example, Olivera, *Contemplación*.

changes – the progressive mutation of Hispanic American monasticism from a ministerial to a patristic experience. These transformations and explorations in the consecrated life were not solely the patrimony of Benedictines; other religious orders in the church underwent similar processes of self-examination and self-imagination in history, mission, tradition and experience. Along a winding road, monastic communities reached a particular form of consecrated life, to which I now turn.

Monastic 'tradition' revisited

As mentioned above, the imagination and implementation of the *patristic monastic model* implied, in its ideological dimension, a rediscovery and reinterpretation of the Christian monastic past. Tradition, which Vatican II urged monastics to rediscover, was insistently identified with the patristic era. Some impetus came from the studies that monks undertook in Rome where they were sent in furtherance of their religious formation; another sign was the launching in 1966 of the *Cuadernos Monásticos*, which was specifically interested in patristic topics, the writings of the Fathers,[27] monastic spirituality according to the model of the desert, silence, prayer and different articles on the same subject area. This publication was singularly important in the sense that it was also an arena where monasticism, as a system of religious practices and representations, was thought about and implicitly debated by Latin American monks. Without a doubt, it was the change in the politics of self-representation, which changed their title from *Padres Benedictinos* (Benedictine Fathers) to *Monjes Benedictinos* (Benedictine Monks); this emphasised the direction of the transformation that was taking place. The first title appeared on a regular basis in publications such as *El Mensajero de las Ánimas* (Messenger of the Souls) and *Revista Litúrgica Argentina*, which were protagonists of the *ministerial monastic model*. In sum, the Middle Ages, significantly present in the 'imaginary' of the Benedictine Fathers, gave place to the stories and sayings of the former anchorites of the desert.

Nevertheless, this rediscovery of the past did not look at the revolutionary mission of the coenobitic communities, which were opposed to both an urban Catholicism and an established, ecclesiastical hierarchy close to the power of the Roman Empire.[28] Similarly, the traditionalisation process was not directed against the *status quo* but was intended to place monastics in a new *locus* within the church. This was done by assigning them a renewed mission, that is, a renewed religious specialisation in which retreat, silence and contemplation came to the forefront of a particular spirituality. Then, tradition began to be studied, reinterpreted and reinvented.[29] As a palimpsest of symbols and practices and an object of interpretation, tradition was dominated by a process of meaning production in a moment of religious and historical change in Latin America. In the re-signification of the past, the process of institutionalisation and legitimation of the new *monastic model* that resulted from the transformation was particularly relevant. According to Hobsbawm, 'the peculiarity of ''invented'' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In

[27]Many of these writings, previously ignored by the adherents of the ministerial monastic model, were directly translated from the Latin and Greek by Latin American Benedictines. Once more, this demonstrated the interest in the period and thoughts of the Desert Fathers.
[28]Brown, *Body and Society*.
[29]For 'invented tradition' I understand, in a broad sense and following Eric Hobsbawm's words, 'both ''traditions'' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity'. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction', 1.

short, they are responses to new situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition'.[30] However, in the case of Benedictines, at least, the reinvention of tradition did not refer to a mere fictionalisation or mystification of a blurred past in order to legitimate a particular state of things. On the contrary, it operated by taking specific segments from the historical and theological experience of the Desert Fathers, addressing contemporary monasticism to an 'imagined' model, that is, to a paradigm of what it should be. Then, monastic imagination worked by developing concrete images of the mythical past of primitive Christianity. In this way, aspects such as community, desert, asceticism and manual work were interpreted in the light of the particular context of Latin America. The experience of early anchorites, as a significant fact of the past, constituted – hermeneutically speaking – a symbol revealed to these religious men in particular for developing new significations of being a monk and, therefore, renewed forms of living monastically.[31] In this sense, Danièle Hervieu-Léger argued that there exist:

> processes of invention, bricolage and manipulation of devices of signification susceptible of 'making tradition' inside historical religions. Certainly, these operations of communitarian and individual recovering of religion prescripted by religious institutions are not developed in a totally unlimited and uncontrolled fashion.[32]

In the monastery of Victoria, as in Buenos Aires and Tucumán, the making of tradition required the selection of the elements of history and monastic spirituality that should constitute the relevant memory and practice of the actors involved. In this regard, according to Hervieu-Léger, 'the history and socio-cultural determinations of each single context delimit the universe of the believable, thinkable and imaginable, inside which these re-compositions are done' (my translation).[33]

In summary, in the experience of Latin American monasticism, history and tradition were set under the light of local imaginations. These, however, were not merely circumscribed by the creation of representations of the past; they were also eminently practical in following a model of action given in the patristic *momentum*.

Under this politics of re-signification of tradition, a great many innovations were introduced into everyday community life and monastic experience in order to adapt practices to the patristic model. One of the first changes was the geographical and social retreat. The case of *El Siambón* had already shown a tendency in that direction. In this sense, and as a consequence of social retraction, ministerial activities were directly affected. The community of Tucumán that came out of *Niño Dios* had begun its mission in 1956 with a serious purpose of developing a life consecrated to withdrawal in the hills of the wilderness. The choice of location by the pioneer group was clearly governed by this particular logic. It would, according to the former entrepreneurs, allow monastic contemplation in the right way envisaged in St Benedict's *ora et labora* which, as a result of apostolic responsibilities in Victoria, was critically compromised. The same happened with the community of Buenos Aires. There, Benedictines were immersed in a multiplicity of activities related to the diffusion of liturgy and Gregorian chant and the creation and management of pious associations. Reinforcing this scenario, the *Santo Cristo* Chapel of

[30]Ibid., 2.
[31]Ricoeur, *Freud*.
[32]Hervieu-Léger, 'Catolicismo', 13 (my translation).
[33]Ibid. With a similar meaning, Castoriadis mentioned the importance of social and historical conditions in relation to the practicable and thinkable in a given society. See note 24.

St Benedict's Monastery had been designated a parish by the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires in order to strengthen its ministerial mission.

The results of this retreat from society were reflected, firstly, in the sociability of religious communities: external social relationships started to be a cause for concern. In general, with the exception of *El Siambón*, this did not happen in other groups until the close of Vatican II. For this reason, *El Siambón* was completely exploratory in a line of religious life that was still immature for the Benedictine experience in Hispanic America. On the other hand, in 1968, the Swiss monastery of *Los Toldos* initiated a series of reforms. Among these, it is worth mentioning the suspension of its activities in the administration of the rural school that, originally, was the reason for its coming to Argentina. Similarly, in the case of Victoria, the historical weight of ministerial occupations in the diocese made the changes to the patristic model of monasticism slower than in any other monastery. Inexorably, however, during the 1980s, *Niño Dios* stopped practices allied to ministry: it withdrew from parishes historically attended by priest monks of the abbey and relocated the diocesan secular seminary, which had operated until then in the building of the monastery. In line with this, Buenos Aires also experimented with radical changes. Under the leadership of its first Argentinean superior, it was transplanted in 1973 to the countryside in order to inaugurate a monastic life in the retreat of a rural area, leaving behind the Federal District. Thus, the monks of St Benedict's Abbey ended an extended network of social relationships connected with other activities – the supervision of lay associations, ministerial occupations and the diffusion of liturgy (which had made them famous in different sectors of Buenos Aires). These activities were definitely over. At this stage, in the late 1970s, the emphasis on the Desert Fathers' experience was totally confirmed and consensually adopted by many Benedictines in Hispanic America. Affirming this fact in 1976, a new community, coming this time from *El Siambón*, launched a comparable monastic project, showing the religious interests of the native-born monks. The foundation of the monastery of *Nuestra Señora de la Paz* (Our Lady of Peace) was the result.

Besides this – and no less significantly – the strategy of social retraction had effects on the structural *locus* of monastic communities within episcopal jurisdiction. By leaving parochial ministry, monks also distanced themselves from the secular clergy. As a product of such a re-accommodation, religious men were relocated to a marginal position in the whole sphere of Catholicism. In sum, it was withdrawal that governed the rationale of the system of monks' religious practices and representations and, which brought about transformations in each particular sphere of monastic activity. Consequently, this did not only involve a geographical retreat but a social one, which must be seen in connection with a world of symbolic representations. In this sense, the progressive installation of a new sociability, from then onwards set a new religious experience that aimed to reproduce – though not in full – some aspects of the life of the desert anchorites. In spite of that, contemporary Benedictines are certainly very different from those 'holy men'.[34] It is also true that the situation of retreat and liminality of the monastic groups dominates the current *patristic monastic model* and finds, in those primitive monks, its symbolic inspiration.

Conclusion

Post-Vatican II Benedictines adopted their contemporary *habitus* progressively. The changes introduced in terms of retreat, sociability, abandonment of ministerial and

[34]Brown, 'Rise and Function'.

apostolic occupations, were mostly the product of the native-born generations of monks rather than of the European pioneers. This was not completely random. Before the Council's requests for updating and renewal, there already existed an interest in developing a religious life that was more 'monastic' and, accordingly, less compromised with the kind of pastoral activities hitherto undertaken by Benedictines of European origin. The ministerial character of their work had not distinguished monks either from secular clergy or from other non-contemplative orders. The initial dependence on the diocesan hierarchy, primarily manifested in demands for parochial involvement, was progressively undermined in order to reinforce the monasteries autonomy in the social creation of their own religious experience. As I have argued in this article, the principal innovation was focused on the accentuation of common life in the countryside, which worked symbolically as a metaphor of the desert. This communitarian religiosity in the wilderness, previously unthinkable, was then widely favoured by restricted social contact. Thus, the model of this social and symbolic construction was found in the primitive coenobitics.

The heroic and mythical times of former Christian ascetics became the motive of interest for Latin American Benedictines, who thereby initiated an exploration and interpretation of their history, theology and spirituality. Fundamentally, however, they sought to imagine how such experience might be brought to Latin America. This process was later stimulated and legitimated by the proposals in *Perfectae Caritatis* for the renewal of religious orders and congregations. In the search for updating and adaptation to the times, according to the charisma of both mythical founders and institutional traditions, new meanings of the past unfolded. This decree mentioned the 'sources', 'traditions' and 'primitive inspiration' of consecrated institutes and orders in an 'objective' fashion, as if they were simply there to be taken and practiced. They were, nevertheless, 'imagined' on the basis of local hermeneutics. This had effects on the identity of monastic groups as well as on their systems of practice and representation.

In this process, religious experience was made paramount. This was achieved by taking the 'traditional' monastic retreat as pivot of the whole change. Thus, through a pragmatic rediscovery of the myth of the desert, the imagined present is intrinsically linked to what happened in mythical times by establishing some continuity with that past. In summary, the creation of Hispanic American monasticism in its contemporary expression is a recent product of the imagination of actors who envisioned the past and present of monastic communities in a creative reinvention of patristic spirituality. Nowadays, this direction seems to harmonise with the dominant conservatism in the Roman Catholic Church.

Acknowledgements

This article is the result of doctoral research in the field of social anthropology on changes in the religious experience of monastic communities in Argentina. More broadly, it is related to a project on contemporary Catholicism in Latin America. The investigation was carried out with the help of a doctoral fellowship from the University of Buenos Aires, and financial support for fieldwork was given by the National Agency for Technological and Scientific Promotion and Innovation (PICT 14274). The author is grateful to those who reviewed the article before publication, enabling him to improve the presentation of its argument and to include new insights.

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