

ARCHITECTURE
OF SILENCE

CISTERCIAN ABBEYS
OF FRANCE

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INTRODUCTION

“Listen, my son,
to your master’s precepts,
and incline the ear
of your heart.”

SO BEGINS THE PROLOGUE to the *Rule* of Saint Benedict, the basis of Cistercian life, and so too the monastic day unfolds inside the abbey in an ambiance of silence and decided purpose. This silence – far from being a void – is a crucible for the multifold activities designed to transform the men and women who lived within the walls so exquisitely captured in these photographs.

To visit a Cistercian abbey is to make a voyage of discovery, but not necessarily a physical voyage. It may be an inward voyage, where one discovers a part of one’s own being, an inner experience from which one seldom returns unaltered. Depending on the investment made by the traveller, it may be a brief and pleasant diversion, or it may invite a change in the direction of one’s life.

These photographs awaken a longing for a quieter, simpler existence. The abbeys seem to grow out of the landscape as though they had always been there, like a waterfall, an old tree, or an arched rock scooped out of a cliff eons earlier. Soft sunlight falling on a doorway, creating a muted shadow, carries the visitor to another time and place. The immediacy of the images makes us want to touch the stone, to run a hand across the

ancient surfaces, angles remarkably fresh, toolmarks still visible. The elusive riverine sites, majestic yet intimate landscapes, and compelling architecture recall a universe where harmony, peace, and balance appear to have been the substance of daily life. It is not difficult to see why Stephen Harding, the third abbot of Cîteaux, was called a “lover of the place.”¹

The indefinable magnetism present here – one might call it the attraction of God – is almost lost on the surface of today’s culture. Yet in the poetry of an image one can be stirred by the same spirit that flickered in Cistercians who watched these buildings emerge from waiting rows of roughly cut stone and unmixed mortar.

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There are many different ways of looking at these sites and structures. If we see an arch composed of finely-cut and fitted stones, some will ask, why was that shape chosen and not another? where was the stone quarried? how long did it take to build? how much did it cost? A vast number of technical, sociological, and philosophical questions can stimulate discussion about how an abbey may have been built, and where and when and by whom. Others are intrigued by the synergy between landscape and architecture. Still others find poetry and romantic idealism in the same walls, even projecting unfulfilled wishes and nostalgia for times past.

Cistercian architecture is experiencing a renaissance of interest. The uncluttered design of the buildings, with their harmonious proportions and subtle play of light, appeal immensely to today’s visitors. The two recent nonacentenaries – the birth St. Bernard² (1090–1990) and the foundation

of Cîteaux Abbey (1098–1998) – have brought attention to this hidden way of life. The contribution of Cistercian agriculture and industry to the medieval economy has also been the object of many recent studies. The spirit of our own time – one of education, research, conservation of historic sites, development of tourism – has connected with and stimulated this curiosity and interest. Indeed, the very survival of the buildings – many under adverse geographical, sociological, or historical circumstances – is witness to an impressive phenomenon. The common will of small groups of men and women to transform a rough landscape into a place of remarkable beauty, peace, and functionalism – often sustained centuries later – presents an antithesis to the short-term flash that characterizes much contemporary culture.

One essential point in understanding early Cistercian spirituality – and therefore the *raison d'être* for Cistercian abbeys – is that in the Middle Ages the distinction that we now draw between thinking and doing was far less clearly delineated. As Norman Tanner has said, medieval people “thought and expressed themselves largely in terms of what they did, and therefore their external activities were the key to, indeed for the most part *were* their inner piety.”³ For a medieval monk or nun, building an abbey was as much an act of spirituality as the meditation and contemplation carried out within it.

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The architecture of the Cistercians cannot be divorced from the life that was led within the abbey walls, and the basis of that life is the *Rule* of Saint Benedict. The *Rule*, a guide for living in monastic community, was compiled

in the mid-sixth century by a former hermit, Benedict of Nursia.⁴ An irony sometimes visited upon hermits is that their reputation for sanctity becomes so well known that people continually come to consult them or even to live with or near them. They were, it seems, a combination of confessor, spiritual guide, and social worker. In this fashion a group of disciples, wishing to live a truly Christian life, gathered around Benedict at Subiaco in southern Italy. But cenobites (monks living in community) are not hermits, and when more than one person shares a common life, a certain discipline is necessary to ensure that their goals and aspirations are carried out effectively. The *Rule* was written for this purpose. It is, on the surface, a deceptively simple book of seventy-three brief chapters, some no longer than a few lines. It quickly became very popular and was much copied, being second only to the New Testament in its widespread circulation during the Middle Ages. The *Rule* has provided a balanced guide for the cenobitic tradition for fifteen centuries and remains today the basis for much of Western monastic life.

Monks who lived by the *Rule* of Saint Benedict were called Benedictines, and in the early tenth century the *Rule* gave rise to a new family of reformed Benedictine monasteries stemming from Cluny in Burgundy.⁵ The Cluniacs became a very powerful branch of Benedictine monasticism, founding hundreds of priories across Europe. During the eleventh century there was a movement of general reform throughout the Church, including numerous experiments in the interpretation of monastic life. The founding of the abbey of Cîteaux in 1098 was part of this movement.

The origins of the Cistercian Order were decidedly modest, and many details were not recorded. Abbot Robert⁶ left the large Benedictine monas-

tery of Molesme that he had founded in 1075, and set out with a group of twenty-one monks to live a purer form of the *Rule* than appeared to be possible at Molesme. There is no evidence that he intended to found an Order – especially one of the magnitude of the Cistercians – and, for the first twenty years or so, Cîteaux itself was simply called the *Monasterium novum* or “New Monastery.”

From the time it was first compiled until the late eleventh century when Cîteaux was founded, the *Rule* of Saint Benedict underwent numerous modifications, especially those that increased the amount of time devoted to the liturgy and decreased the time devoted to manual labor. The person primarily responsible was a second Benedict, Benedict of Aniane,⁷ who died in 821. One of the elements of the Cistercian reform was to strip away many of these accretions to the *Rule* and to re-introduce manual labor into daily monastic life.

The *Rule* is a guide for living a communal life in a monastic setting, and it defines appropriate and effective behavior within the monastery. Balance is a critical factor, for not only is there a wide range of necessary activities, but an equally wide range of human beings who might not make happy neighbors unless all were oriented toward a common purpose. Fifteen of the seventy-three chapters of the *Rule* describe monastic personnel: for example, how to receive someone who wishes to become a monk, the different positions of responsibility inside the abbey, the craftsmen, the priests, the kinds of monks, and how to choose an abbot. This last is of major importance, for according to the *Rule* (ch. 2), the abbot stands in the place of Christ. He is the *abba*, or “father” of his flock, and his posi-

tion in the Middle Ages was one of great authority. He was normally elected for life by the monks of his abbey, and he was to be learned, chaste, sober, and merciful, hating vice and loving his brethren. He was not to be excitable, worried, exacting, headstrong, jealous, or over-suspicious, but prudent, considerate, discreet, and moderate. It is a formidable list of demands, and it was inevitable that few abbots achieved the ideal. Nevertheless, the position and powers of the abbot were central to Cistercian monasticism in the Middle Ages, and the movement cannot be understood without acknowledging this vital point.

Prayer and praise are an essential part of this life, and thirteen chapters of the *Rule* describe the seven monastic offices (services), all based on the Psalter, that were chanted each day, together with another lengthy office during the night.⁸ A further thirty chapters concern the appropriate behavior of monks: obedience, humility, the spirit of silence, observing Lent, mistakes and punishments, travel and work, how to regard one's seniors (with respect) and one's juniors (with love). The remaining fifteen chapters concern the material side of community life: when and where to sleep, abbey property and tools, clothing and shoes, treatment of sick and elderly monks, hours for meals, quantities of food and drink, how to receive guests. Since a portion of the *Rule* was (and still is) read every day, the monks knew it by heart as well as they knew the Psalms they recited daily.⁹

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The very earliest Cistercian spirituality was based on poverty and charity as well as the *Rule* of Saint Benedict. As to poverty, monks possessed nothing as

individuals and were given what they needed to live (the *Rule* is very clear on this point). The abbey lands and buildings were held as common property. Yet poverty was not just a question of possessions, but of a state of mind. It also meant poverty of spirit. Certainly one had to be fed, clothed, and sheltered, but monastic life was designed to provide a release from preoccupation with material things in order to concentrate more fully on things not of this world. Nonetheless, poverty and poverty of spirit could easily be misinterpreted and lead to an unhealthy preoccupation with one's body and one's sins. The balance and beauty of Cistercian architecture were not always reflected in the physical and psychological aspects of medieval monastic life.

This was largely a result of the triumph of the Augustinian tradition. For Augustine, the fifth-century bishop of Hippo, the consequences of original sin and original guilt led inevitably to the vital need for grace and the doctrine of predestination: "Of our own power," said Augustine, "we can only fall."¹⁰ But it also led to a tendency to identify the body with sin – the "concupiscence of the flesh" of 1 John 2:16 – and in turn mortification of the flesh could all too easily be identified with mortification of sin, and to the practice of asceticism for its own sake.

Furthermore, the idea and ideal of poverty of spirit are based on the principle that we are nothing without God. The entirety of our life and being is dependent on his life and being. This is an ancient principle, but once it is merged with the Augustinian idea of the total depravity of human beings, the results are unfortunate. According to Psalm 8:5, we are created only a little lower than the angels, but medieval monks and nuns

– indeed, medieval people in general – tended to see themselves as sin-filled worms on the edge of a precipice leading directly to hell.

The preoccupation with the body and sin that was so much a part of the reform movements of the eleventh century, and the idea that one might starve oneself into the Kingdom of Heaven, was not far from the thought of the early Cistercian fathers. “If you want to enter Clairvaux,” said its abbot, the charismatic (future saint) Bernard, to the postulants who entered there, “only your soul can come in; leave your body at the door.”

There was an antidote to this preoccupation with one’s sinful self – namely, charity, a virtue that was central to the Cistercian tradition. The document conceived by Stephen Harding as a type of constitution for the new order and an embodiment of its principles was not called the *Charter of Poverty* but the *Charter of Charity*.¹¹ Charity involves both God and one’s neighbor, and the Cistercian writers never tired of reminding us that we cannot love God unless we also love our neighbor. Nowadays the word “charity” usually denotes alms-giving (which was also an obligation for all who followed the Benedictine *Rule*), but the *caritas* lauded by the Cistercians was much more. It was the perfect love described by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

While these three elements – poverty, charity, and the *Rule* – remained the basis of Cistercian life, as the twelfth century advanced and thousands of men and women swarmed (the word used in medieval sources to describe the phenomenon) to join the abbeys, different aspects of Cistercian spirituality were developed by different writers. The best known is Bernard of Clairvaux, whose vision of monastic life was saturated with imagery of love and salvation. For Bernard, these were the essential concerns of a monk,

and one of the most important biblical texts for him – in fact, a widespread favorite among the Cistercians – was 1 John 4:19, “We love him, because he first loved us.” The loving sacrifice of Christ inciting our love toward him is a consistent thread running through Bernard’s writings. As a contemporary Cistercian abbot has recently written, love (*caritas*), for Bernard, is the key to understanding, the force behind expression, the common basis for the multiple realities of human life.¹²

Bernard is the best known and most prolific of Cistercian authors, but he was not the only author. Nor was he the most innovative. Different aspects were developed by other writers, many of whom have not received due recognition. Bernard’s Christocentric theology, for example, must be distinguished from the Trinitarian spirituality of William of Saint-Thierry¹³ with its emphasis on the importance of the Holy Spirit rather than on the person of Christ. And William’s ideas were not the same as those of Isaac of Stella,¹⁴ whose remarkable Platonic speculations are as difficult for us to appreciate as they must have been for his monks. Different again is Aelred,¹⁵ abbot of Rievaulx in Yorkshire, with his emphasis on human friendship. Other Cistercian writers of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and later centuries – many virtually unknown in modern times – put forth still other ideas on monastic life. There was not just one Cistercian spirituality, but a mosaic of Cistercian spiritualities, and to extract only a few from the whole is to miss its glorious subtlety and remarkable diversity.

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What we have said thus far allows us to establish a theological basis for discussion of the more earthly side of Cistercian life. It is essential to remember that this life was lived largely in silence. The Prologue to the *Rule* quoted at the beginning of this essay, along with its development in chapter 6 – “the disciple’s part is to be silent and to listen” – is crucial to an understanding of Cistercian life and architecture. When listening, rather than talking, makes up most of one’s waking hours, a necessary shift occurs: in attention, in attitude, in orientation. This is not hard to verify; all we need to do is to watch how much of our attention in the course of a day is oriented toward conversation, and then consider how important that conversation really is. What if the energy and intelligence consumed by conversational activity were available for other things?

For example, *lectio divina*, or “sacred reading,” is an important daily aspect of Cistercian devotion. At the beginning of Lent, each monk and nun received a book to read in the course of the coming year. Every day, winter and summer, weekdays and Sundays, there was a designated time for sacred individual reading. A book a year may not seem much to us, but again, it is not the quantity of reading that matters; it is the quality of the reading. Today we read, often as quickly as possible, for information. Monastic reading, on the other hand, was not so much for *information* as for *transformation*. One read in order to assimilate the words of God and of the Fathers, so that, eventually, one’s own spirit was so imbued with their spirit that one began – slowly – to transform one’s own, human, egocentric will into the “common will” (*voluntas communis*) of God.

When reading time was over, books – being precious and hand-copied – were locked in cupboards in the cloister book-room, and one moved on to the next task, in silence. The minutes spent walking from one place to another were used to continue the process that reading had begun, digesting the words, coming to a new understanding. The gradual assimilation continued whether one was tilling a field, preparing a meal, or doing any other chore. Silence provided the ambiance for both physical and mental work.

Community as well as individual reading was also part of the monastic day. Meals provided another occasion for the process of transformation, where the spirit was nourished along with the body. Far be it for monks to chatter idly at table, or even to discuss abbey business. Silence reigned in the refectory where they ate, allowing the voice of the week's reader – who was seated in a pulpit built high into the wall – to carry throughout this large room.¹⁶ Another occasion for community reading was in the evening, just before Compline, the last office of the day. The reader read aloud to the assembled monks seated on benches in the cloister gallery; the texts were specially chosen to avoid violent subjects that could perturb sleep. In addition, of course, are the monastic offices – some longer, some shorter – that brought the community together eight times a day to chant the Psalms aloud.

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People sometimes wonder how monks earned their living. Once again the *Rule* of Saint Benedict (ch. 48) is the touchstone: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brethren should be occupied at certain times in manual labor, and again at fixed hours in sacred reading. . . . And if the cir-

cumstances of the place or their poverty should require that they themselves do the work of gathering the harvest, let them not be discontented; for then are they truly monks when they live by the labor of their hands. . . .” In fact, the Cistercian grange (farm) system not only provided the abbey with its material sustenance, but played an important role in the development of the medieval rural economy.

A Cistercian abbey was required to be economically self-sustaining. Located in the countryside, often in valleys, each monastery owned and worked a series of granges. Each grange had barns, stables, housing, and a chapel, plus whatever other structures were needed for the work particular to that location, such as forges, mills, tileries, and fishponds. Large herds of cattle were maintained, crop rotation was practiced, salt was mined, cheese was made, iron ore was extracted and worked, and water power was harnessed, to name only a few of the most common agricultural and industrial activities. It was not unusual for an abbey to have a dozen or more granges, some a considerable distance away.

To maintain the rapid expansion of this system, the institution of lay brothers was adopted. Lay brothers were “lay religious,” celibate men who took vows of poverty and obedience, were part of the life and spirituality of the abbey, and whose principal vocation lay in physical – rather than liturgical – work. Most of the week the lay brothers lived at the granges, returning to the abbey on Sundays and major feast days. This does not mean that the monks did no manual labor, for manual labor was an essential part of Cistercian reform. Monks worked in fields nearer the monastery, since they had to return to the church at regular intervals throughout the day to carry

out the divine office – the *opus Dei* (work of God) – whereas the lay brothers said shorter prayers at regular intervals wherever they were working. The celebrated miniatures from Cîteaux illustrating monks at work were not fanciful artistic speculation, but real representations of early twelfth-century agriculture as practiced by the Cistercians.

The Cistercian day, then, had three core elements: liturgy (prayer and praise), sacred reading, and manual labor. These activities alternated throughout the course of each day, the schedule varying according to the season (longer hours of manual labor in summer, longer hours of reading in winter), the day of the week (no manual labor on Sunday), and the calendar of liturgical seasons and feast days. Each element addresses one of the three aspects of human nature described by St. Paul: the body (labor), the mind (reading and meditation), and the spirit (liturgy). When practiced in alternation, the activities provide an admirable – and effective – balance of physical, psychological, and mental engagement.

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Where one lives is an important part of one's psychological make-up. No monastery – and no monk or nun – could be entirely separate from the surrounding landscape, and in their response to that landscape we may discern some of the most important features of Cistercian spirituality.

The majority of Cistercian abbeys were located in valleys at a considerable distance from existing settlements, but it would be wrong to think of a Cistercian monastery as being entirely isolated. Sometimes villages were moved in order to create the separation from the world necessary for

monastic life; in other cases forests were cleared to provide enough new land; in still others, existing hermitages were converted into monasteries.

Living in a valley means, among other things, that to see the landscape one must look upward. “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help” (Psalm 121:1) is not an abstract concept for most Cistercians. This stands in sharp contrast to earlier Benedictine sites, which were atop hills or even mountains (Mont-Saint-Michel off the coast of Normandy is probably the best-known example). In some valley sites the sun, which skirts the southern horizon during the winter months, never touches the cloister garth; sunlight is visible, but not tangible. This humble location can serve to encourage the process of “interiorization” – of the inward quest for the nature and ground of one’s own being – that Cistercian monastic life invites in other ways as well. Looking outward necessarily means looking upward into the landscape, with the eventual and inevitable return of the gaze to the valley, to the monastery, and, metaphorically, to one’s self.

Life in such a landscape may seem like a glimpse of Paradise to those who are unaware that extensive water management during the initial construction, plus several centuries of adaptations and improvements, have in large measure tamed the wild hand of nature. Seasonal rains could be ferocious; rivers flood, life is threatened, water may subsequently dry up and hydraulic power disappear. No doubt many a monk, listening to the rain slashing at the church windows during the night office, shuddered at the reality of the roaring and troubled waters of Psalm 46.

Cistercians became expert hydraulic technicians out of necessity. Living in a valley is a potentially dangerous adventure, and careful evaluation of

the landscape was necessary before permanent buildings could be erected. Abbeys were sometimes built in the steepest part of the valley, or at a convergence of two valleys where water power offered the greatest potential. The river was often dammed to create a mill-stream, and sometimes the river-bed itself was moved to make a wider or more convenient building site. Archeological investigations have brought to light underground channels carefully built to allow evacuation of waste from latrines, kitchens, refectories, infirmaries, and other buildings. Some valleys were dredged down to bedrock and extensive drainage systems built so the site could withstand infrequent but potentially devastating floods.

Not only were rivers harnessed to make use of this abundant natural resource, but exquisite fountains – sometimes still in use – were created for water that was piped in from local springs and filtered before reaching the cloister. This provided not only a source of fresh water within the abbey – for cooking, ink-making, infirmary needs, washing, blessing, sprinkling around the monastery and other ceremonies – but also the appeasing sound of continuously splashing water inside the cloister.

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With this overview of the theological, spiritual, psychological, and practical basis for Cistercian life, what can we now say about the architecture? Benedict's *Rule* tells what was necessary for monastic life, but the *Rule* makes no mention of buildings. Cistercian abbeys were nevertheless made of stone and brick and wood and mortar, and the stone had to be quarried, clay fired, wood hewn, and mortar mixed. All of these activities required the

acquisition of materials as well as the necessary technical expertise, including not least the design of the buildings.

As the monastic day, following the Benedictine *Rule*, is defined by a schedule of prayer, manual labor, reading, meals, and rest, every building inside the abbey has a specific corresponding function. And as the community grew larger or smaller over the ensuing decades and centuries, the rooms or buildings were altered to fit the changing circumstances. For the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, the function of each specific area is generally predictable, even if some details are lost. The fact that Cistercian life has continued unbroken since 1098 (a few abbeys – although none in France – have survived within the same walls) means that monastic life today can help interpret elements of buildings that are not obvious to a visitor.

Just as Cistercian life is based on the *Rule* of Saint Benedict and firmly fixed in the tradition of Benedictine monasticism, Cistercian architecture is firmly based on the traditional Benedictine plan. The cloister garth forms the center of the plan, giving access on all four sides to various interconnected rooms or buildings. The garth is usually square, if topography is favorable, and the whole abbey is laid out and built at the same time. Some cloisters are rectangular and a few are trapezoidal, reflecting the irregularity of the site or the vagaries of construction, but this is imperceptible from inside the garth itself. When the valley was so narrow that the abbey had to accommodate the slope of the land, as at le Thoronet, the irregularity has been absorbed so gracefully that this “imperfection” actually appears as an integral part of the design.

The four sides of the cloister are flanked with vaulted galleries that link the buildings and provide sheltered access from one room to another. As archeological traces indicate, they were more than simple walkways. Monks did their individual reading on benches along the walls; the community was read to there each evening before retiring. The galleries were used for processions on certain feast days, and the *mandatum* or weekly foot-washing ceremony (*pedilavium*) was held there, in imitation of Christ washing the feet of his disciples (John 13).

The four ranges or rows of buildings to which the galleries in turn give access are also designed according to function. The church is built on the highest ground to the north or south side of the cloister, depending on the lay of the land, with the apse and altar facing east. The *Rule* says, "Let the oratory be what it is called, a place of prayer; and let nothing else be done there or kept there," giving no suggestions for its size or shape. It is normally the largest building inside the cloister compound, to which a monk or nun returns numerous times in the course of each day for monastic offices, the Eucharist, and personal prayer. It is the major architectural statement of a monastery, and a wide range of church designs may be found in Cistercian abbeys. Some churches have no direct light in the nave, others have windows on one level, still others are illuminated on two levels. The church may be covered with a pointed barrel vault, or groined vaults, or even ribbed vaults, for Cistercians did not hesitate to adopt the latest technology if it served their purposes; pragmatism was a primary consideration. What the churches do have in common is the absence of figurative sculpture or painting and the subtlety of the decor; they are

neutral spaces against which the task of transformation was slowly accomplished. A similar avoidance of color and narrative decoration may be found throughout the cloister buildings. Light, falling across moldings and recesses, walls and window embrasures, provides the animation, with only geometric or floral forms on capitals and white window glass making patterns on the floor.

The east range is attached to the transept of the church. The sacristy, which communicates with both church and cloister, is followed by the book room or book cupboards, then chapter room, parlor (or auditorium), monks' day-room, and stairs to the dormitory. The main activities concentrated in this range are mental: community meetings, announcements, some types of work, reading. Again, the size and shape of the rooms depended on the scale of the rest of the complex. The chapter room is one of the most important spaces in an abbey, a common room with community functions that set it apart. Here a novice is received into the community, the abbot elected, sermons delivered, important visitors received, business discussed, punishment meted; abbots are also buried in the chapter room, remaining near the community after death. As though to mark its exceptional nature, the chapter room is slightly more ornate than other buildings, being set apart, for example, with marble capitals or twisted columns.

The buildings on the side of the cloister opposite the church, sometimes called the refectory range, all involve water or fire; the activities concern the body – drinking, cooking, eating, washing, warming.

The refectory is one of the most beautiful buildings in a Cistercian abbey, spacious and light-filled. Here we find one of the few Cistercian

variations on the traditional plan. In Benedictine abbeys, the refectory is built parallel to the church and occupies this entire range, and in some early Cistercian abbeys this disposition may also be found. Before long, however, Cistercians began to construct their refectories perpendicular to the cloister, projecting away from it. This modification had several advantages: it allowed an abbey to build as large, and as long, a refectory as was necessary for the size of the community; it also meant that large windows could be placed around three sides. Furthermore, other rooms could be placed on either side of the refectory, benefiting from direct access to the cloister gallery. Normally, the kitchens were on the west side and the warming room (calefactory) – the only heated room in the abbey – on the east side of the refectory.

The fountain was located opposite the refectory door, usually under a stone-vaulted pavilion that opened to the cloister garth through a series of elegant arches. The large monolithic fountain had multiple spigots around its periphery permitting thirty or more monks to wash before meals. Such efficiency was no doubt appreciated; food was not blessed until everyone was at table. Shaving and tonsuring were also carried out there seven times yearly, before the major feasts. The proximity of the abbey's main water supply to the fires of the warming room and kitchen was a practical advantage.

The fourth range, closing the west side of the cloister, was the lay brothers' building. Most lay brothers lived at the granges during the week, but on Sundays and feast days they needed a place in the abbey to eat and sleep. Lay brothers could number well in the hundreds, especially in the

twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and their building is often of substantial size. Part of the ground floor served as their refectory and part as store-room, while the entire upper floor constituted the dormitory.

It is more difficult to discern the precise function of buildings located beyond the immediate area of the cloister since circulation, geography, and necessity, rather than a general plan, dictated placement. The monks' infirmary – often an immense light-filled and well-ventilated building – was usually located east of the church. It was connected to the cloister by means of a covered walkway, since ill but ambulatory monks were expected to attend the offices. In later years, when monastic populations dwindled and buildings could not be repaired, the infirmary was sometimes transformed into a mini-monastery. Although its location is rarely known, a scriptorium would have been necessary for copying books, at least in earlier centuries before it became common to purchase them from professional booksellers. As charity and hospitality are basic tenets of the *Rule*, the gatehouse, guesthouse, and guest infirmary were essential elements of a Cistercian monastery. They would have been near the main entrance, although each site must be studied carefully to determine the location of this entrance at the time of construction.

Mills, forges, tannery, bakery, dovecote, stables, and barns would all have been necessary, and they were built as water supply and other topographical considerations warranted. Because of their utilitarian function, many survived wars and secularization and are sometimes still in use, although they have not always been identified as former monastic dependencies. Still further away – sometimes dozens of miles – were the granges,

providing the basis of the Cistercian economy. Some magnificent barns are still in use, and whether immense or modest, the quality of their construction is no less refined because of their humble purpose. Some granges are larger than churches, and equally well-built. When admiring a Cistercian barn, it is difficult not to be reminded of the Shaker tradition of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northeastern United States. The Shakers lived a similar spiritually based communal life, and their motto “hands to work, hearts to God” is a modern echo of the ancient Benedictine – and Cistercian – *maxim ora et labora* (“pray and work”).

What, then, is the source of Cistercian architectural design? We have seen how the logic of the plan reflects St. Benedict’s *Rule*, and how the Cistercians interpreted the Benedictine plan to make it function better for their purposes. A great deal has been written about the “uniformity” of Cistercian architecture, a view that tends to hinder acknowledgment – and appreciation – of the diversity to be found in the buildings. It is true that the *Charter of Charity* (*Carta caritatis prior*) says that Cistercian monks should live “by one charity, one *Rule*, and similar usages (*similibus moribus*).”¹⁷ It is also true that some elements of design and placement recur in Cistercian buildings – especially of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – although there are also many innovations and exceptions. But if there was an ideal “model” Cistercian abbey, its identity has not been preserved; no two identical buildings are to be found among the hundreds of extant examples.

It is useful to keep in mind that *similis* does not mean “identical,” and that this phrase from the *Charter of Charity* referred more to an internal state of accord among Cistercians than to an outward manifestation such as a

building project. Obviously topography, weather, type of stone, size of community, and other practical factors would all contribute to the design of a building. Dozens – if not hundreds – of abbeys were simultaneously under construction in the twelfth century, from Ireland to Estonia, from Norway to Greece and Portugal. Recent research has begun taking into account both the diversity of Cistercian life and the flexibility necessary for successful management of an abbey. From the floor plan to the pleasing proportions of a nave to the seemingly perfect geometry of a capital, the buildings display a great deal of liberty both in design and in detail. Although there are general similarities – especially concerning the layout and relationship of one building to another, the voluntary simplicity, harmonious proportions, and absence of decor – there remain many exceptions and architectural mysteries.

The writings of Bernard of Clairvaux have often been interpreted as “recipes” for art and architecture, a view that also calls for re-examination. One of Bernard’s most frequently cited works, the *Apologia* to William of Saint-Thierry, is not a treatise on art but rather on monastic spirituality, and the ideas it expresses must be seen against this background. The principle is simple: since the quest for oneself as the image of God – and for the God of whom we are the image – is an interior one, whatever may detract from the process of interiorization is to be avoided. We have already seen how a valley setting may be conducive to this process. In the *Apologia* we find Bernard railing against apes, lions, tigers, centaurs, harpies, hunters, soldiers, and other beasts that decorated the walls, capitals and books of Benedictine monasteries. Such plenteous variety, he tells us, leads us

to read the stone, not our books, and instead of meditating on the law of God, we are tempted to idle away the day marveling at wonderful images.

What Bernard objects to is not art for art's sake – the word “art” never appears in the *Apologia* – but to anything that detracts from the quest for the interior vision. Similar ideas are expressed by other twelfth-century Cistercians – Aelred of Rievaulx, for example, or Idung of Prüfening,¹⁸ or Hélinand of Froidmont¹⁹ – but the principle is logical and straightforward. Letters in manuscripts, therefore, “should be of one color and not decorated with painting”; glass “should be uncolored and without crosses and pictures”; and although walls might be covered with lime-wash and painted with false joints, the Cistercian General Chapter did not approve of the painting of figures.²⁰ They occur, certainly, though not before the thirteenth century, and those examples reflect changing times and tastes.

Minimal decoration in Cistercian churches and other abbey buildings was no more and no less than an effective practical aid to the process of interiorization. This process was facilitated by the location of the abbeys in valleys, and symbolized by the clearing and cultivating of waste land, and the careful attention to detail in unseen places as well as in visible ones. It is not accidental that the quality of the construction of sewers and cisterns is frequently as admirable as that of the churches.

There is yet more to be said, for the lime-washed walls and colorless windows of a Cistercian church are not only an absence of decoration, but a symbol of God himself. For what is God but – as Saint John says – light itself, and “in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). He is the *lumen incircumscriptum* – the “limitless light” – of Gregory the Great²¹ and Bernard

of Clairvaux, and the *lux nova* of pseudo-Dionysius and Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis.²² The transition from darkness to light is one of the most basic yet profound symbols of spiritual progress. But God is not only light, he is also a “simple nature” (*simplex natura*) and wholly perfect. One sees in the light, simplicity, and perfection of Cistercian architecture both a symbol and a reflection of the light, the simplicity, and the perfection of God himself.

The simplicity of the architecture is everywhere apparent. The absence of narrative sculpture on capitals and over doorways only emphasizes the contrast of light and shadow, throwing the structural lines into even greater relief. Yet there is another very important element to Cistercian design: every effort was made to keep bright color out of Cistercian churches, an effect so ubiquitous that it can only have been deliberate and calculated.

The stained glass windows of the great cathedrals provide us with a reason for this exclusion. Color attracts the eye and excites the imagination, and while this may have been acceptable for a largely illiterate lay public, such distraction ran counter to the *raison d'être* of Cistercian life. Prayer and meditation are not helped by red and blue birds or purple-cloaked saints under bright green trees. The grisaille – translucent uncolored glass – in Cistercian church windows, shaped into intricate and lovely patterns, was a deliberate choice, entirely in keeping with the architecture. Color in the windows would drown out the careful play of light and shadow that characterizes the subtle balance for which Cistercian buildings are so admired, a subtle balance that was sought in monastic life itself. Grisaille in geometric

or floral patterns provides light that is neutral in its relative colorlessness, although in no way lacking in beauty. The same can be said for Cistercian floor tiles, which were limited in their range of rather dark colors but were laid in exquisite geometric patterns.

Were you to ask a Benedictine to show you the Deity, he might take you into a great cathedral and show you a splendid painting depicting Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, together with angels and archangels, principalities and powers, and all the company of heaven. If you were to ask a Cistercian to do the same thing, he might take you into the abbey church and show you three unadorned grisaille windows with light behind them, or simply an arch outlined in shadow. A Cistercian abbey – not just a Cistercian church – was designed to reflect not so much the glory of God (that had already been done at Cluny) as the nature of God, and to provide aspiring seekers with the most conducive environment for the realization of their divine potential. “For this alone were we created and do we live,” wrote the twelfth-century Cistercian, William of Saint-Thierry, “to be like God, for we were created in his image.”²³

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Cistercian architecture embodies two things. First, it reflects and symbolizes the nature of the God one seeks; and second, it provides an effective environment for the pursuit of this quest. It is not so much what the stones *are* but what they *do* that enables us to speak in this way, even though the very existence of the stones is a trace or vestige of the One who brought them into being. We must also remember that the nature of

the stones and their location was often determined by practical factors, of which water supply and political expediency were among the most important. This only confirms our hypothesis, for in approving a new site, in clearing the land, in building an abbey as perfectly as possible in places both visible and invisible, and in transforming a wilderness into a place of prayer and the presence of God, the Cistercians achieved with their hands what, within themselves, they sought to accomplish with their spirit. The heart of Cistercian architecture lies in its power to transform, and the abbey serves as a catalyst for our inward evolution toward an ever greater likeness to the image of God.

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