

FROM TOTAL INSTITUTION TO EXTITUTION?

Discussions on the future of monastic life in the Benedictine women's monasteries of Catalonia (Spain)

¿DE LA INSTITUCIÓN TOTAL A LA EXTITUCIÓN?

Debate sobre el futuro de la vida monástica en los monasterios benedictinos de mujeres en Cataluña (España)

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ABSTRACT

On the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Federation of Benedictine Women's Monasteries of Catalonia (Spain), the five monasteries represented are discussing the following question: what will monastic life be like in the future? This question is added to the debate about "new forms of monasticism", "urban monastic life" and, in a more general sense, to the modernisations and "the opening up" of the precepts and practices of monastic life at this time. Faced with the ambitious monastic questioning, the author responds with five deliberately provocative debates developed out of a consideration of various chapters of the Rule of St. Benedict that raise profound questions when it comes to responding to the question presented here. Having described these five debates, by way of a summary, the article presents three ideal types of monastery in relation to the current processes of deinstitutionalisation that represent, in an overall way, three provisional responses and serve as a focus for the question discussed here.

KEYWORDS

Deinstitutionalisation; Extitution; Monastic life; Rule of Saint Benedict; Total institution.

RESUMEN

Con motivo del 50 aniversario de la creación de la Federación de Monasterios Benedictinos de Cataluña, los cinco monasterios miembros se plantean la siguiente pregunta: ¿cómo será la vida monacal en el futuro? Esta cuestión se enmarca en los debates sobre las "nuevas formas de monaquismo", "monaquismo urbano", y, de forma más general, en la puesta al día de los preceptos y las prácticas de la vida monástica hoy. Ante la ambiciosa pregunta de los monasterios, el autor responde con cinco debates que se desarrollan partiendo de la Regla de San Benito. Estos cinco debates propuestos a las comunidades monásticas en una metodología cercana a la investigación —acción, desembocan a modo de resumen en la propuesta de tres modelos ideales de vida monástica en relación con los procesos de desinstitucionalización y extitucionalización que viven los mismos. Estos tres modelos ideales representan la respuesta provisional a los debates y a la vez son un nuevo punto de partida del debate con los monasterios sobre su realidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Desinstitucionalización; Extitucionalización; Institución total; Regla de San Benito; Vida monástica.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Western Catholic world many of the monasteries that attempted to open themselves up in line with the “signs of the times” promulgated by the Second Vatican Council have ended up either closing because of a lack of vocations amongst the young, or returning, in some way or another, to a more traditional monastic lifestyle. In Catalonia (Spain), in contrast, some of the Benedictine women’s monasteries seem to have not only not followed this trend, but have even inverted it. In their attempts to strengthen their progress towards openness, dialogue with the world and reading the “signs if the times”, they have managed, in some cases, to attract an important number of new novices, a social and media presence that is both significant and positive and enjoys an unusual level of public visibility. One sign of this vitality and forward-looking vision is the decision, taken to mark the 50th anniversary of the Federation of Benedictine Women’s Monasteries of Catalonia, to promote a debate, both internally and externally, about the future of monastic life and the closely related questions: what is a nun, and what should a nun be in the 21st century? The author of this paper was one of those invited to take part in this debate.

Concepts

Throughout the ages, all social institutions have undergone processes of greater or lesser structuration, of more or less flexibility —processes that may be more focussed on the institution itself, or may be more attentive to the “exterior”. Thus, families, the school system, churches and other religious organisations have all passed through stages of greater or lesser institutionalisation and periods of deinstitutionalisation and crisis that have, in turn, paved the way for the introduction and incorporation of new guidelines, relations, and practical and theoretical coordinates. One of the most significant “total institutions” (Goffman 1970), the monastery, has begun a process of transformation and debate that, in my opinion, is distancing it further and further from the model Goffman described: (1970:13) “*a place of residence and work where an important number of individuals in the same situation, isolated from society for a significant period of time, share within their closure a daily routine that is formally administered*”. Institutions in general (whether schools, families or monasteries) might be defined as those intermediaries (Berger and Luckmann 1995) that are capable of transforming dominant social values into norms and socialising people into accepting and internalising them. A “total institution” would then be one which has the capacity to transmit its attitudes, values and norms

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to its adult members in a more powerful, effective and all-encompassing way. However, following Dubet (2002), we know that the arrival of the “second modernity” (Beck 1992) or “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000) is profoundly transforming the life of all institutions, pushing them towards a process of “deinstitutionalisation”. This latter process is understood here as being a profound shift that involves both socialisers and socialised becoming aware that the values and norms to be transmitted, and the ways of doing so, are socially constructed conventions and, as such, are open to debate and change. As a result, the nature and contents of the socialisation process, the agents responsible for it, and the institutions themselves have all been subject to a profound transformation, with the resulting institutions being more reflective, more democratic, more horizontal and, as a consequence, more fragile.

While going through this process of deinstitutionalisation, all contemporary institutions (schools, families, monasteries, etc.) are therefore simultaneously searching for new ways of working that will allow them to continue to exist (re-institutionalisation). Faced with the need to continue functioning as spaces for the (re)production of attitudes, values and norms, institutions are forced to choose between two options: that of returning to a model that is more closed, traditional, hierarchical and safe; or of advancing towards a new model that is even more open, horizontal, reflective and which is connected to the outside world through some form of network. This latter option has been termed “extitution” by Michel Serres (1994). While this concept will be dealt with more extensively in section 2.2, at this point it might be worth clarifying that if an institution is a space, a building, a time and a set of homogenous and shared values, an extitution is a new form of relation based on heterogeneous connections. That is, for an institution to be understood as an extitution is to conceive of it as a set of diverse individuals who, without any form of external coercion, choose to work together of their own free will, being connected through some form of network.

Debates

The question “who is a nun?” reappears when the traditional institutional, cognitive, symbolic, religious and normative frameworks are subject to intense questioning. Given this context, this article first describes the five debates presented to the Benedictine women’s monasteries in the attempt to respond to the question “What will monastic life be like in the future?” To do so, we go back, paradoxically, to the origins of European monastic life: the Rule of St. Benedict (6th century). Thus, various Chapters of the Rule form the basis for the debates which aim to respond to the question about the future of monastic life. Secondly, an analytical model is proposed in an attempt to provide a broader and deeper understanding of the transition being experienced by these monasteries which, we believe, are moving from total institutions to extitutions; each at a different stage, moment and process of deinstitutionalisation and re-institutionalisation. The article finishes with some brief conclusions regarding the process and the results of the analysis from the perspective of the Sociology of Knowledge. Before moving on to the debates, it

should be made clear that both the work done with the monasteries and this article are very much *work in progress* and are materials that are merely “an initial approximation” for further debate and provisional reflection.

I would like to make two very brief notes before beginning the article as such: firstly, the origin of the debate explored here and, secondly, my position, perspective and prejudices with respect to monastic life.

Various people of differing backgrounds, including the author, were invited to participate in a process of discussion and debate around a question posed by the abbesses of the five Benedictine women’s monasteries in Catalonia: “What will monastic life be like in the future?” The response of this author was based on information gathered using ethnographic techniques from the various monasteries. Having presented the results in writing, the abbesses requested three meetings with the author at which they were present together with other nuns. The aim of these meetings, which took the form of group discussions, was to explore the author’s response in greater depth. Finally, the results obtained from this process were shared with the abbesses, and commented on by two experts in monastic life.

The description of the author’s response is structured around five debates or discussions. This has led to the development of three ideal types of monastic institution that include a series of analytical dimensions reflected in the questions themselves, always recognising that all ideal types are heuristic concepts that attempt to capture the “essence” of an empirical case. The underlying perspective that informs these debates about the present and future of monastic life is that of the Sociology of Knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and is based on the author’s knowledge of life within these five monasteries. This knowledge is the result of the friendship I have maintained for more than 15 years with the Benedictines of Montserrat (both men and women), while my own pre-judgements (my prejudices) about monastic life reflect this proximity and the possibility of “intellectualising” the experiences I have shared with the monks and nuns. Finally, I would like to make it clear that, like Estruch (1995), I do not consider monastic life to be a throwback to the past with little if any future, but rather something that, while unfailingly reflecting aspects, trends and realities of “secular” society, is also becoming an excellent laboratory for testing out new forms and practices of religious and community life.

FIVE DEBATES FOR RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF BENEDICTINE MONASTIC LIFE

The debates proposed in the Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries centre around different chapters of the monastic Rule of St. Benedict. The Rule, believed to have been drawn up by the Benedict of Núrsia in the mid-6th century (534-550 approx.), formed the cornerstone of the whole western monastic movement based on peace (*pax*), prayer and work (*ora et labora*). The Rule is addressed principally to novices and aims to establish the basis for a solidly constructed community life under the authority of a Father or Mother who is both a spiritual and organisational guide. It is organised into 73 chapters, most of

which are very short (1-2 pages), which contain exhortations of a practical, organisational and spiritual nature for the monks or nuns who wish to live a simple life in a community organised and guided by an abbot or abbess. Taking this root, then, as our starting point, let us examine the debates regarding the future of the “branches” of the monastic tree.

Debate 1: Homogeneity vs. heterogeneity. “Whether All Should Receive in Equal Measure What Is Necessary” (Chapter 34)

In this chapter, the Rule presents a first debate, and one that has important consequences for monasteries given that, for decades, they functioned as “total institutions”, with all that implies. The question is, then, whether it is necessary that all the nuns undertake all the activities in the same place and in the same way. Is it necessary that work and prayers are always performed in the same way, by the same group of people, at the same times? Do all those who enter the monastery (novices) have to follow the same process of “subjectification” (Foucault 1975) or “re-socialisation” (Berger and Luckmann 1966)? Does the model of order and government have to continue to be that of collective and mutual vigilance in all places and at all times as in a total institution? The Rule speaks of “what is necessary” but, in the early 21st century, what is “necessary”? What is not necessary? How should the debate be formulated between this chapter and other parts of the Rule that appear to display a greater respect for diversity?

The marked process of deinstitutionalisation experienced by the Catholic Church as a whole (Dubet and Martucelli 1998; Hervieu-Léger 2003) has also affected monasteries (Goddijn 1965). The historical circumstances pertaining to Spain, specifically the Franco dictatorship, have meant that this deinstitutionalisation has taken place in the country at a faster pace. Indeed, the profound social and religious changes that occurred in other European countries over a period of 50 or 60 years, have taken place in Spain in little more than 20 years. Such changes include the drastic decline in the numbers of practising Catholics who have become a “cognitive minority” (Berger 1992); the loss of the political, social and cultural centrality of the monasteries, especially in Catalonia; the steady aging of monks and nuns with few new novices entering the orders; and the privatisation of religion. All these factors have placed the Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries in a new context. A new social and religious context that celebrates diversity and holds that the free construction of personal identity is the central task of the individual (Luckmann 1967; Bauman 2004) is a context that inevitably comes into confrontation with institutions such as the monasteries, which until the 70s and 80s were very close to Goffmann’s paradigm of “total institutions”. Over the last few years it is precisely these total monasteries that have undergone the greatest processes of deinstitutionalisation, and as a result, are now searching for new forms, practices, discourses and relations in order to re-institutionalise female monastic life on the basis of alternative assumptions. However, this desire to re-construct, re-form, and re-practice the idea of “being a nun” in the 21st century necessarily involves attempting to resolve the tension between those elements of the Rule that invoke tradition and habit —both “personal” (profiles, tasks,

itineraries) and structural (space, time, authority) (Chaves 1997), and the admonitions the Rule contains that make respecting and caring for diversity their maxim. Thus, we have here the first debate between the pole of homogeneity and that of heterogeneity in the practices, itineraries and connections between the nuns and the monasteries themselves.

Debate 2: The monastery as a physical vs. a symbolic space. “On the Brethren Who are Working Far from the Oratory or Are on a Journey” (Chapter 50)

In Chapter 50, the Rule establishes what members of the Order should do, and in what way, when they are not present in the monastery. Fifteen hundred years after these words were written, when monasteries now own cars and use them every day for journeys to and from work or studies, visits to the doctor, for routine administrative tasks, or to visit families; when monasteries have much-visited web pages; when monasteries have nuns away from “home” for months and/or years for work or training and all of this is completely “normal”, what sense do the words of the Rule make? What “stability” is there? We might ask if the monastery is (only) a place, or rather whether it is (fundamentally) an attitude towards life? Is a nun the inhabitant of a monastery, or is she a person who has taken decisions about her life that are connected with both a community and with the transcendental? Is it possible to be a nun (in the full sense of the term) outside the monastery? Is it possible to be a “semi-nun”, that is, without having taken all the vows, or, specifically, without taking the vow of stability?

In this debate we encounter the concepts of *extitutions* as described earlier (Serres 1994; Tirado and Domènech 2001) and *networks* (Castells 1996) which lead us to consider monastic structures and forms of organisation that differ from the traditional ones. On the one hand, Michel Serres, when analysing how institutions work within modernity, and in order to explain the shift from centripetal to centrifugal forces within them, proposes the term *extitution*. This concept might be defined as the result, following a process of deinstitutionalisation, of an attempt by an institution to organise its re-institutionalisation on the basis of the idea, form and connections of a network. Thus we might say that it transforms itself into an extitution. That is, an institution that has no ‘inside’ or ‘outside’; one in which its members are all connected with each other, with the connections being of different intensity and duration, and in which movement and displacement are no longer penalised as they were in the institution (Foucault 1975:221). In an extitution, the bond, stability, can also be lived in movement, with openness, diversity of status and location, etc., and the elements of control operate precisely through the permanent connections the network permits.

This control is increasingly exercised through the symbolic dimension rather than the disciplinarian dimension of authority (Estruch 1995). It is in precisely this symbolic dimension that authority takes the form of a “case manager”¹, offering personalised attention

¹ The “case manager” is a way of organising work that is quite widespread in the health and social services

to the individual and personal implication in the shared project, etc. This kind of authority runs directly counter to the way in which power is exercised in total institutions; a power which requires homogeneity of space, time and itineraries and depends on discipline and its unquestioning acceptance. As examples of extitutions, we might cite online universities, tele-assistance services or the anklets and bracelets worn by prisoners on parole. In all these cases it is the institution that changes its “texture and form” to become a centrifugal network that maintains its links through a personalised, diversified and concrete connection, rather than through the traditional means of homogeneity, stability and shared time, space, tasks, etc.

Applying the concept of extitution to the Benedictine women’s monasteries, we can see that they are, and have been for many years now, “networked monasteries”. That is, they already have an important network of links and friendships that mean that the monastery is not bounded by its four walls; walls that, since these powerful webs of contacts have been developed, have less and less of a structuring function. But the question posed by Chapter 50 of the Rule is whether it might not be possible to go one step further and construct a “monastery as a network” that incorporates all those who “are monastery” but who do not live there permanently: nuns who are travelling, nuns who work or study outside the monastery itself, lay members (in the style of the Third Orders), families, etc. Thus, returning again to elements of the first debate, the debate centres on whether it would be plausible for the abbess and her team to be the “central node” of a network that, rather than dealing with homogeneous and unique itineraries, spaces, time and tasks, are instead responsible for overseeing the process of “becoming and living as or like a nun” in an individualised way, like that of a “case manager”?

It should not be overlooked, however, that this vision of the Benedictine women’s monasteries as extitutions, as networks, may come into conflict with a warning set out in the first chapter of the Rule: that of the danger of the “Gyrovagues” or vagabonds (*gyrovagum*). Here the Rule identifies a type of monk or nun, the “Gyrovague”, who is always on the move, is never still, who does not commit him/herself to any monastery, who has no stability and who, as a result, will never be able to become a “real” monk or nun. St Benedict, with this point, warns of the importance, when becoming a nun, of stability, of limits, order, and the rhythm of a regulated life, of not becoming “*monos*”, that is, singular and alone. Stability, a rhythm, a bond implies being rooted in a community, a setting, a country, hence the debate and the contraposition of a model that sees the monastery as a physical space, as an institution, and one in which monastic life is considered more as a symbolic space; as an extitution that articulates a network of people with diverse intensities, locations and itineraries.

in which a single professional takes on the role of accompanying and managing a case. This person who accompanies or manages the case centralises all the information about the patient or user, makes relevant referrals, guides them through the bureaucratic procedures, etc.

Debate 3: The monastery receives lay members vs. the lay members receive nuns. “On the Reception of Guests” (Chapter 53).

Throughout the monastic tradition that dates back to St. Benedict, “welcoming the stranger as if he were Christ” has been one of its strongest defining characteristics. However, while it is true that the hospices of the Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries are places that accommodate a far from negligible number of people, groups and gatherings during the year, the question posed here is whether it is possible to conceive of a “society” that also takes in nuns? By “society”, I refer here to the individuals, families and lay Christian communities found outside the monasteries. Thus, the question involves rethinking not only the idea of “open monasteries” that welcome families, lay persons, etc., but, above all, the idea of exploring the notion of the “monastery as a network” that includes those lay people and families who live in towns and cities. In this notion of “monastery as network” we are explicitly leaving aside the work historically done by monasteries located in urban settings. Some of these have strong bonds with the surrounding urban area; an element that has most clearly marked their “character” and particular nature. However, the idea of the “monastery as network” does not refer so much to monasteries in cities as to the presence of nuns and the monastery itself within everyday secular urban life.

The idea underlying this proposal was expressed by Raimon Panikkar (1984) in his book *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as a Universal Archetype*. Every person has within them a transcendental dimension and becoming a monk or nun is “just” one of the forms this dimension might take. Thus, the challenge posed by Panikkar is how to live this transcendental dimension that all humans share “in the midst of the world”, how to develop a “monastic life” outside the monasteries. In the face of this challenge, the notion of the “monastery as network” might be considered as involving the (temporary) presence of nuns living in flats and houses in towns and cities in order to promote and accompany the processes of developing the transcendental dimension of people, families, groups and urban communities.

Despite still being a relatively unknown phenomenon, we can now draw on several reflections and significant pieces of research that describe the new organisational forms of monastic communities and the practices of the so-called “new urban monasticism”² that have taken root in various European countries since the 80s and 90s (Hervieu-Léger 2003; Landron 2004; Wittberg 2006; Palmisano 2007; Oviedo 2008; amongst others). In these experiences, the changes regarding the definition of mission, the role of the

² See, for example, the “New Monasticism Network: A network of ecclesial communities arising out of contextual mission” <http://new-monasticism-network.ning.com> (20/07/2010); Urban monasticism <http://tribes.tribe.net/urbanmonk> (20/07/2010); the Fraternité Saint-Paul (Marseilles) <http://frat.st.paul.pagesperso-orange.fr/> (23/07/10); The Simple way (USA) www.thesimpleway.org (23/07/10) with its “12 marks of new monasticism”; the Fraternità Apostolica Diocesana (Turin), etc.

Rule, the organisation, the resources and their connection with the official churches are diverse and of a varying degree. However, there is a shared idea underlying them all: the need to update the intuition of the founders of the different monastic orders to reflect the realities of present-day society. Returning to Weber's definition of the monastery as a place of asceticism (prayer, meditation and silence) and as a space "outside the world", our case leads us to frame the debate about whether it is possible to construct a "monastery as network" which, by combining the continuous, discontinuous or virtual presence of nuns in towns and cities, is capable of accompanying the development of the transcendental dimension of individuals, families and groups.

The hermitic vocation has always existed amongst the men and women who have lived in monasteries. Now we might ask whether, apart from this hermitic vocation, there are also women amongst the nuns of the Catalan Benedictine women's monasteries with an "urban vocation", with a vocation to live on the physical and symbolic "frontiers" of our time (Calsina 2009), with a vocation to constantly interrogate and question their urban surroundings. For many years now there have been lay people who have connections with the monasteries, who make regular stays there, who are accompanied on their spiritual journey by a nun, people who establish profound relations with the spirituality of the order, but what about inverting this idea? This third debate questions whether it might not be possible for there to be nuns with links (of different temporal and spatial kinds) with the city (whether or not the monastery is situated in an urban setting) who would build a "monastery as network" through "urban missions" and who would aim to accompany lay people in their process and in their desire to be "monks/nuns in the world" (Panikkar 1984). Would this then allow them to go beyond the search for oneness (*monos*) and the personal experience that "everything is holy" in the monastery and reach out from within this "holy unity" to the urban world?

Debate 4: Being a nun as an absolute category vs. a relative category. "On the Manner of Receiving Sisters" (Chapter 58)

Chapter 58 of the Rule sets out the itinerary nuns should follow from their first visit to the monastery to their taking of solemn vows. Given the nature of this process, it seems clear that one is either a nun, or one is not. Thus, nun and monk are absolute categories: either you are one, or you are not. In this fourth debate, we might raise the possibility of creating "degrees of nunhood", that is, to "grade" this category according to different stages (progression), states (categories), etc. Hence, we might imagine a "full" nun; a "temporary" nun; an "urban" nun; a "lay" nun; a "thematic" nun, etc. It is true that this would not be a complete novelty. Both within and outside Catholicism, and Christianity in general, there are experiences in which the dualism of being or not being a nun has been broken and, albeit timidly, a range of ways of "being a nun" has been opened up. However, to go from this to raising the possibility of there being, in a structured and established way, different ways of "being a nun", and that there would be connections, paths, and traceability between them, is quite a different matter.

This debate about the future of Catalan Benedictine women's monasticism proposes exploring Panikkar's intuition (1984) further: everyone has a transcendental dimension to be developed and, hence, everyone is a "potential" monk or nun. However, the circumstances of life and personal choices mean that many people remain outside the category of "absolute monk/nun". On the other hand, if the institution were to contemplate different times, spaces, itineraries or intensities of "being a monk/nun", it is possible that many more people would find this an attractive option. And this without concealing the complexity of issues of legitimacy, or the organisational, spiritual and emotional difficulties that this, like the other debates presented here, would involve.

The figure of "full nun" would be the "total" option; dedicating one's time, space and whole life to the monastery, taking all the relevant vows (stability, shared life, obedience to the Rule, and to the abbess), and committing oneself unconditionally to the community, to silence and to poverty in an absolute and permanent way. The figure of a "temporary" nun might involve a pre-established itinerary that would have a starting point and an end, and those who take this option might have a differentiated status within the community. Options might, for example, be for one year ("learning the monastic life"); three or five years ("deeper knowledge of monastic life"), etc. Some of the objectives of this form of nunhood might involve, through monastic experience, developing the transcendental dimension, learning about communal life, or deepening biblical, theological or exegetic knowledge. The figure of the "urban nun" might have two forms: a first one, connected to the debate about the "monastery as network", would involve a nun ("full" or not) from the monastery who voluntarily offers support to people, families and groups in a town or city through her continuous, discontinuous and/or virtual presence. The second, the "lay nun", along the lines of the Third Orders, might be a lay person from an urban context who decides to adopt the tenets of monastic spirituality, building links to the monastery through prayer, visits, training, readings or social projects and in some cases might take some of the vows (consecrated lay people).

Finally, the figure of the "thematic nun" might cover those who incorporate some of the elements of monastic life into their everyday, lay existence: prayer, liturgy, silence, etc., and who build a particular relationship with the monastery in order to share and work on these elements, without necessarily incorporating any of the other aspects of monastic life. These suggestions, offered merely as possible examples, bring the presentation of this fourth debate to an end; a debate that questions the idea that the only way of becoming a nun is to pursue the "complete" form of nunhood and raises the possibility of drawing on other religious experiences and traditions to explore new ways of being a nun.

Debate 5: A detailed Rule vs. a minimal Rule. "Concerning the Fact That Not Every Just Observance is Decreed in This Rule" (Chapter 73)

The final chapter of the Rule introduces an element of openness when it says that "not every just observance is decreed in this Rule". In this sense, the Benedict of Nursia

suggests that the 73 chapters comprise only a “minimum Rule” which, through its observance, would enable people to move towards God. This interesting idea of a “minimal Rule” introduces a crucial debate that every institution has to confront: how to ensure that its members share its values, practices, ideas, forms, its “style”. A monastery cannot avoid organisational debates of this kind, with all their implications for managing information and knowledge, hierarchical structuring, processes, governance, itineraries, etc. *De jure*, the Rule of St. Benedict is quite clear on this point: it establishes the idea of the “minimal Rule”. Yet, at the same time, some points of the Rule itself, combined with the weight of centuries of tradition, have meant that, *de facto*, the norms, roles and structures of the Benedictine monasteries are more important in number and exigency than might at first appear. Faced with this reality, and the explicit wish of the abbesses of the monasteries to move towards regulatory simplicity, a classic organisational debate arises: how can cohesion, values, style, ideas; in short, a shared identity, be maintained in a context that is moving (or wants to move) towards a “minimal Rule”?

Niklas Luhmann (1996) presents the idea that the various sub-systems (work areas, or human groups of any other kind) within any system (in this case, the monastery) have a “natural” tendency to work in parallel to closure³. Each sub-system, through its own functioning, tends to cut itself off and generate a “culture” (values, practices, or style) of its own that might, for various reasons, lead it to move away from any transversal measures proposed for the monastery as a whole. Such reasons might include ignorance of this common proposal and/or of the other sub-systems though this may occasionally occur out of mistrust. However, the most frequent cause is the existence of an inertia, an everyday rhythm, that leads each subgroup, work area, etc. to adopt norms, habits, or values that are not fully coherent, thereby generating dysfunctions, incoherencies or mistrust.

Faced with this “natural” tendency of the various sub-systems of a monastery to evolve towards a way of working that is parallel, isolated and self-centred, the monastery, as an organisation, has to consider how to make the wish for a “minimal Rule” compatible with transversal notions that offer cohesion, coherence and a transversal character to the overall aims of this minimal regulation. Organisational sociology offers two types of strategies in this situation: “hard” strategies and “soft” strategies (Longo and Ysa 2007).

By a “hard” strategy we understand a focus on working and developing the “structural” elements of the monastery: changes in the organisational structure, the creation of “commissions” of figures who are charged with working to promote overall coherence, etc. In some way, given the wish for a minimal Rule and for the maintenance of an identity, shared values and cohesion, the “hard” strategy requires a clearly established hierarchy, clearly defined spaces for coordination that everyone participates in, and commissions

³This is what Luhmann describes based on two of his best-known concepts: that systems are autopoietic and self-referential.

that work to maintain this identity. That is, the creation of a structure that enables the overall coherence of the monastery to be sustained. The “soft” strategy has the same aim but takes the opposite path to achieve it. Rather than focusing on the structural dimensions, this strategy works through training and knowledge to generate cohesion and the desired identity of conceptions, values, perceptions and practices of all the nuns in the monastery. It is evident that, on a practical level, these two strategies are not incompatible and that, on a theoretical level, they are ideal types. However, it is no less true that, in every organisation, the decision to adopt one or another of these ways of building an identity, as shared and internalised as possible, has consequences on a day-to-day level —consequences that are at the heart of this fifth and final debate which sets out to ‘respond’ to the question regarding the nature of monastic life in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

Let me now move on to present some brief conclusions regarding these five debates. Before I do so, however, allow me to make two preliminary observations. The first is that, obviously, all five, and the ideas that flow from them, are the result of a deliberate exercise in “intellectual provocation”, openness and provisional reflection, and are presented here in the hope that they will serve as a stimulus to the opening up of discussion and the questioning of the postulates themselves. Secondly, each of the monasteries participating in this process of debates and questioning will naturally respond differently, and will only reflect on those ideas that are of significance to them. Having made these observations, let me move on to examine in more detail the three most important axes of discussion in the five debates presented in the form of conclusions.

a) The first conclusion is that the debates presented here are intimately bound up with monastic and academic questions that have been under discussion for some years now regarding the form, texture and daily practice of institutions in general, and of religious institutions in particular. In the words of Dubet (2002), institutions are no longer spaces that embody great values (be they social or religious) and that socialise people (or re-socialise in the case of the monasteries) in precisely these values. Going back to Berger and Luckmann (1995), we might ask whether monasteries are (still) “medium-sized institutions” that are capable of mediating between society and the individual, conferring meaning on life itself. Thus, the first of the transversal debates revolves around what is, and secondly, what should be, the organisational, cultural, spatial, temporal, relational and governmental structure of the monastery, the “*grammar*” (to re-interpret Tyack and Tobin’s concept of “grammar” of schooling 1994) of Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries of today? What forms of re-institutionalisation might seem most plausible in the light of the deinstitutionalising movement of the 70s, 80s and 90s? What physical and symbolic boundaries (inside-outside), and limits to belonging, should the monastery establish?

As mentioned above, these debates are not new in Catholicism, or in the other Christian churches. Throughout the 20th century, and especially after the Second Vatican Council, Catholic religious orders and monasteries have become places of debate, reflection and thought that have questioned the “grammar of monasteries” and their meaning in the contemporary world. One of the writers to have most openly confronted these debates is the American Benedictine nun Joan Chittister from the Erie monastery of Pennsylvania. Drawing selectively on her personal experience as a Benedictine, Chittister has risen to the challenge of thinking and “practising” monastic life, particularly in women’s monasteries. Thus, both the initial question, and the debates presented here, connect with a preoccupation with the future of monastic life that has been present in monasteries for several decades now.

b) The second of the conclusions, understood as transversal axes of questioning, connects with the debate about what it is to be a nun today, and what it means. For some years now, the notion of identities understood as coherent, global, stable and permanent constructs has been called into doubt. This general questioning has been based on concepts like the “saturated self” (Gergen 1992), multiple identities (Maffesoli 2004), etc. In all these cases, the “falseness” and “mythological” nature of the modern self (conscious, rational, powerful) is contrasted with the fragmentation and weakness of this self that, in reality, is often overwhelmed by both the social structures that run through it and by the personal emotions that dominate it (Goleman 1995), etc. On a religious level, there are even those who have provocatively spoken of a new “regime of religious truth” —subjective truth (Hervieu-Léger 1999)— in order to highlight the way we live new forms of belonging and new practices in the religious field. Then, given this context, what model of “identity” might be proposed for Benedictine monastic life? In what terms might belonging to the monastery be framed? What might be involved in the everyday life, role, habit, and “job” of being a nun? How, in today’s world, might this “identity” and this form of “monastic practice” fit with the bonds that connect the person with their biological family, their work and/or studies, their social relationships, and so on?

c) Thirdly, and finally, the question the Benedictine Sisters have bravely and boldly asked is closely bound up with the whole debate about “the role” of religion and/or transcendence in today’s world. Their question, undoubtedly, is connected with others of a more general nature that might include: What is the future role of institutionalised religion in Catalan and Spanish society? What is the role of the transcendental dimension today, and what role might it play in the future? What social mechanisms will be used to articulate these dimensions? What personal experiences will bind (*re-ligare*) people together in religions and/or spiritual movements? And, on the other hand, given their importance throughout European history and particularly in Catalonia, what role will monasteries, religions and spiritual movements play when it comes to rereading (*re-legere*) and reconstructing the social reality of the present and future?

Closely bound up with these five debates and the three transversal axes of questioning, the “responses” to the question formulated by the Benedictine women’s monasteries necessarily involve opting for one model in the following debate: which model of monastic institution and monastic identity do they wish to choose? In order to present this key debate as clearly as possible, and at the same time, to generate an analytical model that might be extrapolated for use by other monasteries, orders, etc., three forms of monastic life are presented. These three ideal types together form an analytical model that should be capable of both “evaluating” the current situation of a monastic institution in all its multiple dimensions, its “institutional moment”, and of developing normative discussions about what a Benedictine women’s monastery should be like in the mid-21st century.

THE MONASTIC INSTITUTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY. THREE MODELS

Introduction

The analytical model presented here is an exploratory exercise, and one that is still “under construction”. It aims to offer a greater and clearer understanding of the dimensions and ideal types within which monastic life moves. The model has been developed to include a series of dimensions that set out to account for the reality of a monastery in terms of its structure (or “grammar”), culture, relations, and identity. These dimensions are set against three ideal monastic types constructed on the basis of the (ideal) logic these institutions follow: stability, deinstitutionalisation, and re-institutionalisation (extitution).

The first of these corresponds to the model of a classic monastery characterised by Goffman (1970) as a “total institution”. In this model, which has remained stable for many decades, the institution is conceived, lived and “practised” as a global “totality” with few fissures. While this notion of the monastery as a total institution reflects a well known and widely recognisable image, one in which time, space, authority, hierarchies and individual and group itineraries were clear, defined and rationally planned, all in a context of harsh “materiality” and “solid modernity” (Bauman 2000), the ideal types of a “deinstitutionalising institution” and of an “extitution” —an institution that is seeking to re-institutionalise itself along alternative lines— are more difficult to situate. For this reason, before offering some further initial considerations and the table that sets out a comparison of the three ideal types, let me describe these two models a little further.

When speaking of monasteries that are undergoing a process of deinstitutionalisation, I am referring to the impact of the processes that have tended to delegitimise the “total institution” monastery. In Catalonia, and in Spain, the impact of the Second Vatican Council and the revoking of certain “total” practices in (women’s) monasteries —the bars and grilles, the impossibility of stepping outside the walls even to attend the funeral of a relative, the impossibility of anyone from the outside entering or working in the monastery, etc.— did not take effect until the 70s or 80s, and the process of expunging those

elements that became embedded in the monastic world by the effects of the First Vatican Council and Franco's National Catholicism lasted until almost the beginning of the 21st century. Thus, those monasteries which are "deinstitutionalising" might be said to have shed such routines and habits but without having yet addressed the question of how such practices might be reformulated in another way. This has been done, or is being done, by those monasteries that are re-institutionalising themselves in an alternative way, along the lines of an "extitution".

It is evident that, in reality, monastic practices associated with a "total institution", a "deinstitutionalising institution" or an "extitution" often cohabit with each other in a more or less coherent or dissonant way. These three ideal types are being used, then, as analytical tools in the awareness that they are incapable of fully capturing the true reality of life of the monasteries, which is complex and does not neatly coincide with the models. Those monasteries that are re-institutionalising themselves on an alternative basis as "extitutions" have begun to develop ways of "being a nun" that are based on different parameters. For example, nuns spend far more time outside the monastery for work, to look after relatives, to undertake tasks for the monastery, etc., and maintain contact via mobile phone or internet; the monasteries have a constant and habitual presence on the internet through their websites and on social networks; each of the nuns has much stronger links with the social world and, in addition to allowing the "world" into the monastery, the monastery, through its nuns (articles, conferences, public debates, etc.) is increasingly present in the outside world. All of which means that notions of time, space, authority, hierarchies and sources of legitimacy are becoming much softer and more liquid. This alternative form of re-institutionalisation through the adoption of the extitution model offers a glimpse, in the practices being developed, of the metaphor and the working of a network, and this in a context that, until just a few years ago, was best represented by the solidity of a wall.

Before presenting the resulting table, two important considerations should be noted. The first is that in no sense should one or another model be conceived of as "morally" superior. Secondly, it should be understood that while the institution-deinstitutionalisation-re-institutionalisation process is one that many of the monasteries involved in this debate have experienced over the last 30-40 years, this should not be taken to mean that, at some time in the future, the re-institutionalising processes currently taking place might not lead to the development of a new "total" institution or to a process of permanent deinstitutionalisation, or that the reality of each monastery might not involve a combination of elements from all three models in a more or less harmonic way. It is evident that there has been an "evolutionary" dynamic within the monasteries over the last few decades towards forms that are more decivilised (Elias 1987) or informalised (Wouters 2003), and that they have advanced from the "total institution" models of the past to today's processes of deinstitutionalisation and re-institutionalisation. However, this should not be taken to mean that there is a lineal process that all monasteries necessarily have to follow. Further, and most importantly, the question about what models the current re-institutionalising movements will lead to remains open.

Analytical Model

Table 1 sets out eleven analytical dimensions of monasteries against three ideal types of monastic institutions. This is followed by a brief presentation of the results.

Table 1.
Model: Ideal types of monastic institution by analytical dimensions

	Total Institution	Deinstitutionalising Institution	Re-institutionalising Institution (Extitution)
General dynamic	Centripetal	Centripetal, though being questioned	Centrifugal
Space	Inside vs. outside clear and permanent	Inside vs. outside being questioned	Distinction disappears - simultaneously in and out
Time	Single and continuous	Single and continuous though with some breaks	Diverse and discontinuous
Bonds	Monastery forms part of a formal network	Monastery part of formal and informal network	Networked monasteries and monasteries as networks
Government	Hierarchical and pyramidal	Formally hierarchical but more horizontal	Network of control (governance)
Norms	Pre-established (top-down)	Established but simultaneously negotiated	Regularly debated and reconstructed
Control	Direct and explicit	Direct and implicit	Indirect
Novitiate as resocialisation	Total (alternation)	'Strong' resocialisation	Resocialisation
Key value	Obedience	Involvement	Personal experience (liberty)
Role of Monastic Rule	Rule as an absolute value	Rule as guideline	Rule as an inspiration (Minimal Rule)
Overall Model	Total institution	Institution being deinstitutionalised	Re-institutionalising on the basis of extitution

Source: Author

What follows is a very brief presentation of the results obtained by comparing the eleven dimensions with the three ideal types of monastic institution. Firstly, the analysis refers to the “general dynamic” of the monastery. Here, the idea is to respond to the question about where the energies, attention and the lives of the nuns are focussed within the framework of monastic life. It is clear that at the two extremes there is a strongly centripetal or centrifugal dynamic, that is, dynamics that are focussed inwards or outwards. A second key element in understanding the kind of structure, or ideal “grammar”, of the monastery is the conception, and the use, of space—a dimension that is of

key importance in the construction of “us” and “them”. Until a few years ago, the frontiers between inside and outside were clear and very rigid, while now they are the subject of much debate and there might yet be an even clearer move to relativising this boundary when, in an extitution model, the importance of the delimited inner space of the monastery in which to “be a nun” is further reduced. In terms of the structuring of time, the other great defining and socialising agent of the monastery, the shift is evident from a single, continuous notion of time for all nuns, to a time that is lived with some “normalised” discontinuities and with a significant degree of diversity. If we speak of bonds, it should be pointed out that monasteries have always been surrounded by a family, social and ecclesiastical network. The tension in this dimension would be between a monastery with a formal network and one which, in addition to this external support network and bond (from the outside), is also structured around a mesh of connections out towards the wider world (urban monastic life, periods in the city, etc.).

In relation to this structuring, the authority within monasteries also shifts from a model that is clearly hierarchical and pyramidal to one that political science terms “*governance*” or relational government (Messner 1997; Mayntz 1998). This model implies a greater horizontality, the essential involvement of those who are “governed” in the taking of decisions, an important bond with other external bodies, and a breaking with the idea of the pyramid to advance towards the notion of complex, interactive and non-hierarchical government (though who bears the ultimate responsibility and power is not forgotten). This would reflect the debate between the disciplinarian dimension of authority and the symbolic dimension, as described earlier. Closely bound up with the dimension of government, the role of norms also displays two opposing poles: one model in which they are pre-established and another in which they are the object of debate and reconstruction in a “normalised” way. In terms of the dimension of control and adaptation to norms, orthodoxy, and identity itself, a question which exists in every organisation, the direct, explicit model is associated with hierarchical government and rigid, pre-established norms. At the other extreme, there lies an ideal type which incorporates the thesis of self-control and, as a result, each nun becomes her own “guardian” within the framework of a more relational and horizontal system of government, with norms taking the form of guidelines.

In terms of the monastery as a space of resocialisation, there are also three differentiated ideal positions. In the first of these, monastic life is conceived of as a place of alternation, of becoming “another” person: a nun. This model was favoured by the entrance of young novices and by the whole “closed” structure of the total institution model. On the other hand, a monastery that is undergoing deinstitutionalisation, with the entrance of older (more “socialised”) novices and a more open approach, conceives of the novitiate as being largely a process of resocialisation (Berger and Luckmann 1966) that does not involve breaking ties to family, interests and previous studies or the social world. The model of the novitiate in a monastery —extitution— would surely involve an even less intense resocialisation, one that is more partial, and which would involve an evolution rather than a “breaking” with the identity, ties or interests that were developed

during the life prior to entering the monastery. With regard to the socialising dimension of the monastery, when seeking to identify the key “value” in each of the three ideal types, we find that monastic life revolves around obedience in the total institution. In a context of deinstitutionalisation, obedience is important but now also requires the personal involvement of each nun, an involvement that, in the end, will be the factor that allows the nun herself to be the person who freely chooses to remain within the monastic life. Finally, in the extitution model, the key value is the personal experience of God on the understanding that this can only follow if the person has the necessary liberty to experience it. Closely bound up with this notion of key values, the role of the Rule can also be identified in three clearly differentiated ideal models. At one extreme, we find the Rule as an absolute value, as an unquestionable precept whose literal compliance is obligatory. At the other, the Rule becomes a fount of inspiration, a kind of stove on which each nun has to write her own composition (experience) from a position of freedom. In the intermediate model, the Rule is conceived of as a kind of guide that accompanies and marks objectives on the path to being a nun; a path whose observance is the responsibility of each individual.

Finally, by way of a summary, we can observe that the first ideal type responds to that of a *total institution* in its classic definition and practice; a practice which, despite having now completely disappeared from the Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries, is a reference for a time that is still quite recent and, it should not be forgotten, the model into which all those nuns over fifty years old were socialised —precisely those nuns who currently occupy positions of responsibility in the monasteries. The second would attempt to reflect the movements that the Catalan monasteries have made since, more or less, the Second Vatican Council; movements that above all have involved “leaving behind” all those elements that the Tridentine tradition, the counter-modern movements (First Vatican Council), and finally National Catholicism imposed on monasteries, and especially on the women’s monasteries. Thus, the *deinstitutionalising ideal type* represents the effort to do away with all those elements that, like radical closure, did not form part of the Rule and the monastic tradition of the first centuries, but that the three “waves” mentioned above gradually imposed with the passing of time. Finally, we find the *re-institutionalising (extitution) ideal type* which attempts to draw on certain elements that have emerged in the last few decades in order to re-institutionalise the monasteries but following alternative guidelines and models. Hence, having shed certain total institutional elements that did not correspond to the monastic tradition, the monastic orders are asking themselves how to live according to the inspiration of the Rule (minimal Rule), but without ignoring current realities. This questioning, together with processes that are demographic (the aging of the nuns, the fall in the number of vocations, later-life vocations), social (the unattractiveness of “being a nun”), or monastic (in many cases, the monasteries that have most “innovated” their *grammar* are those that attract most vocations), mean that certain elements of the extitution model are coming to be seen as the way to reconstruct (re-institutionalise) the Benedictine women’s monasteries using the different parameters, values, grammars and practices that have been briefly described here with regard to this ideal type.

MODELS AND REALITIES. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE 3 IDEAL TYPES FOR CATALAN MONASTERIES

Before moving to the final conclusions, I would like to return to some of the ideas presented in the introduction and re-examine them in the light of the debates and the analytical model presented here. Firstly, unlike other countries where, in general, the more the monasteries have opened up (through deinstitutionalisation or extitutionalisation), the more swiftly they have declined (very few new vocations, closure of monasteries, etc.), in some of the Catalan monasteries it appears that the contrary has happened. That is, those monasteries that continue to function as total institutions, or that have “merely” become deinstitutionalised, have very elderly populations, with very few younger women entering to take over their running. Such monasteries seem very likely to close in the near future. On the other hand, the monasteries that have undergone the process of deinstitutionalisation in a “positive” way and are actively exploring the extitution route continue to receive new nuns and hence their continuity will be guaranteed at least for the next few decades. Thus the Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries that in recent years have freely and positively chosen to follow the extitution route seem to have managed to break, at least for the moment, the pattern of other countries; the apparent “historical inevitability” that extitution equals extinction. As a possible hypothesis to explain this reality, and as my own provisional response to the question posed by the Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries, I believe that a “liquid monastery” (an extitution) is capable of attracting people who have already been socialised in “liquid” families, schools, friendship networks, universities that are open, free, networked, more horizontal, more democratic, and that have minimal rules. Thus, my hypothesis would be that it is the adaptation of some of the monasteries to the current *zeitgeist* (extitution) by seeking to return to the “simple monastic origins” that has, at the moment, converted them into a pole for attracting new vocations.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

As final conclusions to these provisional reflections, and returning to the question with which this article began —“What will monastic life be like in the future?”— three elements might be mentioned. First, that the mere fact that the five Catalan Benedictine women’s monasteries have generated a debate of this nature is in itself an indication of their vitality and their explicit desire to seek out ways to not only continue with their deinstitutionalisation, but also, and most importantly, to find ways of re-institutionalising themselves based fundamentally on the Gospels and on the (minimal) Rule. The second point to be highlighted is the importance of the debates being opened up and the transcendence they have for the everyday life of the monastery and “nunhood”. Doubtless, the debates that are the “response” to the initial question

represent a highly significant questioning of the very structure, of the grammatical rules of the monastery. Finally, and returning to a reflection already presented here, it should be remembered that, despite the evident evolution of the monasteries in leaving behind the first model and situating themselves in many dimensions in the second and third models, we should be very cautious about drawing lineal and simplistic conclusions and imagining that in 20 years time all the dimensions of the monasteries will respond to the extitution model. As the greats like Weber (1964) or Elias (1987) warned us, neither in the social or the religious spheres are processes lineal, simple and unidirectional. Thus, the most precise answer we can give to the question "What will monastic life be like in the future?" is that, for sure, the current process of deinstitutionalisation in the Catalan Benedictine women's monasteries will advance towards their re-institutionalisation. However, determining what referents, values, practices and grammars will guide this re-institutionalisation, and above all, what forms this process will take, lies more in the realm of futurology than in the sociology of religion.

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