

Monastic Courtesy*

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Editor's Note

During his years as Master of Scholastics at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a service he began in 1951, Fr Louis (Thomas Merton's monastic name) wrote a small pamphlet which was duplicated for the sake of the young monks in his charge. If I were to hazard a guess, I would suggest the early 1950s as a probable date of its creation.

As far as I can tell, the copy found in the Gethsemani archives is the only extant text that is available. So when Victor A. Kramer suggested an unpublished Merton piece on the monastic life, I unearthed this early document. What follows is the document in its entirety with a few notes added for clarity and only a minimum of editing.

But why publish such an ancient and informal text of Thomas Merton, written for young Trappist monks, many coming directly from military service, and some even from high school or college? Clearly it provides a reflection of the 1950s monastic world and of Merton's concerns for his students. Adjustments have to be made, given the special environment of a silent monastery in the 1950s, but from the little I know of the academic world I would venture to say that these notes on 'Monastic Courtesy' could just as easily be addressed to academics now.

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* Merton's original punctuation has been kept. Except where corrections for the sake of clarity have been added or [*sic*] inserted to highlight missing punctuation or unconventional style. The transcription is word for word.

Monastic Courtesy

Importance of This Topic

Many confuse courtesy with worldliness—as if courtesy itself and decent manners were nothing but empty show and had no reason for existing in a monastery—as if boorishness were simplicity and sincerity.

Good manners and courtesy are a necessary part of monastic life, and the sign of a true monk, when they are supernatural and based on the right spiritual attitude. Lack of manners or a deliberate neglect of them are usually a manifestation of a natural spirit and of emotional immaturity as well. They show selfishness, pride, lack of discipline, and so forth.

This spirit of boorishness may have been cultivated in high school or elsewhere; it should be got rid of in the monastery.

It is related to deeper faults and weakness of character than we think.

Some think it is sufficient to give a perfunctory attention to the signs of politeness prescribed in the Usages¹—but these are the bare minimum. One should add to them the ordinary niceties of polite behavior observed by clerics everywhere.

But *especially* do Trappists need to be reminded to practice ordinary courtesy in unusual situations, in contacts with outsiders, or on trips outside the monastery, for instance to the doctor or hospital. Because we so seldom enter into these situations, we often make glaring errors which other religious would not make—not only impoliteness or boorishness or social inexperience, but even faults against charity and justice (in speaking, i.e.) which can gravely disedify those to whom we speak.

Other religious, in the active life, are carefully trained in good manners in order that they may be able to deal with souls without repelling them. No such training is usually given to Trappists. Yet we do sometimes have contact with outsiders, and our failures in elementary courtesy and decency may give serious scandal and do much harm.

Courtesy to postulants, when one is a guardian angel,² is also of very great importance.

1. Book of Usages: Monastic regulations which governed all aspects of communal life in minute detail.

2. 'Guardian Angel': Usually a senior novice appointed by the Novice Master to instruct personally the newcomer to the monastic life.

Principles

The basic principle of good manners and courtesy is that we should *always avoid unnecessarily hurting or offending others and that we should do what is usually considered to be helpful and considerate.*

What is the basis of this? It is twofold.

- a. *Natural.* We are members of the same society, we live together, we complete one another, we aid one another to live well. Manners and courtesy fall into this context: for unless we aid each other to live well and happily, we will hinder one another and contribute to each other's unhappiness. But for men to live together making one another miserable is an offense against God, since man is the image of God and his social unity gives glory to God, the author of nature.
- b. *Supernatural.* All the more important is it to observe these norms when we are members of Christ, when we are *obliged* to bear one another's burdens, to love one another as Christ has loved us. Since our union in charity is the sure sign that we are Christ's disciples, and since He died for us that we might be one as He and the Father are one, the duty to behave well towards one another in our social relations is an inescapable part of our basic duty to love one another. Without it we are not fully monks or even Christians.

Our Christian and monastic courtesy are marked with the sign of the Cross, because usually the acts by which we give evidence of good manners are of a kind to cost us some trivial sacrifice, in order to place others before ourselves. The bad-mannered person is usually selfish, and his bad manners are often very clear indications of his selfishness. The neglect of courtesy and the refusal to make the small sacrifice by which one could do service to another is generally a 'black eye' for the one who commits it.

St. Benedict lays down principles of supernatural courtesy everywhere in his Rule. Especially in Chapter 72 (The Good Zeal) which we should reread frequently and strive with all our heart to put into practice perfectly.

- a. *Honore se invicem praeveniant.*³ True courtesy depends on a sincere reverence for our fellow monks and for other
3. 'To be the first in showing honor.'

Christians and for all men. Note that he says '*praeveniant*': to anticipate in honoring others, to be first in honoring them, not suspiciously waiting for them to begin.

- b. *They should most patiently bear with the infirmities of others*, whether of body or of soul—not constantly complaining of them, not always reproving them explicitly or implicitly, not refusing to be nice to those one disapproves of. This is not mere 'Manners', it is an obligation of charity. Especially does it mean not manifesting displeasure at the faults of others or taking it upon oneself to punish them in season and out of season for their limitations.
- c. *They should obey one another*. Monastic courtesy goes further than worldly politeness: it means we have an obligation to give in to others and to prefer their will to our own, even when they may be in the wrong or may be crude in the way in which they manifest their desires.
- d. *Let no one follow what he judges useful to himself*, but rather what is useful for another. This principle covers a tremendous area. Let us note it carefully and spend our lives trying to put it into practice.

These elements—honor and respect, patience and long-suffering, mutual deference and obedience, and general unselfishness—should pervade all our community relations and fill our lives with charity. In such an atmosphere, real perfection of life in Christ and in the Spirit would easily be attained. Indeed, the faithful practice of such virtues would argue a great perfection already achieved.

Let us keep in mind this 'form' of perfection and build our lives accordingly.

Other passages in the Rule could easily be brought together to show how St. Benedict wants his monks to practice a charity which is courteous and kind and considerate of others. [For example:]

In Chapter 31, the Cellarer: *Maturus moribus—non injuriosus, etc.—omni congregationi sicut Pater—Fratres non contristet—rationabiliter cum humilitate male petenti deneget*.⁴ All through the chapter. And in the end

4. 'Mature in conduct—not offensive, etc.—but as a father to the whole community—he should not annoy the brothers—but reasonably and with humility deny the improper request.' (See *The Rule of St Benedict*, 1980 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981], pp. 228-29.)

a principle of universal order and good sense—all things to be done in the proper season, *ut nemo perturbetur neque contristetur in domo Dei*.⁵

See also the chapter on silence—not arguing, not talking or laughing loudly, etc.

Reverence everywhere, care of the tools, etc. No one should have to ask for anything for himself in the refectory, etc. Also the Chapter on guests.

Applications

Courtesy in Choir. Above all, our choral service should be carried out in a spirit of reverence, charity, and peace. What are we doing? We have come to praise God, above all by our unity in charity. In Choir everything should be done with simplicity, dignity, and reverence towards God. But this also implies respect for our brother.

All relations with neighbors in Choir should have the qualities we have just seen above. *Honor* their sanctity and good intentions. *Bear* with their weaknesses and imperfect results. *Give in* to them whenever we legitimately can. Consider their convenience (in prayer) rather than our own—and their devotion. To do this requires a saintly and unselfish spirit rarely found.

It is a mockery to pay an act of 'reverence' to God in such a way as to insult or offend or hurt one's brother—for instance, bowing in such a way that he has no room left, pushing him out of the way in order to make a bow, bowing with your back in his face, performing ceremonies in such a way that you implicitly reproach others for not doing everything your way.

The same way with zeal for the books.⁶ The principle governing the placing of the books is that they should be placed so that everyone can conveniently see. The one in charge should have charge, and should try his best to suit the needs of all. If he cannot do it well, a suggestion is permitted (polite though) but not bossy commands. Restrain eagerness. Better to let a mistake take place than to cause a commotion by rough interference.

We should avoid singing in such a way that we disturb the peace of others—for instance, when we allow ourselves to be carried away by our enthusiasm we may not realize that our singing does not sound so beautiful to others as it does to us. Don't sing too loudly, or in a nasal,

5. 'So that no one may be disquieted or distressed in the house of God' (*The Rule of St Benedict*, p. 229).

6. Large liturgical books in Choir, one a Psalter and the other the Antiphony.

raucous voice. Be careful to keep the same tone and tempo as the rest of the Choir. Much of the trouble in Choir is simply a matter of bad manners.

Avoid eccentric postures. Do not be carried away by sensible devotions and obtrude your feelings on others. To take an eccentric pose in Choir does not necessarily mean that one is singular or deliberately artificial, but it shows that one has become thoughtless and lost a sense of proportion and fittingness through attachment to consolation or to some other personal gratification in prayer. It is a subtle form of involvement in self.

During intervals in church and in chapel, be quiet; respect the desire of others to pray in peace. One should not go over lessons in the Jube⁷ in such a way as to be heard by others or sing in the sacristy in such a way as to be heard in the church.

Avoid much head scratching, examining of nails, sighs, yawns, etc. Be discreet in keeping awake.

In church and everywhere else, avoid expressions and postures that indicate you find your brother a nuisance or a penance. We are supposed to pray and help others pray well. It is no help to others if we ridicule their singing or create an atmosphere of strain by being consistently critical of everything they do. Even without overt acts, these things can be 'felt' in our Choir, and we owe it to others to think kindly of their efforts.

At the same time we should avoid making useless signs or smiling around at neighbors under the pretense of being 'charitable'. This does not help prayer either.

Still more, avoid actions and conduct that show the whole thing is distasteful to you.

Courtesy When Serving Mass. When *Serving Mass* do not disturb those at the neighboring altars; take a subdued tone.

Fraternal courtesy and cooperation are most of all necessary in pontifical ceremonies seen by all. Nothing is more out of place than two ministers arguing in the sanctuary and refusing to give in on a point of rubrics.

Courtesy in the Refectory. Eating together in common is a community act, not just an 'exercise', nor just an unavoidable necessity. *The refectory is a place in which a man's virtue can be known not so much by what he eats or does not eat, as by his general behavior.*

7. Jube: pulpit in the Choir where lessons were sung during the Office.

The key to conduct in the refectory is *not to regard it 'merely as a place of feeding'*.

One has to have the sense of community, of being together as brothers, of sharing the fruits of our common work. Eating together is an expression of charity and unison. *The atmosphere should be pleasant and cheerful.*

Avoid unnecessary noise, which prevents others from hearing the reading. To cultivate interest in the reading is the best way to supernaturalize meals—along with attention at prayers.

Take care to see that your neighbor has all that he needs.

Be glad when, as servant of the refectory, you can wait on others and help them.

All these things go together. If a monk resents having to take his time in serving his brethren, his selfishness will manifest itself in small acts of discourteousness.

Table manners. Don't eat with elbows on the table or with your face in the bowl 'so that if something drops out of your mouth it is not altogether lost to you'.

Avoid mouth noises—belching. Be restrained in coughing and nose-blowing. Don't pick teeth with your fingers. Keep your place clean if possible. Don't finger the bread to get a fresh piece. Avoid uselessly spoiling food.

Many virtues can be practiced in the refectory. They can be a substitute for fasting which is not always possible. The virtuous man practises the *tantum quantum* [only enough] rule in his food.

Courtesy in Community Life. *In general:* One's attitude and bearing have a 'social meaning'—our very facial expression can be a discourtesy or an insult to others. By our expression and carriage we show our idea of our relationship to the community. For instance, the martyr (nobody loves me—I don't get the attention I deserve) or the victim of injustice. The outraged aristocrat. The disgusted plebeian. The rebel. 'Noblesse oblige': here I am in a spiritual slum, but I'll do my best for the 'hoi polloi'. The energetic man of action in the midst of loafers. The hardworked and longsuffering officer. The salesman type. The good-mixer, etc.

The best thing is to be cheerful and humble, and to express a *sincere* interior conviction that it is good to live in the house of God. Only a supernatural spirit can give us this conviction.

In the Scriptorium: You can show courtesy by silence and neatness.

Silence: avoiding noise, signs, loud laughter, mouth noises, loud coughing and nose-blowing and throat-clearing.

Neatness: keeping your desk neat, putting books back where they belong, not tracking in mud, not taking sloppy postures, care of furniture and articles for common use.

A virtuous man makes a minimum of demands on his brother.

At Work: Not showing too much eagerness to get the best jobs for oneself. A selfish person betrays himself at work. Keep in mind that your work is a *service*, not a recreation. You are to join your brother in contributing to the support of the community. Take care of tools, etc., out of consideration for the one in charge of the tool room. Have a sense of responsibility.

At work I am not merely to seek an interesting or enjoyable occupation that will allow me to pray and contribute to my self-esteem. I must be useful to the community and help others to be so.

Courtesy at work means looking out for the interests of others, seeing that they do not become overburdened, that they do not injure or exhaust themselves when it could be easily avoided.

Suggestions—maybe. But are they prompted by charity or by the assumption that you know everything? Are they an aid or are they a means of dominating others?

Volunteering for jobs. A good spirit is shown by those who are always *unostentatiously* ready to do a job that needs to be done, even at the cost of their own free time. Generosity in cooperation with others is a good sign and promotes a good spirit in the community. One who has this spirit gains a great deal for himself and for the community as a whole.

Basic: In community courtesy as a general attitude of respect is basic: for the community, for the other categories (priests, brothers), for superiors, for one's brothers.

Never speak disparagingly of the community or anyone in it.

Never foster an attitude of superiority or contempt for the community or anyone in it. This is just self-love trying to cover up and justify itself.

Be considerate of the needs and obligations of others.

Courtesy in Relations with Superiors. Not going over the head of minor superiors. Respect for authority of minor superiors—and

respect for the man also. Tact and kindness in dealing with officers, so as not to upset their work, etc.

Not asking permission when a superior cannot possibly refuse. Not putting pressure on superiors.

It is common courtesy to obey a superior willingly and cheerfully, and it is the sign of a really bad religious simply to disregard his wishes. Disrespect for superiors is usually a danger signal.

Even though we may be correct and externally obedient in our relations with superiors, many faults can be committed in our dealings with them:

Being too blunt in stating one's views.

Trying to force one's opinions on a superior.

Demanding to know the reason for this or that decision.

Obsequiousness is not courtesy. Nor is flattery.

One should not adopt an attitude of too easy familiarity with superiors.

Gratitude for care and trouble taken—appreciation, but not flattery.

Courtesy in Relations with Outsiders.

Writing letters. Neatness is a sign of courtesy. Be considerate in choice of topics. Interesting news, without preaching or blowing your own horn.

Visits. Brief them well beforehand. Remember they are in a totally unfamiliar place. Put yourself in their place. When taking them around, consider their interests. Be careful about their comfort; they may not want to climb to the top of the knobs. Keep out of mud.

Dealing with women. Avoid overshyness and also dangerous familiarity.

Hospital. Observe hospital rules. Do what the Sister says. Do not insist on sleeping in your habit. Adapt yourself to their ways. Keep to your room. Do not demand useless things. See St. Benedict's chapter on rules for the sick.