

Communion with God and the Brothers: Reading Rancé¹

by

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This article presents a series of texts from Rancé's masterpiece *On the Holiness and Duties of Monastic Life*. These texts are intended to introduce readers to key aspects in the teaching of the Reformer of La Trappe. Selections are arranged under the following headings:

- "Who is a Monk?"
- Rancé's Sources of Inspiration
- Religious Vows: the Direct Route to Conformity with Christ
- Community Life as a Life of Love
- The Superior and the Brothers
- Prayer
- Mary

I hope the selections themselves and the brief comments introducing them will show how this vigorous teaching is rooted in a rich and sound spirituality.²

"Who is a monk?"

[Within the cloister] there exists a profound peace. It is there that Jesus Christ, who is the king of peace and who delights in it wherever it is found, establishes his kingdom.³

¹This article is part of a longer study that originally appeared in *Cistercium* 221 (2000): 1061–1118. It has been adapted and abridged for CSQ. The English translation of the passages from Rancé's writings quoted here was made by Dom Bernard Bonowitz, Prior of Novo Mundo in Brazil. The English translation of Sr. Anna Maria's commentary was made by Fr. Hugh McCaffery of Mount Melleray in Ireland.

²To have a more complete idea of the subjects treated in this article it would be useful to consult the following bibliography: Lucien Aubry, "La spiritualité de Rancé," *Cîteaux et la Normandie* (Abbaye de Bellefontaine—ARCCIS, 1999); Alban J. Krailsheimer, *Armand-Jean de Rancé, Abbot of la Trappe. His Influence in the Cloister and the World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974); Denise Pezzoli, "Le discernement des vocations monastiques par l'Abbé de Rancé," *Coll* 22 (1960): 37–48; Louis Lekai, "The Problem of the Authorship of Rancé's 'Standard biography,'" *Coll* 21 (1959): 157–63; Chrysogonus Waddell, "Simplicity and the Abbot de Rancé," *CSQ* 22 (1987): 250–61; Chrysogonus Waddell, "The Abbot of la Trappe and the Schoolgirls of Mortagne," *CSQ* 24 (1989): 127–43. For further bibliography see David N. Bell, "Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé: a Bibliography of Printed Sources," *Cîteaux* 51 (2000): 219–84.

These words from *On the Holiness and the Duties of Monastic Life* indicate both the climate of the monastic vocation and the level at which a monk is called to live. A monastery is a kingdom of peace because it is the kingdom of Jesus Christ. In order to give life to Christ's kingdom, the primary purpose set before a monk is holiness, nothing less than the imitation of the Lord. At the same time, emphasis is given to the basic importance of attending to the interiorization of one's duties.

Rancé's answers to questions put to him on this subject show both his fatherly love and his strong sense of responsibility for the salvation of his monks:

The true religious is a person who, having renounced by solemn vow the world and everything sensible and perishable, lives for God alone and concerns himself solely with what is eternal.⁴

Since eternity alone is his portion, it must be the sole object of all the activity of his mind and all the motions of his heart. What Jesus Christ presents to men in general in the form of counsels becomes, for the religious, on account of his vocation, utterly binding precepts. He will only begin truly to fulfill the duties of his state when his detachment is total, when his self-denial is genuine and effective, and when he succeeds in making the sentiments of his heart bear fruit in his actions.⁵

It is helpful to notice Rancé's stress on the importance of the religious modality of monastic life its direct and constant link with God ever present in the obscurity of a monk's faith enfolding a monk's life. Of equal interest is the way Rancé links religious/monastic profession to the Gift of the Holy Spirit. In the spirituality of his time this particular fellowship with the sanctifying Spirit was regarded as a second conversion. Further on, in Chapter 22, when he indicates how a monk ought to behave when sick, Rancé says, "What should confirm the solitary even more in his love of suffering is the knowledge that he has committed himself to imitate the sufferings of Jesus Christ by a twofold obligation: his baptismal vows and the vows of his profession."⁶ Baptism has grafted him to the good olive tree, Christ, Priest, Prophet, and King, enabling

³Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, *De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique*, (Chapter 5, Question 7) (Paris: F. Muguet, 1683) 101; (Paris: F. Muguet, 1701) 1.134. Subsequent references to this work [hereafter *Sainteté*] will follow the same sequence: Chapter and Question numbers (Question numbers vary slightly between editions), page reference to the 1683 edition, volume and page reference to the 1701 edition. Please note that the 1701 edition contains some passages that are lacking from the 1683 edition.

⁴*Sainteté* 1.1; 1683:101; 1701:1.134.

⁵*Sainteté* 1.3; 1683:1; 1701:1.3.

⁶*Sainteté* 22.7; 1683:487; 1701:2.591.

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him to imitate his life and mission. Monastic profession has opened the temple of his soul to the invasion of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier.

Another fine text underlines this basic idea. Taking solemn vows—a monk's particular consecration—has made him by vocation an indispensable follower of the "counsels" of Jesus:

Vowed consecration means nothing else but the immolation of a holocaust, total and absolute. . . . [The fathers] could describe monastic profession as . . . continual meditation on God's judgments, a crucifixion, a true martyrdom, living in apostolic perfection, an angelic *conversatio*. In this they simply wanted to say that the solitary must be insensible to all human affections, separated from all that is mortal, with a *conversatio* that is completely heavenly . . . that the monastic vocation, as Saint Basil says, lifts men to the purity of the angels.⁷

These early replies to the questions put to him are essential for knowing Rancé's mind and for giving a clear view of the underlying principles on which he bases his reform. His replies, based on Holy Scripture, are both theological and patristic, leading those who seek salvation in a monastery directly to the very source of Christianity. Rancé's spirituality is utterly concrete; it focuses immediately on its objective. He puts holiness and perfect fulfillment of God's will, following the example of Christ, as the basic demand of monastic life. In this way a monk fulfills his vocation by offering everything to God, both his will and his body. It is the same self-offering that the Father loved in his Son and that the Son made for our salvation: "The Eternal Father's choice of the elect, made before all time, can only be realized in heaven insofar as these have conformed themselves to the Son on earth."⁸ In present-day language this could be paraphrased: "The call which the Father gave them is fulfilled to the extent to which they conform to Christ on earth. Christ's life was above all a life of humility and love in obedience to the Father. This is the route that monks should follow."

Rancé's Sources of Inspiration

A man of his time, influenced by the Counter-Reformation's effort to return to the sources, Rancé, like his contemporaries, looked to early sources for answers to the serious problems of the day. He turned to the Fathers, especially to Saint John Climacus, that perspicacious expert about even the least grief in the human heart. Esteem for this author can be seen in the Sorbonne's declaration of August 5, 1647, officially approving Arnauld d'Andilly's

⁷Sainteté 1.4; 1683:4–5; 1701:1.5.

⁸Sainteté 22.7; 1683:487; 1701:2.592.

translation of Climacus's great work: "*The Holy Ladder* is a work by the most excellent director of conscience that Greek antiquity has left us."⁹

A loyal friend of the Oratorians, to whose ministry he owed his reconciliation with God, Rancé was well acquainted with the *École Française*. Nor did he disdain the influence of Saint Francis de Sales for certain aspects of his spirituality. Nonetheless, the only teachers that he really claims are the Fathers of the Desert. "My only crime has been to defend the holiness of the desert and the humiliation of the Cross,"¹⁰ he wrote to M. Gilbert de Choiseul, bishop of Tournay, on August 15, 1677. It has to be acknowledged that no other seventeenth-century reformer imitated so well the lifestyle of the monastic deserts of antiquity. Many have questioned, taking so vital a preference into account, whether La Trappe could also be regarded as having a Benedictine environment. On this matter Étienne Gilson is worth listening to:

The asceticism of Cîteaux, of the Chartreuse for that matter, is certainly derived from the Fathers of the Desert. In the former the cenobites of Egypt lived their lives over again in France, in the latter the hermits. Cîteaux and the Chartreuse were "deserts" peopled by the ascetics of the twelfth century. . . . To set out to observe to the letter the Rule of St. Benedict, not omitting the last chapter, is thus to follow in the footsteps of St. Antony, of Marcaris and Pacomius.¹¹

Rancé did indeed wholeheartedly desire to be faithful to and live in the spirit of Cîteaux's founders. He himself says so, and his contemporaries noticed it and even called him the "new Saint Bernard."¹²

The example of Rancé's search for God kindled the desire for such fidelity in men committed to confront a culture that concentrated on the importance of reason as a source of universal concepts and that tended to separate morality from faith. The marvel of such frequent conversions was certainly a significant sign. taught careful fidelity to and almost literal imitation of the life led in the monastic deserts of Antiquity. It seems only fair to view this attitude not as something narrow-minded and scrupulous but as a great and genuine desire for loyalty to Christ and to his vocation. Moreover the conversion of the Reformer himself, his temperament, and his complete inexperience of monastic life, above all in the early years, profoundly influenced the story of La Trappe. Rightly

⁹Guerric Couilleau, "Saint Jean Climaque," DSpir.

¹⁰Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, *Correspondance*, ed. Alban J. Krailsheimer, 4 vols. (Paris: Cerf/Cîteaux, Commentarii Cistercienses, 1993) 2:145–46.

¹¹Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, CS 120 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1990) 17–18. Concerning seventeenth-century French spirituality, see Jacques le Brun, "France," DSpir, and Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis les guerres de religion*, 12 vols. (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1915–1933).

¹²Armand-François Gervaise, *Histoire générale de la Réforme de l'Ordre de Cîteaux* (Avignon, 1746) 365.

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does Rancé deserve credit for his docility to the Spirit-given maturity that enabled him to combine prudence, patience, experience, and balance with fervor.

Rancé saw the solitaries of the desert as spiritual heirs of the Apostles and Martyrs:

The deserts and the monasteries were filled with them. In accord with God's command, Anthony, Hilarion, Pachomius and their like brought together men who would attach themselves to them with a view to practicing the same perfection and living in the same deprivation and forgetfulness of creatures. All the monks who followed them as their true masters and fathers were formed . . . in the same holiness and the same separation from sensible things.¹³

If the present order of things gives rise to a totally contrary impression, it is because of the decadence and corruption of our times. In itself, the monastic life remains what it has always been. God neither alters his designs nor countermands his orders. He requires no less a degree of perfection and detachment from his religious today than he did fourteen hundred years ago. Saint Bernard was not afraid of being excessive when he told his brothers that they had promised God to live in the perfection of the apostles It is evident that within the Church the religious are privileged to take the place of the martyrs and to imitate the perfection of the apostles.¹⁴

Here we see Rancé establishing his reform on basic, generally accepted values that go back to the origins of the Church and that give consistency to the monastic church. In this unbroken succession is to be found the vital sap that has nourished the life of the Trappist Reform for centuries and enabled it to come as far as us. So, then, to what kind of sanctity is a monk called? What is quintessential? A monk has to carry through his following of Christ by constantly devoting himself to the careful fulfillment of the will and counsels of Christ as demanded by the sacred bond of the vows, which give him such a close affinity with Christ that it eliminates any limitation whatever from the generosity of his commitment.

Rancé, thanks to his unflinching mindfulness of the Holy Rule, fully agrees with what Saint Benedict asks of his monks, that is, that they ever keep God's judgment in mind, that the brothers live in full fellowship, that they love their superiors, that they imitate Jesus in his humiliations, discouragements, and

¹³Sainteté 3.1; 1683:15; 1701:1.17.

¹⁴Sainteté 3.1; 1683:16; 1701:1.18

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sufferings, and regard themselves as the least of all. Basing himself on a quotation from Saint Bernard,¹⁵ he says,

It is for others to serve God; yours is to unite yourself perfectly to him. For others, it suffices to believe in God—to know, love and adore him; you, on the contrary, must penetrate the depths of his wisdom and knowledge that you may see him in himself and possess him.¹⁶

This statement is of the greatest importance. Amid the loving, trinitarian fellowship that Rancé established in La Trappe, a monk has to make exclusive space in his life for faith, for the imitation of Christ, for the fulfillment of the Father's will. In this way the monk unites himself intimately with the Son whose incarnation he imitates. By reflecting on the Son, the monk finds the wisdom of the Father and delights in it.

Religious Vows: the Direct Route to Conformity with Christ

Right from the start, Rancé follows the traditional course of his great teachers, the course summed up by Saint John Climacus in the words "Blessed whoever have a no less passionate love for God than they had for their loved one."¹⁷ Rancé comments:

When men and women contract marriage, they think it enough to pose the requirement of corporal chastity. But he who surpasses infinitely in beauty all the children of men demands of those souls he considers as his brides a purity worthy of his own. It is to them, more than to others, that these words of the Holy Spirit are particularly addressed: "Sancti estote, quoniam Ego sanctus sum."¹⁸ You see how the Bridegroom in the Canticle wants his bride to be perfectly and completely beautiful, how his heart is sensitive to everything about her. . . . He cannot abide the smallest fault or defect in her. "Tota puchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te."¹⁹ He calls her beautiful twice, to show us that she should have a twofold

¹⁵*Ep frat* 2.16. Notice that Rancé follows an old tradition of attributing this work to Saint Bernard. In the seventeenth century, French scholars began to identify William of Saint-Thierry as the actual author of this piece. Mabillon did so in 1690. For more information on the history of this work's attribution see *Lettre aux Frères du Mont-Dieu*, SCh 223:50–121.

¹⁶Sainteté 4.2; 1683:32–33; 1701:1.37–38.

¹⁷John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russel (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1982) 286.

¹⁸Lv 11:44: "Be holy, for I am holy."

¹⁹Sg 4:7: "You are wholly beautiful, my love, and without a blemish!"

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beauty: she should be as pure in soul as she is chaste in body.²⁰

These words describe a thoroughgoing move from human love to complete personal communion with God. Rancé goes on to say: “Since [the monk] offers himself entirely to Jesus Christ, he must let him fill the entire capacity of his heart.”²¹

In this way a monk “reconstructs” according to God’s image a heart “destroyed” by sin, filling it instead with Jesus Christ, the perfect image of the Father. Before arriving at this conclusion, however, Rancé quotes many patristic texts extending from Saint Cyprian to Saint Basil, Saint Ephrem, Cassian, Saint Augustine, and Saint Bernard. Thus, by means of his usual plain and concrete reasoning, he demonstrates that the vow of chastity refers to the body and to the rectification of the emotions:

Saint Cyprian expressed the same opinion when he gave the name of “foolish virgins” to those who imagine that because they are physically chaste they are genuinely pious, despite the fact that their hearts are corrupted by avarice, pride, envy, and detraction.²²

Saint John Chrysostom perfectly expressed that truth, when he said that a virgin preoccupied with the things of the world does not merit inclusion in the ranks of the virgins. Truly to deserve this glorious title, renouncing marriage does not suffice. The profession of virginity also requires a chastity of soul. . . . The five virgins whose lamps were extinguished were indeed virgins, physically, but they were not pure in spirit. Uncorrupted by sexual intercourse with men, they were defiled by their attachment to possessions. Their bodies were pure, true enough, but their souls were immersed in all sorts of adulteries. A thousand evil thoughts filled them, an endless cycle of avarice, tightfistedness towards the poor, envy, laziness, negligence, pride—all the spiritual and interior vices capable of destroying the venerable state of Christian virginity. What good, after all, is virginity, when it is joined to a hard and pitiless heart?²³

In other words, full personal maturity comes through complete maturity of love. Rancé thus echoes what has always been the great ambition of Cistercians: to see God. Moreover God reveals himself only to the pure of heart, to those filled with Jesus Christ. In his doctrine on this subject, Saint Bernard consistently teaches that union of the soul with God is possible because of

²⁰Sainteté 5.4; 1683:57; 1701:1.83–84.

²¹Sainteté 5.4; 1683:59; 1701:1.85.

²²Sainteté 5.4; 1701:1.89–90.

²³Sainteté 5.4; 1683:64; 1701:1.91.

mutual likeness. Consequently it is clear that full union with God is attained by one who has overcome all sin-caused hindrance and has been cleansed from all external dross.²⁴

While the vow of chastity extends to the most intimate depths of the heart, the vow of poverty, according to Rancé, recalls the experience of the early Church: “On the contrary, it is those who renounce the things of earth in imitation of the apostles that have a genuine abundance.”²⁵

The soul’s disposition in observing this vow is so radical that it can only be the effect of total self-denial. The reason for this is that, in order to have poverty, one must place one’s own self, in the first place, among the things one wants to renounce. Rancé quotes the example of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who writes, “Now, desiring nothing in all the world, I begin to be a disciple of Christ.”²⁶

These words are found in Ignatius’s *Letter to the Romans*, where he lovingly implores the Romans not to show him any false kindness that would hinder his great desire to follow Christ. In this letter, Ignatius is above all a kind of christological icon, copying almost three-dimensionally the *longing* Christ had to carry out the Father’s will to the end, a longing that led him relentlessly to the Cross: “Let me be an imitator of the passion of my God.”²⁷

Rancé proposes Ignatius as an example of poverty because the Bishop of Antioch saw total detachment as the way to Christ.²⁸ Thus do monks take the place of the early martyrs. Rancé comments:

The saints regarded poverty as the solitary’s wealth. It is those who renounce the things of earth in imitation of the apostles that have a genuine abundance. . . . To such a degree does the hope of future goods absorb them that the notion and memory of present things is lost to them. . . . This disposition, brethren, is so truly great that it can only be the fruit of total self-denial. Whoever wishes to be established in this state must strip himself unreservedly of everything, and in the first place of himself. Nothing created or transitory may be allowed to occupy the smallest space in his heart. He must follow Jesus Christ with an attitude of such perfect disinterestedness that he can say together with the great martyr: “Jam Christi incipio esse discipulus, nihil eorum quae

²⁴See Gilson 92–94, and Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Medieval Mind*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1959).

²⁵Sainteté 5.6; 1683:70–71; 1701:1.100–1.

²⁶Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans* 5.3, *The Epistles of Saint Clement of Rome and Saint Ignatius of Antioch*, trans. James A. Kleist, ACW 1 (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1949) 82.

²⁷Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans* 6.3, ACW 1:83. About martyrdom see Étienne Ledeur, “Imitation du Christ,” DSpir.

²⁸Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans* 6.2; 7.2–3, ACW 1:83. See Gal 5:24. See Pierre-Thomas Camelot, “Ignace d’Antioche,” DSpir.

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sunt in mundo desiderans” [Now, desiring nothing in all the world, I begin to be a disciple of Christ].

Brethren, believe me: A religious will never find peace in his reclusion until he abandons himself totally to the only one who can bestow it. If he does not accept all the sufferings and privations that befall him—hunger, thirst, cold, heat, illness, his superiors’ way of proceeding, his brothers’ . . . ill-humor as coming from God’s Providence, he will live out his days in bitterness. . . . From such exalted thoughts and reflections as these, brethren, you cannot help concluding that religious poverty goes beyond a mere cutting-back of outward wealth and possessions. Rather, in the same manner as chastity, it divides the heart from everything, visible or invisible, that is not eternal. It strips us of all, leaving us with God alone and those things that can lead us to the possession of his kingdom.²⁹

Having outlined the commitment involved in the first two vows of chastity and poverty as a veritable martyrdom of innocence and hope, what does Rancé teach about obedience? He presents this vow, so basic for Saint Benedict, as the very shape and summary of monastic commitment:

Perfectly lived, it is obedience that gives the religious his proper form and establishes him in his state. By means of it, he consecrates himself and offers himself up to God, striking the blessed deathblow that puts an end to his worldly life and makes him live the life of Jesus Christ. “Vivo ego jam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus.”³⁰

Consequently, for Rancé a monk’s witness consists in obedience, a martyrdom of heart and will; a martyrdom of love that is equivalent to a martyrdom of bloodshed. Obedience thus expresses an absolute aspiration written in the brevity and poverty of human existence, wholly determined by loving surrender to the Father.

Answering the question “Would it not be better if you spoke to us more precisely of the origin of the solitary life and of God’s plan for its realization?” Rancé says:

As I think of nothing but how I may contribute to your edification, this being the duty most bindingly imposed on me by God, I will simply say to you, brethren. . . , that God’s chief end in making a new covenant with men was to establish here in this world a cult worthy of his majesty and to find true

²⁹Sainteté 5.6; 1683:74–75 and 84; 1701:1.103–4 and 114.

³⁰Sainteté 5.7; 1683:100; 1701:1.132–33. For the scriptural quotation see Gal 2:20: “I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me.”

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worshippers, who would worship him, as Jesus Christ says, in spirit and in truth: “Venit hora in qua veri adoratores adorabunt Patrem in spiritu et veritate”³¹—in that purity that can only be the effect of the fullness of his Spirit and the abundance of his grace.”³²

The monk who, by means of the vows, welcomes the Father’s will for his own life becomes the closest disciple, the truest imitator of Jesus Christ.

Explaining such well-known truths about the observance of the vows, Rancé continually refers to three principles that are the foundation, guide, and purpose of his exposition: God’s Word, the Church’s tradition, and the monastic church/community.

The Word of God is the foundation of these realities and points to the final purpose. Church tradition offers the example, especially as the Fathers express that tradition. The monastic community, the church in miniature, is where, in the simplicity and poverty of daily life, these great principles are put into practice. Christ is the Brother who leads all, who makes himself the pledge of those who follow him. He is the indispensable Model.

Community Life as a Life of Love

What was the community life, the spiritual environment in which such ideals were lived, where *obedience challenged freedom*? To explain this is of the greatest importance since it is obedience that molds a monk. By this vow the monk draws close to Christ, becoming almost another Christ, at least in wholehearted desire. Rancé points the way to fulfilling this desire, namely, the way of love for neighbor.

After the failure of his mission at Rome on behalf of the Strict Observance, Rancé returned to La Trappe desiring above all to complete the reform of his monastery.

The question that springs to mind is: How did he perform his task as abbot within this program of reform? Rancé exercised his spiritual fatherhood as a genuine charism expressed by his sense of responsibility for the salvation of each of his monks. Moreover, his love for those he always called his “brothers” enabled him to gain the community’s free and full acceptance of the ideal of holiness that he put before them and that he himself lived in the first place.

It seems useful at this point to recall the important place Rancé gave to the practice of humility, and at the same time not forget that in Saint Benedict’s Rule spiritual ascent through humility is focused on love: “Now, therefore, after

³¹Jn 4:23: “But the hour will come when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth.”

³²Sainteté 3.1; 1683:11–12; 1701:1.13–14.

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ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear.”³³

Love then is a basic point of reference for life in community, love that grows and thrives as a kind of reward for an intense sacramental life.

As has often been pointed out, Rancé allowed frequent access to the Eucharist contrary to Jansenist influence and the customs of the time. Many monks of La Trappe received Communion several times a week, obviously with their abbot’s approval. Such regular reception of the sacrament should be seen in its deepest sense, as the real root of the imitation of Christ truly lived by each monk.

A monk continually grew in freedom by means of the Eucharist and in it found the strength to offer himself to the Father, with the Son and in the Son. Here indeed is to be found the very root of the Christocentrism of Rancean spirituality. Such assiduous contact enabled love for neighbor to develop and flourish among the brothers. Many visitors to La Trappe at the time testify to this, as can be seen especially in two visitation cards.³⁴

Another factor that nourished the spiritual life at La Trappe was prayer. In this regard also Rancé differed from the then general practice of considering methodical prayer as the only sure way. As we shall see, he used instead to introduce his monks to the school of the Holy Spirit. His teaching here is consistent: obedience transforms a monk into a true imitator of Christ, and in Christ makes him a true worshipper of the Father; contact with the Eucharist makes love for neighbor flourish in his consecrated state; the Holy Spirit is the true Sanctifier that transforms the monk’s heart and the Friend that accompanies a monk’s life on his way to becoming an offering to the Trinity.

How then was love lived at La Trappe? Commenting on the greatest of the commandments, Rancé writes:

As the love of God is the first and most binding of the divine precepts, its obligations are the clearest and most self-evident. If the heavens and the entire universe tell us unceasingly of his grandeur and glory, we can say that they likewise proclaim to us our obligation to love him. . . . We adore him on account of his sovereign majesty; we owe him love on account of his infinite goodness.³⁵

Rancé continues, “What God revealed to us by the word of his Son, he made known by the Son’s earthly mission. . . . How can there be any doubt about the kind of love with which we must love him?”³⁶

For Rancé a monk’s debt of gratitude to God should have no limit, since God has already loved him infinitely, for gratitude is simultaneously a matter of

³³RB 7.67.

³⁴Hervé du Tertre, abbot of Prières, made the first regular visitation in 1676; in 1685 the abbot of Val-Richer held a second one. Both left positive visitation cards.

³⁵Sainteté 7.1; 1683:113; 1701:1.149.

³⁶Sainteté 7.1; 1683:120–21; 1701:1.158–59.

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justice and of love. A monk should respond with all his energy in order to reciprocate God's love wholeheartedly. The greatness of the Father's love for us is clear in all aspects of Jesus' life, and above all in his Passion. This last is an act of love in fact, and love alone was the reason for his martyrdom both of love and of blood. Rancé writes:

When the Church wishes to stir up the love and piety of her children by reminding them of all the graces the divine mercy has shown them, she can find no more moving climax with which to conclude her account than that grace which is the culmination and the fulfillment of all the others. Directing herself to God, she cries out to him in an access of tenderness: "That the lord might save the servant, he gave up his Son." "Ut servum redimeret, Filium tradidit."³⁷ In his first letter, Saint John speaks exclusively of charity and love. "Let us love, not in word or in speech, but in deed and truth." "He who does not love does not know God, since God is love."³⁸

After this, there should be no further need to ask how we should love God; these reflections speak for themselves. If they fail to produce an equal degree of understanding, it is because they make use of the language of the heart. To understand this language, it is necessary to have a heart, and most people do not have one. But the saints who have received the new heart and the new spirit promised by God through the prophets—"Dabo vobis cor novum et spiritum novum ponam in medio vestri"³⁹—are profoundly affected by these truths.⁴⁰

The Superior and the Brothers

To help situate this topic, Rancé recalls that the superior takes the place and fulfils the function of Christ himself. To fulfil his worthy duty he should know the brothers fully and so be able to guide them. And in order to have such knowledge he must win their complete trust. Rancé then goes on to describe the qualities a superior ought to possess. He must be aware of the sacredness of his charge, he ought to obey the Rule, he should really love his brothers, and display his love in the care and attention with which he ought to work for their salvation.

³⁷See the *Exultet* proclamation in the Paschal Vigil liturgy: "He gave up the Son in order to redeem the servant."

³⁸Sainteté 7.1; 1683:123; 1701:1.161.

³⁹Ez 36:26: "I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you."

⁴⁰Sainteté 7.1; 1683:124; 1701:1.162.

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Last, his behavior in the monastery should be worthy of a vicar of Christ, which he is. The brothers should have full confidence in such a superior, and ought not be critical about him, but only on condition that he does not fail to give such an example of holiness. Even so, were he to give some command in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, he should be obeyed, thus proving their respect for his office and his person, although they cannot always share his sentiments. The chapter on mutual relations between the brothers themselves is even more important.

What is most impressive in the reform effort at La Trappe is how unanimity between the superior and the brothers was achieved. This unanimity was underlined by the Father Visitors who, having come to La Trappe with minds set on criticism, had nonetheless been compelled, in their respective visitation cards, to admit this fact. Rancé comments:

Next to the commandment of loving God, the most important is that of loving our brothers. By this sign, Jesus Christ told us, people would distinguish those who are his disciples from those who are not: “In hoc cognoscent omnes quia discipuli mei estis, si dilectionem habueritis ad invicem.”⁴¹ Solitaries, having the duty to be the first among his disciples—not in rank or dignity, but in piety and holiness—should also be preeminent in charity. Jesus Christ is more fully within them. His mind and his outlook are more markedly apparent in them. They demonstrate more traits of his holiness. All this renders them more worthy of love and respect.⁴²

Rancé adds to this a remarkable text from Saint Basil:

The religious state constitutes an entirely spiritual way of life, a determination to live together in indissoluble and inviolable union. Solitaries are bound to each other through a spiritual covenant made in the presence of the Holy Spirit, who acts as its mediator and witness. It is a union that should far surpass in closeness that which exists among the members of the human body.⁴³

In places of peace and sanctity, such as monasteries are, it is absolutely indispensable to put into faithful practice the few means the Rule provides for monks with regard to mutual love:

The means you have at your disposal for exercising charity towards your brothers come down to a number of concrete practices: offering them good example, praying for them, and

⁴¹Jn 13:35: “By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

⁴²Sainteté 10.1; 1683:245; 1701:1.305.

⁴³Sainteté 10.1; 1683:246; 1701:1.306. The quotation from Saint Basil is from *The Long Rules*, Question 7.

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showing the signs of gentleness, affection, and deference permitted by monastic observance.⁴⁴

Monks must strive as far as possible to work for one another's salvation by the exemplary regularity of their lives. Thus the mere sight of a brother will provide support and encouragement. Moreover,

True religious are united by such close and binding ties that we could say it is in them that these words of Jesus Christ are perfectly realized: "Claritatem quam dedisti mihi, dedi eis, ut sint unum, sicut et nos unum sumus."⁴⁵ As Saint Basil puts it, they have a single mind, a single heart, and a single will, and we can add a single occupation: to serve Jesus Christ and to fight without respite against the enemies of his name and his glory.⁴⁶

The community is the place for overcoming the dangers of excessive self-concern and small-minded intimacy. It is the space where Jesus is encountered, where monks live as brothers of one another and of Jesus and thus as children of the Father. They live not as slaves but as sons through self-giving to the brothers and in a truly ecstatic intimacy with the Son, and through him, with the Father. Rancé invites the monks to total fidelity in order continually to bear witness to Christ and to awaken in themselves and in others a longing to live with Christ. As true friends of the Bridegroom, the brothers witness to one another and sustain each other in fidelity to Christ:

Charity is the bond and foundation of monastic communities. It creates and sustains them, making the brothers live as God decrees, in unity and holy concord, bearing the yoke of the Lord *humero uno*,⁴⁷ with the same mind, the same heart, and the same will.⁴⁸

It is in their weakness that the brothers experience themselves most as brothers, for they face the same enemies and can witness their mutual efforts in striving to overcome them. Moreover, many can find strength and happiness in the endurance and faithfulness of even a single individual:

Let them extend a helping hand to each other, the strong supporting the weak . . . the firm encouraging the wavering, so that . . . they can win the same victory and receive the same crown.⁴⁹

⁴⁴Sainteté 10.1; 1683:246; 1701:1.306.

⁴⁵Jn 17:22: "I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one."

⁴⁶Sainteté 10.1; 1683:248; 1701:1.309.

⁴⁷Zph 3:9: "Under the same yoke."

⁴⁸Sainteté 10.5; 1683:260; 1701:1.322.

⁴⁹Sainteté 10.1; 1683:248–249; 1701:1.310.

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Still, beyond this mutual support through good example there is yet another determining factor. As Rancé notes:

Only if you were completely ignorant of the necessity and usefulness of prayer, of its power and its role in your sanctification, could you fail to know that you have an obligation to make use of it before God for your brothers' sanctification.⁵⁰

Recalling a text from Saint Cyprian's *On the Lord's Prayer*, where Cyprian mentions the prayer of the three youths in the furnace, Rancé stresses that prayer like theirs is answered because it comes from a single mouth . . . charitable, simple and sincere.⁵¹ Rancé continues:

This is how we see that the apostles and disciples prayed after the Ascension of Jesus Christ, as it is written: "All of them persevered in prayer with a single mind, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers"—demonstrating thus the fervor and the unity of their prayer. For God who calls together to dwell in a single house those who are of one spirit will receive into his eternal dwellings only those united in the same prayer.⁵²

What then is the kind of prayer on which monks ought to nourish themselves so intently?

Prayer

The Foundations of Prayer

The Chapter dealing with prayer is surely one of the most interesting in *On the Holiness and Duties of Monastic Life*. It is our main source for Rancé's ideas about monasticism.

Converted at age thirty-one, of noble lineage, learned and refined, Rancé wished at his conversion to keep the same loyalty and enthusiasm that had always characterized his behavior. "To love God with all the intensity with which one has loved the world": such was his desire, even if it came to him, in its turn, from his teachers, the Desert Fathers, John Climacus in particular. Another way of expressing it would be: *return to the experience of the interior life*.

Saint Benedict, Saint Basil, Saint John Climacus, Saint Ephrem, and Cassian are the most important of the Fathers Rancé refers to when explaining the seriousness of the Gospel statement "One ought to pray continually and

⁵⁰Sainteté 10.3; 1683:253; 1701:1.314.

⁵¹PL 4:524. See also Gustave Bardy, "Cyprien," DSpir.

⁵²Sainteté 10.3; 1683:254–25; 1701:1.316–17.

never be discouraged” (Lk 18:1). Saints Anthony, Macarius, Augustine, and Bernard are likewise frequently quoted. However, a close reading of the text makes it clear that Rancé was doing more than faithfully handing on this venerable teaching; he was trying to do so using the religious language of his time. In fact, he arrived at a truly masterful synthesis of the early Desert teaching and the spirituality of the *École Française* that prevailed in his time.⁵³ He always kept the main spiritual themes of the twelfth-century Cistercian reform in mind and took pride in referring to them frequently. He thus showed deep love for his great teachers:

Saint Bernard was not afraid of being excessive when he told his brothers that they had promised God to live with the perfection of the apostles. . . . Is it not to you, brethren, as coenobites that these words of Saint Bernard are addressed: “Yours is a very exalted calling, higher than the heavens, equal to that of the angels. In no way is its purity less than the purity of these pure spirits. You have committed yourselves to attain not simply holiness, but the perfection of holiness—the very summit of this perfection. For it is for others to serve God; yours is to unite yourselves perfectly to him. For others, it suffices to believe in God, to know, love, and adore him; you on the contrary must penetrate the depths of his wisdom and knowledge that you may see him in himself and possess him.”⁵⁴

In Rancé’s works the spiritual themes of contemporary masters frequently appear together with those of ancient texts:

- Devotion to the infancy and Passion of Christ, that is, to aspects he most shares with humankind in his greatest poverty and weakness, aspects that God himself willed to “experience” by becoming incarnate and dying for us. The brothers are continually invited to walk in the footsteps of the Obedient One.
- Fraternal and community life that find in the Eucharist—received with a certain frequency—the *form that conforms*, Christ himself.
- Continuous prayer, which intimately unites us to the Father, in the Son, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.
- Purification of the heart, which, thanks to constant discipline, frees us from all the passions and unites us to Christ.
- And last, the thought of death and the spiritual value of sickness.

⁵³The Council of Trent pressed for a return to the writings of the Fathers. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, many translation and printing projects were undertaken. See Noëmi Hepp, “Antiquité chrétienne et antiquité païenne dans la culture française du XVII^e siècle,” *Revue de la Société d’étude du XVII^e siècle* 131 (1981): 117–33.

⁵⁴Sainteté 3.1; 1683:16–17; 1701:1.19, and Sainteté 4.2; 1683:32–33; 1701:1.37–38.

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He goes on to ask: “What then is the difference between the obligation of a religious and that of the Christian who like him has renounced the world in baptism?” He answers:

It is true that the Christian who has been buried with Jesus Christ in baptism and been given new life by this sacrament—a life animated and centered in the Spirit of Jesus Christ himself—ought to live as dead to the world, its goods, honors, business, and pleasures. But in his case, this renunciation can be made through a certain disposition of his heart. Permitted to retain the outward ownership and use of all these things, he will need to be so inwardly detached that he will remain poor in his prosperity, chaste in his marriage, temperate at his table, and dedicated to God in the midst of his dealings with others to which his state of life obliges him.

For a solitary, however, this is far from enough. He cannot stop there. He must detach himself literally from all that is sensible. Since eternity alone is his portion, it must be the sole object of all the activity of his intelligence and all the motions of his heart. What Jesus Christ presents to men in general as counsels becomes for the religious, on account of his vocation, totally binding precepts. He will only begin truly to fulfill the duties of his state when his detachment is total, when his self-denial is genuine and effective, and when he succeeds in making the sentiments of his heart bear fruit in his actions. Only those who remain in the grossest ignorance of the monastic state can deny this, people who have never concerned themselves with it or read what the holy fathers have to teach about it. Vessels set apart for divine service and worship cannot be used for other purposes without profaning them. Likewise, the religious who by special consecration has become the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit and the temple of God must keep this reality constantly before his gaze.⁵⁵

Such are the basics of Rancé’s teaching with its strong christological foundation and its constant invitations to faith, hope, and love.

Prayer is the Monk’s Greatest Duty

Developing his thoughts, the abbot again underlines the fact that monks are an example of what true Christianity should be: an example of all the virtues, bearing witness to Christ before the Church and the world. According to Rancé, God intended monks to be heirs of those true adorers of Christ, namely, the apostles and martyrs, the true witnesses. Thus is the path marked out: to bear

⁵⁵Sainteté 1.3; 1683:2–3; 1701:1.2–3.

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witness through utmost fidelity to the Rule in an ever-increasing intensity of love. It is in prayer in particular that monks should find the strength needed to lead a holy life:

Be mindful, brothers, to carry out the Holy Spirit's precept: "Oportet semper orare et non deficere."⁵⁶

Take special care to purify yourself by means of prayer, making it the first of your duties and allowing nothing to come between you and the fulfillment of such an important and highly recommended duty. But be careful not to let your prayer consist of dry speculation, empty of the spirit from which it derives all its merit and all its power. . . . Do not imagine that prayer is merely a product of the intellect, a series of spiritual thoughts or a reflection on some pious subject. Do not resemble those persons who think they have prayed well because kneeling, they have meditated before the altar on a few Christian truths or attempted to practice the rules and methods of prayer suggested by those who treat of such matters. Your prayer should be the voice, the cry of your heart, proceeding from your heart's sentiments and expressing its inner feelings and desires. Or, truer still, it should be the Holy Spirit who by his divine workings forms the prayer within your heart . . . and places words on your lips, since only his utterances are worthy of the divine majesty and of being heard by God.⁵⁷

The meaningfulness of these words helps to explain some of the most interesting aspects of Rancé's thinking. After corroborating his teaching with numerous texts from the monastic Fathers—as was his custom when discussing essential matters—he continues:

From such notions, brothers, you will readily grasp that there are two principal types of preparation for prayer, one remote and general, the other proximate and specific. The first consists in amending our behavior, regulating our actions, leading a holy life and being careful to act for the love of God in all things, eliminating from our conduct all that is not according to God's ordinance and that could possibly displease him.

The other is, at the time marked out for prayer, to separate ourselves from all visible things, denying to our senses, our imagination, our memory, our reason and our very heart all that is not God. Those activities we otherwise accept as

⁵⁶"Pray continually and never lose heart." Lk 18:1.

⁵⁷Sainteté 9.1; 1683:275–76; 1701:1.352–53.

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imposed on us we reject as illicit at this time and fix our gaze on God alone. He alone in himself and without mediation is our entire occupation.⁵⁸

But what are these conditions?

I hold them to be purity of heart and fervor. The saints considered these conditions so necessary to prayer that they placed them before all others.

He wishes all creatures to withdraw and cede their places to him, that he may be completely alone in those he has distinguished with such tender and signal marks of his infinite goodness. Anything but himself which he sees or encounters there displeases and perturbs him. “Remain alone,” says Saint Bernard to such chosen souls, “Don’t you know that your Bridegroom is extremely modest and will never make himself known to you when others are present?” [SC 40.4]⁵⁹

This purity is incumbent on all Christians, brothers, but especially on solitaries. It is for this that God has withdrawn them from the midst of the world and led them into solitude, so that finding them free from all preoccupation and perfectly detached from creatures, he can first purify them and then fill the void of their intellect and their heart, establishing in them, while they are still in the world, his kingdom of blessing and glory as if in a heaven.

Fervor, the second condition for prayer, is no less necessary or important. In fact, it is inseparable from the first, since prayer can never be pure if it is not fervent.⁶⁰

These pages point out the mysterious road by which Rancé leads his sons to a nuptial meeting with God, to the deepest communion of the heart with Being. This union is the secret of divine Wisdom, the hidden reality about our nature’s eternal destiny and that of monks in particular. Rancé does not get lost in describing elaborate techniques but instead builds up the life of an ascetic by means of fidelity to monastic observances, liturgical life, and the sacraments. Priests are invited to celebrate Mass every day, monks to receive communion frequently. He makes confession a celebration of the love and mercy of the

⁵⁸Sainteté 11.1; 1683:279–80; 1701:1.357–58.

⁵⁹Bernard of Clairvaux on the *Song of Songs* 40.4, Trans. Irene Edmonds, CF 7 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1980) 202; SBOp 2:27.4: “An nescis te verecundum habere sponsum, et qui nequaquam suam velit tibi indulgere praesentiam, praesentibus ceteris?”

⁶⁰Sainteté 11.2; 1683:280–83; 1701:1.358–61.

Father. Participation in the choral celebration of the office receives close attention.⁶¹

As we read on, we will find in Rancé a teacher who points out a simple and concrete path leading to the summits of prayer. The sacraments are at one and the same time mystical to the highest degree and yet concrete acts. In this too he is faithful to the teaching of the Fathers, who since the fourth century associate the mystery of salvation with the reality of the sacraments. So thought Saint Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Dionysius. In the same way, for Rancé faith is something highly existential for everyone, and above all for monks. Saint Gregory of Nyssa teaches that anyone not moved by the Holy Spirit is not a human being. *Mystical* life means *Christian* life, since it is love for God lived by a human being. A monk in particular should keep this in mind because by his monastic profession he has renewed his baptismal commitment.⁶² From that moment on, the monk has become a direct heir of the martyrs, full of Christ's presence, closely related to the crucified and resurrected One, called to experience deep purification in total self-giving. This purification will be the means—if God wills it—that leads to the state of nuptial union.

Rancé's copious yet sober counsels are all aimed at making a monk's heart a place for God. He should practice recollection, silence, indifference to worldly matters, prostrate in a deep, prayerful humility. John Climacus's *Ladder* and Saint Benedict's *Rule* teach that the end result of union with God is perfect charity. We know that the God of the Bible loves us with a jealous and demanding love. It is in such charity that the monk's soul must expand:

He wishes that they subject themselves to all in an attitude of genuine humility . . . that with all the might of their souls they yearn for what is eternal. Lastly, that by the constant exercise of piety, they ascend to perfect charity, which casting out all fear will make them serve God on earth as the angels do in heaven: without any thought of punishment, but simply for the sake of truth and justice, their pure love for Jesus Christ and the consolation they have in pleasing him.⁶³

To these two requirements, the holy fathers have added a third: compunction of heart. Actually it ought to be considered an effect and a necessary consequence of the others. Those who have united themselves to God through a perfectly pure and fervent prayer, filled with the knowledge and love of God, cannot help but feel an intense suffering when they see the Divine Goodness, so worthy of being loved,

⁶¹See *Règlements généraux pour l'Abbaye de la Trappe* (Paris: Muguet, 1690); and André Félibien des Avaux, *Description de l'abbaye de la Trappe* (Paris: F. Léonard, 1671).

⁶²Gregorio Penco, "Sulla professione monastica come secondo Battesimo," *Rivista liturgica* 47.1 (1960): 34–39.

⁶³Sainteté 4.2; 1683:45; 1701:1.59.

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daily affronted by human beings, and when they see that they themselves have the misfortune to be among those who offend and displease him.

Such a sentiment ought to exist in all true disciples, in everyone on fire with holy zeal for the glory of his name. Yet it is so proper to monks that it constitutes as it were their character and their distinguishing trait. Their vocation is to mourn; their profession is to grieve continually. Their life is one great sacrifice of tears offered for the world's sins and their own. They are the ones prefigured by the men . . . sealed by the prophet with the letter of mercy at God's command. . . . "Thus says the Holy Spirit: Inscribe the letter Tau on the foreheads of those who weep and afflict themselves on account of the abominations committed in the midst of Jerusalem" [Ez. 9:4].

It was for this reason, brethren, that the ancients desired solitaries always to make their prayers with compunction of heart. They were to keep it present in all the aspects of their lives and in all their exercises, and ever to purify their prayers with the waters of their tears.⁶⁴

Always begin your prayer in a profound awareness of your nothingness, trusting in the promise of the Holy Spirit: "Oratio humilitatis se nubes penetrabit."⁶⁵ Without fail, lay up some words of Scripture in the mouth of your heart, as Saint Basil advises, words that can serve to express your needs or which relate to the mysteries or contain the truths you have come to venerate.

But to say all this in a more orderly fashion. First: Whether you are taking the truths or the mysteries of faith as the subject of your prayer, consider them attentively and make a careful meditation upon them, as completely as you can. Second: Let what you have meditated penetrate you, so that it warms your zeal, stimulates your piety, and produces devout affections. Third: If the subject is your indigence and your wretchedness, investigate them thoroughly. Subject yourself to a detailed and rigorous self-examination and judge yourself severely, laying before God your all neediness and your wounds, that he in turn may judge you with clemency. Fourth: To ensure that your prayer not stop at the level of simple aspirations or pious reflections, take some definite resolution with regard to your

⁶⁴Sainteté 11.2; 1683:284–87; 1701:1.362–65.

⁶⁵Sir 35:21: "The humble man's prayer pierces the clouds."

spiritual necessities, how you plan to amend your behavior or improve your rule of life—all this depending on the vices you wish henceforth to avoid or the virtues in which you intend to make progress. Fifth: Thank God that for all your unworthiness, he has permitted you to be in his presence. To facilitate the foregoing practices, make use of passages in your reading that have especially touched and edified you, and of those thoughts that tend to animate your devotion.⁶⁶

These words reveal Rancé's moderation as a teacher. He lays down no degrees of perfection, nor does he distinguish between categories of intimacy with God. His emphasis is on the need for each one to live out this intimacy. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in spite of everything, the ascetical aspect predominates for beginners. They thus begin by clearly seeing their own human reality. As always the Fathers point the way, in this case through their insistence on self-knowledge as a requirement for knowledge of God: "One who has seen his sin is greater than one who has seen the angels."⁶⁷ Once conscious of one's own interior, one longs for, waits for, and hopes for divine mercy. In this atmosphere of humility that gradually grows and in which the whole ascetic life develops, one begins to climb Climacus's *Ladder to Paradise*. One's attention is concentrated on the source of evil in one's heart. And it is there that one makes one's life's choice. The purpose of mortification is that the purified spirit should prevail over the material part of one's being, and so make matter new.⁶⁸

All Rancé's writing has but one purpose, that is, to purify the monk from all that is not God. A monk completely dedicated to this search, immersed in silence, hopes for the fulfillment of God's will, when his soul will be completely transformed into the image of its Creator. Once his capacity for love has been purified he experiences an utterly radical separation from any spirit whatever of worldly possession or interest, and this capacity becomes love in the strictest sense of the word. Gregory of Nyssa used to say it was a case of "really seeing God, and never having enough of this desire."⁶⁹ Once one is not centered on oneself and lives with totally detached humility, one's innermost being hopes for God and desires God, and, when God wills, this hope turns into unitive love.

Restrained in his exposition of his method of prayer, Rancé shows the extent and depth of his experience when he writes:

Here, my brothers, is a method that, though brief, is also holy and useful. You should feel free to follow it and apply it. Should you discover, however, that it does not suit you, that you have difficulty in adapting yourselves to it or that it does not yield the hoped-for benefits and advantages, do not force yourselves to continue, as if your prayer depended on it.

⁶⁶Sainteté 11.4; 1683:291–93; 1701:1.371–72.

⁶⁷Isaac the Syrian, PG 86:849–50.

⁶⁸Ælred Squire, *Asking the Fathers* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1973) 51–66.

⁶⁹Gregory of Nyssa, SCh 1:260–261.

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God's Spirit is free and in no way bound to human rules and practices. He gives himself to souls and inspires them in the manner that pleases him.⁷⁰

Such language is not new. Saint Bernard too affirms God's freedom to visit when and as he pleases. It does not depend on the level of holiness reached, or on one's courage, or on one's virtues. Such mercantile categories, so to speak, have no place in Saint Bernard's mentality either, a lesson Rancé learned well from him:

Brethren, when you come before the face of God and kneel at his altar to pray to him, abandon yourselves to whatever movement he inspires in you. Have a great confidence that the God who preserves the life of your bodies by his constant protection will not deny you the grace of prayer, without which you could not preserve the life of your souls. Hand over to him the disposition of your whole being and follow the promptings of his Spirit in complete simplicity, whether they lead you to ponder his truths, to tell him of your or your brothers' spiritual needs, or—should he inspire you—to present to him the needs of the whole Church. Follow him when he makes you shed floods of tears at the recollection of your faults, when he lifts you up to contemplate his ineffable beauty, and when he calls you to adore him in profound silence. Follow him when he attracts you and unites you to himself by the sacred bonds of love, when he illuminates you with heavenly lights, inspires devout sentiments, or forms within your heart fresh resolutions about your conduct. Abandon yourselves to him as well when he lets you remain in his presence with nothing to do but await in blessed idleness the actions he produces in souls that belong to him, according to his good pleasure.⁷¹

Prayer Marks the Path of the Monk's Deep Transformation

Rancé then takes his teaching to a completely different stage or, to put it in another way, makes a qualitative leap forward. The soul enters on the purest mystical life, which would seem to mean entering a milieu of total simplicity and freedom, because God is simple and respects our freedom. As for a method, all that is to be found is love or, rather, allowing oneself to be loved.

God alone can make God known. The Holy Spirit enables us to know the Son, and thanks to him, we go to the Father. The imitation of Christ reaches its apogee in meeting him, in being transformed in him who speaks to our hearts

⁷⁰Sainteté 11.4; 1683:293; 1701:1.372.

⁷¹Sainteté 11.4; 1683:293–94; 1701:1.372–73.

through the Holy Spirit. If Rancé insists so much on detachment, poverty, moderation, and interior stripping-away, it is only because he wants to lead the monk to a perfect inner balance so that he can experience that *passionless passion* for God that, prescinding from extraordinary phenomena, unites one directly with God. “In prayer one should not bother with any images or shapes; be immaterial in the presence of the Immaterial.”⁷² Rancé comes across as suspicious of extraordinary experiences. He had learned from the Desert Fathers that even ecstasy is for beginners and not for the mature: “Were you to see a young man climb up to heaven of his own volition, grab him by his foot and bring him back to earth, since such behavior is of no help to him whatever.”⁷³ Such experiences are for the *homo psychicus*, not for the spiritual:

I do not intend, brothers, to give you any more extensive rules on prayer than these. No other subject than prayer has been so written about or prayed over. Prayer after all is a wholly divine activity, better learned through God’s anointing than through human instruction. The Holy Spirit is its origin and principle and should also be its master and teacher.⁷⁴

Rancé describes the highest point of communion with God: one experiences in oneself the passage from fear to love. God fills one with his presence, and one becomes a new creature. All movement ceases and “one prays beyond prayer.”⁷⁵ Or, as Rancé puts it, echoing Saint Anthony, “The soul does not know it is praying.” One is in complete *otium*, in the deepest silence, a silence beyond prayer, in the peace that surpasses peace. “God comes to the soul, and the soul emigrates to God,” as Saint John Damascene expresses it.⁷⁶ But, as always, before revealing his own inner life by describing the higher reaches of communion with God, Rancé raises a question, and its answer is once again entrusted to the wisdom of the Fathers:

When the saints taught that the solitary’s prayer should be continual and that he was bound to pray without ceasing, they did not mean to say that his contemplation of God had to be so continuous and so incessantly attentive that it was never subject to interruption. They recognized that a state of complete stability and immobility was proper to angels rather than to human beings; furthermore, that there are in monasteries duties imposed by God calling for so much dedication that they inevitably draw the brothers’ attention

⁷²Nilus of Sinai, *De Oratone* 119, PG 79:1193; see also Chapters 117–18.

⁷³Apothegmata, anonymous series, Nau 244, F. Nau, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* 14 (1909): 357–79; *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Fairacres: SLG P, 1975, 34=Saying 112.

⁷⁴Sainteté 11.4; 1683:293; 1701:1.373.

⁷⁵Isaac the Syrian, quoted in *Vie d’Isaac Évêque d’Alexandrie écrite par Mina Évêque de Pchati*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 11:365.

⁷⁶John Damascene, *De Fide orthodoxa*, PG 94:1074–90.

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away from the Divine Majesty, temporarily obstructing the view.⁷⁷

By this assertion Rancé makes clear how definite and how balanced is the line he takes as a spiritual guide. He has no wish whatever to diminish the depth and excellence of union with God. Intellectualism has no place in Rancé's teaching. The Fathers he mentions most frequently—the Cappadocians, Saint Basil and Saint Gregory of Nyssa, as well as Saint Benedict, Cassian, , Saint Gregory the Great, and Saint Augustine, along with Saint Anthony, Saint John Climacus, Saint Ephrem, and Saint Maximus—all belonged to the school of spirituality that stressed Trinitarian theology. Knowledge of God and union with God are part of the dynamic of love. With the Incarnation, the reality of Christ becomes compelling and complete. In him, all is transfigured and saved. It is by the most thoroughgoing imitation of the Son of God that a monk accomplishes his vocation:

The saints held, brothers, that a religious could fulfill his duty of praying without ceasing when God's will governed the whole of his life, when his love filled his heart, when he kept to his will in everything, when his only desire was to please him.⁷⁸

Rancé is a classic witness to the spirituality of the Greek Fathers who locate the mystical life in God in whom the new creature originates.⁷⁹ God is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. Life in God becomes more supernaturally natural than our own human life:

And so, brethren, to rid you of your doubt as to how anyone can so forget himself in prayer as to be unaware that he is praying, I will tell you that when the soul . . . goes out of itself in all the movements of the heart and all the functioning of the intellect and draws near to God in prayer, it is like a person who finds himself looking open-eyed at the sun at noon. His eyes are so struck and dazzled by the sun's rays that he sees nothing but the brightness that surrounds him. His vision is restricted to this; none of the other objects are visible to him. In the same way when by a special grace a soul is penetrated by God and immersed in that unfathomable light, it is he alone that it sees, he alone that it perceives, he alone that it knows. Everything else escapes it, disappears, except for that beauty which it possesses and by which it is possessed. It is this beauty, endlessly attracting and ravishing the soul by its infinite loveliness that makes it incapable of interrupting or suspending its attention for even a moment. Thus hindered

⁷⁷Sainteté 11.4; 1683:293–94; 1701:1.373–74.

⁷⁸Sainteté 11.5; 1683:295; 1701:1.376.

⁷⁹See Gueric Couilleau, "Saint Jean Climaque," DSpir.

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from making the least reflection on itself, it is aware neither of itself, or what is happening to it, to the extent of not perceiving that the state it is in is the consequence of the exalted quality of its prayer.⁸⁰

It is the passage from fear to love. As Saint Gregory of Nyssa says, “God is the love that shoots the arrow, his only-begotten Son having drenched the three extremities at its point with the Spirit who gives life. The point itself is faith, which introduces not only the arrow but the Archer with it.”⁸¹ All motion ceases in order to adopt a heretofore-unknown rhythm. “One prays beyond prayer.”⁸² It is silence, complete rest beyond all prayer. “God comes to the soul and the soul emigrates into God,”⁸³ adds Saint John Damascene. At this stage everything appears both dazzling and dark simultaneously. One experiences changes that are humanly inexplicable. One’s heart opens out to the Infinite in love for all, in the joy and happiness of Easter.

Mary

It has repeatedly been said that Rancé scarcely mentions Mary. Yet it is well known that a characteristic aspect of Berullian spirituality, so highly approved of in Rancé’s days, was “never to separate the Son from the Mother.”⁸⁴ Bérulle, for instance, wrote a meditative prayer to Jesus Christ, which is immediately followed by another in homage of the Most Holy Virgin Mary’s greatness.⁸⁵ In other words Mariology was joined to Christology. We have reason to think that Rancé’s Christology includes this same approach to Mariology, based as it is on the teaching of the Fathers. This statement is confirmed by the special symbolism of the statue of the Virgin that Rancé placed above the renovated high altar at La Trappe. The following words were inscribed at the foot of the statue itself:

Christian, you come in a spirit of faith,
To take the holy bread of life.
Receive it worthily, and in the thought
That Mary’s most pure blood gave it its form.⁸⁶

What shall we say about the following words of the Abbot?

⁸⁰Sainteté 11.7; 1701:1.392.

⁸¹Gregory of Nyssa, Sch 1:105.

⁸²See n. 75.

⁸³See n. 76.

⁸⁴André Molien, “Bérulle (Cardinal Pierre de),” DSpir.

⁸⁵Around 1612 he wrote *Élévation (à Jésus sur ses principaux états et mystères, à la Trinité sur le mystère de l’Incarnation, à Dieu en l’honneur de la part qu’il a voulu donner à la V. Marie dans le mystère de l’Incarnation)*.

⁸⁶Albert Cherel, *Rancé* (Paris: Flammarion, 1930) 115.

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Knowing, after all, that the whole world continues in being solely by the merit of the Incarnation, that it is the foundation of our salvation and the gate of heaven, I cannot see how anyone could be so rash or presumptuous as to try to enter there without honoring the one God used to provide the entrance. . . . And if redemption is purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ, can anyone fail to realize that she is so united to him that in the saying of the Fathers the savior's flesh is the same as Mary's: "Caro Christi, caro Mariæ"? As a result, any indifference shown towards the mother cannot fail to reflect upon the Son. [He went on to say] Dear brothers, it would not be possible for us to be too diligent or assiduous in our recourse to her. Maybe you will say that already you daily sing her hymns and canticles of praise. To that I say, Yes, very good, but you should not stop there. Unless you add to these prayers and intercessions that we all say in public some private practices which you use to honor her as you call upon her, you will never fulfill your obligations as a religious and especially a religious of the Order of Cîteaux. For example, the recitation of the rosary, litanies, frequent aspirations to her as protectress, telling her from the depths of your souls, "In te sunt oculi nostri; ne pereamus, Virgo benedicta!"⁸⁷ I tell you, brothers, that for myself I count it a day lost and badly spent when I do not find a few moments to turn to her and commend my eternal salvation to her. I encourage you to do the same, and if you omit to do so, it will only be by deviating from my express wishes. For as I have told you, devotion to the Blessed Virgin is one of the most powerful means of sanctification God has placed at your disposal.⁸⁸

CONCLUSION

In spite of his deep and genuine desire to return to the golden age of ancient monachism, Rancé was not able to reach his goal, as he himself recognized, although his contemporaries were unanimous in seeing Rancé as the spiritual teacher of his century who was most faithful to the teachings of the early Fathers, whom he quotes constantly. The Council of Trent, in its turn, had vigorously requested a return to the study of those Fathers, and in the spiritual ambience of the Oratory, where Rancé's conversion took place, their works were highly esteemed. So, in addition to his personal regard for them, Rancé

⁸⁷"To you our eyes are turned, O blessed Virgin. Do not let us not perish."

⁸⁸Pierre Le Nain, *Vie de M. de Rancé*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1719) 2:486.

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had an ecclesial love for the Fathers. And yet at the same time he had an appreciation for contemporary spiritual writers, whom he also quotes frequently. All the following facts—Rancé’s great culture, the social standing of his family, the times during which he lived, and the painful happenings that marked them—all reveal the complexity of his character, and the need to go beyond first impressions and the prejudicial judgments of the past. As a result, thanks to deeper research, the spiritual worth of his teaching becomes evident. Rancé was a man of fiery disposition whom the grace of God mellowed and brought to great equanimity and prudence when guiding his spiritual children by a theological approach to imitating Christ.

In his teaching he makes a very helpful synthesis of the spirituality of the eastern Fathers focused on reacquiring the prerogative of being an “Icon” of God, which our nature possesses from its creation, and that of being children of the Father and sharing his nature. These themes orient all Rancé’s teaching concerning purification of the heart. On the other hand, Rancé does not forget the western Fathers, least of all Saint Augustine, nor more modern authors such as Saint Teresa, Saint Francis de Sales, and the Oratorians, who all stress the redemptive dimension of the suffering, humiliation, and pain that brought Jesus to death for our salvation. Following the supreme example of the Obedient One, who obeyed the Father’s will, fallen humans must also let themselves be aligned to the Father’s will. Acceptance of suffering is the indispensable way to genuine conformity to the eternal and saving will of the Father. Such is the powerful message of the *École Française* when pointing out the way to imitating Christ. Rancé never tried to speak about theology theoretically. Rather, he encouraged his monks, within the mysterious fellowship with Christ promised at their profession, to breathe with these two lungs of East and West, old and new.

Viewed this way, giving due prominence to its theological aspect, Rancé’s teaching, although somewhat austere, becomes more understandable, even in those parts of it that are least compatible with present-day culture. It is good to discover its treasures.

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