

## ***Otia Monastica*: some reflections on leisure and work in the context of contemporary monastic practice**

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“Idleness is the enemy of the soul” (RB 48)  
“With what activity shall we fill our leisure?” (Aristotle)

In this paper I would like to do three things. First, I want to explore what is meant by the term ‘*otia monastica*’ a phrase that literally translated means ‘monastic leisure.’ To many of us the concept of ‘monastic leisure’ may sound foreign, at worst non-existent, or at best elusive. Given St Benedict’s strictures about ‘idleness being the enemy of the soul,’ the term seems, at least at first glance, a contradiction of what our Benedictine monastic life is about. Secondly, accepting that such a thing as ‘monastic leisure’ does exist I will try to establish the relationship between leisure and our different works in its wider monastic context. Finally, I want to make some comparisons between ‘*otia monastica*’ and what is often called ‘work-life balance.’ How can monastics, who are engaged in this unique form of leisure, help people, either in their workplace or at home, come to a deeper understanding of the meaning and purpose of leisure in their lives and in God’s plan for salvation? All too often it seems, either they are overwhelmed by the total world of work or, even when they do have adequate leisure time, find leisure alienating or just as frenetic as their job.

### ***Defining ‘Otia Monastica’ – Monastic Leisure***

The use of the term ‘*otia monastica*’ has a well established history. Let us remind ourselves of the etymology of the English term ‘leisure’ and some of its modern meanings. It is derived from the Old French word ‘*leisir*’ and beyond that the Latin ‘*licere*’ meaning literally ‘to be permitted.’ Also, there are a number of other English words that provide further insights to its meaning. For instance, our word ‘school’ is derived from the Greek word for leisure which is *σχολη*. That tells us something

about the way in which leisure was understood in Greek civilisation. Again, the Latin word, (nominative plural) for leisure is, as we know '*otia*' (singular = '*otium*') the opposite being '*negotia*' that is 'not at leisure'; in other words to be engaged in commerce or business; hence our English word 'negotiate.' The Latin '*otiosa*' comes from the same stem but it tends to have a pejorative connotation meaning 'idleness.' This is certainly the case in the Rule of Benedict RB. However you cannot be hard and fast about this usage. It is sometimes translated as 'leisure.' This lack of precision presents us with a problem. Additionally, there are a number of words like recreation, relaxation, happiness, well-being that imply some element of leisurely activity but do not come from the same root as 'leisure.'

As you probably know, because of the pre-eminence of leisure in antiquity, work and commerce were disdained, especially by the ruling classes, the property owning and intellectual elite. This presented a problem for the first Christian communities, including monks and monasteries, who were attempting both to make work respectable and an indispensable element of the Christian life.

There is an enormous body of literature on the topic of leisure, mainly from a sociological perspective. One of the key elements of leisure is freedom from work. We can make a choice as to whether we engage in leisure or not. That is not always the same with work. There is a duty or obligation attached to work. Without getting in to it too deeply you can identify three broad meanings of leisure.

1. First it can be understood as an opposite or co-relative of work. It is the freedom from work or 'non-work time' that affords the opportunity to engage in some form of 're-creation.' Leisure is physically and psychologically restorative.
2. Second, it can be reflective time, or simply just 'being' or doing nothing. Here the boundary between work, leisure and idleness can become blurred. Is there, for instance, a positive form of 'idleness' in the sense of being still or at rest?

3. Finally, leisure can be seen to have a 'transcendent' or 'spiritual' character in so far as it provides the individual with an opportunity to 'transcend' the concerns of work and deepen one's relationship with some higher power.

Next I want to examine more closely our monastic understanding of 'leisure'. As far as I know the most comprehensive treatment is found in Jean Leclercq's '*Otia Monastica*' published in the '*Studia Anselmiana*' series in 1963. A summary of his analysis can be found in Appendix A. It gives a useful introduction into the ways in which monastic leisure has been understood through the centuries especially the first millennia. For instance, he examines from a secular, biblical and patristic perspective a number of leisure categories such as *quies*, *otium*, *vacatio* and *sabbatum*.

The foundations for this early Christian tradition on leisure goes back beyond to the '*otium sanctum*' of the Patristic period to classical pagan times and the Old Testament. The term 'leisure' is seldom explicitly used in either the Old or New Testament although a number of words such as rest, solitude, silence and Sabbath, imply some form of leisure. Jesus certainly felt the need to 'get away from it all' either by himself or with his disciples.

And Jesus said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.  
(Mark 6:31)

As mentioned earlier, in ancient Hellenistic and Roman culture, leisure implied maximum freedom from the daily concerns of running a business or having to work. Aristotle, for instance, speaks of three kinds or states, pleasure, leisure and public life. Leisure gave an individual the opportunity to contemplate, reflect on the important things in life, make good decisions, take part in public life and the work of the *polis*.

"Contemplation is both the highest form of activity (since the intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects it apprehends are the highest things that can be known), and also is the most continuous...Also it is commonly believed that happiness depends on leisure; because we occupy ourselves so that we may have leisure."  
(Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10 vii)

The reason to work, in Aristotle's view, was not to obtain position, money or power but to have time for leisure. However he distinguishes between leisure and idleness or inactivity.

"This is the main question, with what activity one's leisure is filled?" (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VIII iii)

Both Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379) and Augustine of Hippo (c.354-430), two important monastic founders, spent the early part of their adult life in 'philosophical communities' where leisure time afforded them the opportunity to reflect and discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Both came to repudiate this philosophical leisure in favour of a leisure that is dedicated to the pursuit of the knowledge of the truth: that is, the search for God. Basil condemned,

The 'evil leisure of the Athenians' which succumbed to devilish spirits. He contrasted this defective leisure to 'a good and beneficial 'scholē' which pursued the cognisance of God

Augustine, in the *City of God*, identifies three kinds of life including the life of leisure.

As for the three kinds of life – the life of leisure, the life of action and the combination of both: a Christian might conduct his life in any of these ways and still attain to everlasting rewards, provided that he does so without prejudice to his faith...the delight offered by a life of leisure ought to consist not in idle inactivity, but in the opportunity to seek and find the truth, so that everyone may make progress in this regard, and not jealously withhold his discoveries from others...thus it is the love of truth which seeks a holy leisure, while it is under the impetus of love that we should undertake righteous business." (Bk. 19, Ch. 19)

An important point to make here is that leisure activity is directed toward God, it is not an end in itself.

### ***Work and Leisure in the Rule of Benedict***

Only five times in the Rule of Benedict's (RB) Latin text is the root word for 'leisure' *otium* used and then in a pejorative sense to mean 'idle' or 'idleness.' (RB 6.8; 48.1; 48:18; 48:24; 67.4). In doing this the RB was following the earlier Christian monastic tradition of treating 'idleness as the enemy of the soul,' a practice that goes back to the Desert Fathers, and beyond that to some of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament

The wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure; only the one who has little business can become wise.' (Sirach 38:24)

Much of this is mediated to the RB through Cassian (c.360-430). Idleness was synonymous with *acedia*, boredom or even despair,

Once *acedia* has seized possession of a wretched mind it makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell...likewise it renders him slothful and immobile in the face of all the work to be done within the walls of his dwelling" (Cassian, *The Institutes*, Paulist Press, New York, 2000, 10, ii, pp.219-236).

The RB brings under the broad heading of work four different activities. First, the 'Work of God' or the *Opus Dei*. 'Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God' says Benedict (RB 43:3). Next there is manual labour or *labor* (RB 48). Thirdly there is the work of the craftsmen or artisans or *artes* in the monastery (RB 57). But then there is a fourth category, not so explicit, which might be called 'inner work' or the work of conversion, that is our unique Benedictine vow, *conversatio morum*. The monastery is the spiritual workshop in which the monk toils through the labour of obedience (RB Prologue v.2 and 4:78). Included in this are the 'good deeds' (*bona* or *opera*) achieved under the impulse of grace and co-operation with the Holy Spirit. Given this strong focus on work and prayer with no great sympathy for a 'life of leisure' what grounds are there for claiming that the RB makes provision for leisure?

As we have seen from teasing out the meaning of '*otia monastica*' the RB does make provision for monastic leisure. First, it establishes a physical environment where we can be at rest or in repose, a place of stillness. That is why our abbey church, the cloister and cell are so important to us. Secondly the provision for private prayer and keeping silence. This is continually alluded to in the literature referring to '*otia monastica*.' Thirdly the importance of sacred reading or *lectio divina*. I always think that it is interesting that the RB treats this reading activity in the same chapter as manual work (RB 48). Perhaps Benedict is trying to say something about monastic 'work-life balance'? At the physical level sacred reading offered some respite from hard toil. It also engaged the intellect and the heart. So, this chapter, besides explicitly informing us about manual labour, which occupied another four to five hours of the day, is recommending implicitly something that was a leisurely activity.

The RB says nothing about the actual practice of *lectio divina* itself but the 12<sup>th</sup> century Carthusian Guigo II writing c. 1150, described it as an evolved four stage process, of reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. (Guigo II, *Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, Cistercian Studies, 1979, pp.67-86). So, the implicit leisure activity of *lectio divina*, is directly linked to the inner work of a monk seeking God. This monastic leisure is one of a number of activities that has the power to transform the monk, help him grow in virtue and moral perfection.

Another point I would like to make before looking at some examples of monastic leisure is the connection between leisure, the *Opus Dei* (corporate prayer, or worship) and culture. Here I would like to introduce some important insights from the German philosopher Josef Pieper (1904-1997). Soon after WW II, just as Germany was embarking on its economic regeneration programme, Pieper, drawing on the writings of St Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-74), warned about the obsession with work at the expense of leisure. For Pieper the heart of leisure lies in festival and celebration. (Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, St Augustine's Press, 1998 pp. 50-51). Above all it is worship that provides these two elements. I would suggest that the Benedictine worship, the praise of God our Creator, that is the *Opus Dei* is in itself a leisure activity. That might prompt us to reflect how, in our modern society, we have lost the sense of festival and celebration, but more especially Sabbath 'There can be no celebration without God', Pieper reminds us. So, although at first examination the RB makes no apparent reference to leisure I would claim that it is evident in many ways. As St Augustine reminds us the '*City of God*' monastics strive for the eternal or perpetual Sabbath.' (Book 22: Chapter 30)

The constitutions of the EBC provide for a thirty minute period of spiritual reading or *lectio divina*, Also, a similar period for private prayer and contemplation. Neither should be forget the benefit of the time spent in the calefactory or guest house parlour. Does not the way we engage with leisure have some important lessons for the leisure industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the way it conducts itself?

## ***Monastic Leisure and Regaining Life Balance***

Now let's ask ourselves, how does society's current understanding and use of leisure time fit with the RB? Sociologists and economists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were keen observers of leisure activity and the leisure classes. A century and a half ago Karl Marx (1818-1883) observed that 'leisure time for a privileged class is produced by converting the whole lifetime of the masses into labour time.' (K. Marx, *Capital*, Everyman Library, 1930, p.575). In our own day, the 'fetishism' for commodities, again predicted by Marx, depends in no small way on the exploitation of the unskilled and low wage economies in the undeveloped world. (Marx, p.42)

Furthermore, leisure activities increasingly demand significant disposable income and are often associated with a particular social class or life-style. Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), fifty years after Marx, differentiated forms of leisure by coining the phrases 'conspicuous consumption' and 'conspicuous leisure.' (T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, Dover Publications, New York, 1970 pp. 23-62) Leisure has become a status symbol, it tells others about our position in society. Two centuries later we ask, 'has much changed'? On the positive side we can point to improved standards of living, more opportunity for leisure, greater affluence and disposable income, an increase in property ownership and wealth, better health care, educational opportunity, longer holidays, shorter working week, better working conditions and so on. Yet, while for many countries the leisure (and hospitality) industry has become a significant employer and wealth generator, this economic progress has brought a number of negative aspects. Among these, I believe, is the 'commodification' of leisure. In particular, leisure has lost its contemplative dimension. Fundamentally this is why leisure needs to be redeemed.

In 'Consider your Call' published in 1978, the chapter on Work devotes one page to leisure. It draws our attention to the danger of making our monastic work a cult to the extent that there is the danger of forcing out leisure. Work for work's sake, the search for self-justification through work, or a sense of guilt when one is not engaged on a job, are neither Christian nor monastic, it says. Furthermore, the

section adds, it can greatly hinder a person's human and spiritual development and create a tense and competitive spirit in a community...Some reassessment of the practice of leisure in our monasteries seems desirable, it says. Then it goes on to speak about the need for monastic holidays, regular breaks from the stressful or demanding work, extended periods available for prayer and reflection, an opportunity for sabbaticals, quiet days and retreats. Forty years on we might ask ourselves has this advice been heeded? We live busy lives and fortunately we are safeguarded by the half hour periods for private prayer and '*lectio divina*' prescribed by our constitutions. To me that seems to be a minimum requirement.

Since 'Consider your Call' other monastic writers have treated this topic. For instance, as part of a series in the 'Tablet' on the 'Lost Art of Leisure' you may have come across an article by Martin Browne of Glenstal Abbey entitled 'Listening with the heart.' In it I found a quotation from Thomas Merton who told his novices that "the monastic life is ordered to leisure in the best sense." In that article the reader was reminded that the opening word of the Prologue to the RB, 'Listen.' Benedict summons us to engage in holy leisure or 'otium sanctum' as it is called in the early Christian centuries. And, each time we hear that verse of the invitatory, Psalm 94, are we not called to 'Listen to his voice'?

In his book '*Strangers to the City*' (2005) the Cistercian Michael Casey devotes a whole chapter to leisure. He points out that RB 6, about the 'Restraint of Speech' exhorts 'the disciple to be silent and listen.' Leisure he adds is an integral part of the Benedictine vocation. 'It is a time of space and freedom in which the deep self can find fuller expression.' He is quick to warn about the enemies of leisure as well. Michael Casey (p.33) quotes a famous story from Cassian's Ninth conference on Prayer (Section VI,i) about the monk totally absorbed by his work (Cassian, *Conferences*, Ed. B. Ramsay, Newman Press, New York, 1997, pp.333-334). It is, above all, being attentive.

Casey reinforces this view with a quotation from Josef Pieper. Pieper confronts the type of person who embodies the 'total work' culture, where people are defined by

their jobs to the exclusion of character, where a country's greatness is based solely upon economics or gross national product, and leisure time is simply time away from work, free time, your own time, necessary R&R (rest and relaxation) so that one can return to the battlefield of labour rested and rejuvenated. These ideals, maintains Pieper, destroy the meaningful life. The irony is that the Western worker, raised in a culture dominated by Christianity, has been immersed in the religious concept of grace and yet is unable or unwilling to transfer it to the world of work. For Pieper, as for Benedict, 'leisure' is not just time off manual labour, it is beyond that. The worker must win contact with what he calls the 'superhuman life giving forces.' Also, we must allow grace to work in us (RB Prologue).

Leisure is a form of silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality. Leisure is a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation. (*Leisure the Basis of Culture* pp. 50-60).

I do not think it is necessary to rehearse in any great detail the many forms that leisure takes in modern Western society. Today, if we ask people the question 'how do you occupy your leisure time' or 'what counts as leisure?' they will more likely point to holidays at home and abroad, cinema, TV, a game of soccer, going to a sporting event, a walk in the countryside, some cultural pursuit like a visit to an art gallery, reading a book, or very occasionally going to Church? One thing they are less likely to say is that they are going to engage in contemplative activity although a small majority may do so. In themselves I do not think that any of these leisure activities, so called, are bad, they just are not enough. They have taken over, subsumed everything else. It strikes me that leisure has become almost as frenetic as work, if not more so. People come back from holiday and they feel that we almost need a holiday to get over the one they have just had. Driven by media hype, peer-group pressures and sheer necessity, non-work time becomes more pressured as we try and fit everything in to those few hours we have available. In the same way that work can be alienating, the same can be said about contemporary approach to leisure as well. Another point we need to consider is that leisure activity needs to be

at least morally neutral and at best a virtuous activity. By this I mean of course that there are certain forms of non-monastic leisure that we might legitimately engage in and others that we should not. To what extent should monastics be taking the lead on this? Because of lack of time, there are a number of leisure pursuits not mentioned. Notice that nothing has been said about the aesthetic aspects of leisure such as church music and Gregorian chant, art, architecture and secular literature. Neither have we directed our attentions to aspects of leisure that provide physical regeneration.

Throughout the Christian centuries there has been a continual tension between the demands of work and the demands of holy leisure. For instance in the twelfth century St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) writing to Pope Eugenius III

One day passes on litigation to the next, one night reveals malice to the next; so much so that you have no time to breathe, no time to rest and no time for leisure.... To give no time during life to such pious and beneficial leisure, is this not to lose your life? (*Five Books on Consideration* Bk. 4 iii)

It is a constant battle as Abbots and other superiors know only too well. This is not something confined to monasteries. It is a universal problem, at least for the Western civilisation.

The Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship reporting in 1924 stated that,

Leisure is part of God's positive purpose for men and women in the development of personality; not only a means of keeping fit for the daily toil....Happy leisure depends to a large extent on happy work, and when work is happy a number of problems connected with leisure today will be found to have disappeared, because there will be greater possibilities of self-realisation through work, and consequently people occupied in work that is recognised as worth doing will improve in character and intelligence.

Echoing these sentiments the Anglican Christian Socialist writer Maurice Reckitt (1884-1880) wrote in *Faith and Society* in 1932,

The truth is that our conception of leisure is as vague and anachronistic as our conception of work, and equally unworthy. Leisure is not by nature a mere prerequisite or economic privilege; still less is it to be identified with a condition of destitute idleness. Its social basis is abundance; its essence is spontaneity; its natural fruits freedom and joy; its disciple responsibility.

More recently in 1956 the Church Assembly of the Church of England declared that,

The purpose of economic systems is to enable people to provide themselves with livelihood and leisure, not to make work or create new needs.

This is a concern also expressed by the Second Vatican Council more than a decade later,

The opportunity, moreover, should be granted to workers to unfold their own abilities and personality through the performance of their work. Applying their time and strength to their employment with a due sense of responsibility, they should also all enjoy sufficient rest and leisure to cultivate their familial, cultural, social and religious life. They should also have the opportunity freely to develop the energies and potentialities which perhaps they cannot bring to much fruition in their professional work. (*Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1967, §67)

A recent report in 2001 by the RC Church points out that there has been little theoretical study about the nature and purpose of leisure.

The modern age is characterised by the phenomenon of leisure time, which must be distinguished from the *otium* of the classical epoch, typical of a civilisation based on clearly defined hierarchies determined by a person's work and his social standing. Leisure time is therefore of recent origin and is closely linked to the change from an agricultural to an industrial and post-industrial society. Leisure time, a typically western phenomenon, is not without ambiguity because it comes a poor second to work, which always predominates, and because there has been but little theoretical study about its nature and its purpose. With regard to "the possibility of personal fulfilment and room for creativity" leisure time should contribute to the autonomy and full dignity of the human person. To achieve this an enormous sense of responsibility is required. Tourism acquires value if it helps free the human person, if it gives answers to the questions raised by modern culture and if it overcomes the prevailing temptations to nihilism, consumerism and aestheticism. (Church's Mission to Tourism: *Report on Tourism as a Leisure Time Activity*, 2001)

Is it too much to claim that we Benedictines have a significant contribution to make in this area?

One of the important charisms that our Benedictine way of life can give to society in general, but particularly to those people who we educate or offer hospitality is this '*otia monastica*'. The opportunity to do this is by no means unique to our monastery. Most of you here have schools, parishes and guest houses. We can be important models of an alternative form of leisure.

Speaking from my personal experience participants have fed back the following comments:

1. Leisure in RB is not only about making time and space. It is an attitude, an orientation of the mind and heart towards God. Implicit in daily monastic life. It is essential for everyone's 'life balance'
2. There is a strong link between modern's society's understanding and use of leisure and life style. The sustainable balanced and temperate lives which monastics lead (nurtured in part through *lectio divina* and the *Opus Dei*) teaches modern society an important lesson about the meaning and purpose of work and the individual's perceived need for appropriate leisure activity
3. The opportunity to go into 'contemplative mode' and think carefully about important decisions and workplace issues (e.g. career change, how to cope with redundancy, fractured relationships) has become an indispensable part of daily routine
4. The practice of *lectio divina* has increased participants sensitivity to ethical attitudes in the workplace and the way these affect other stakeholders
5. A contemplative practice is indispensable to organisational leadership especially when under pressure or at times of isolation or vulnerability
6. Leisure, happiness and personal fulfilment are interlinked

To conclude, what I have tried to do in this paper is re-establish a link between society's post-modern understanding of leisure and a much more ancient form of leisure, namely a 'monastic leisure' as understood in pre-modern times. I have done this first by looking at the meaning of monastic leisure. Secondly how monastic leisure juxtaposed and integrated with monastic work features in the Rule of Benedict. Finally I have explored some of the ways in which our monastic understanding and practice of leisure speaks to the contemporary workplace especially on issues such as work life balance. Increasingly, people from all walks of life are discovering for the first time the wisdom and teaching of the Rule of Benedict. All too often, under the influence of what goes on beyond the enclosure, we allow ourselves to be drawn or driven down the road of 'total work.' But does not

the way in which we engage with work and leisure as monastics, in all its different facets and charisms, its balance and its rhythm, provide a vital witness to the world about us? Is it not an affirmation to the world that our monastic models of work and leisure are two of the key instruments by which all people, whoever they are, can be transformed to the likeness of God?

## APPENDIX A

### SUMMARY OF LATIN WORDS USED TO DESCRIBE DIFFERENT FORMS OF MONASTIC LEISURE

Jean Leclercq OSB, "Otia Monastica" *Studia Anselmiana*, 1963

- (a) In Antiquity (English translation taken from *Lewis & Short Latin-English Dictionary*)
- i. *Quies* – rest, repose, cessation from labour and/or from cares, a quiet life, keeping still, a resting place
  - ii. *Otium* – leisure, vacant time, freedom from business, ease, inactivity, rest, repose, quiet, peace
  - iii. *Vacatio* - being free from a duty, dispensation, exempt, immunity from something
  - iv. *Sabbatum*- Sabbath, day of rest, ('the eternal or perpetual Sabbath' St Augustine, *City of God*, Book 22, Cha.30)
- (b) Middle Ages
- i. Contemplative solitude
  - ii. Interior silence
  - iii. Resting in God
- (c) Twelfth Century
- i. Repose of the monastic cloister
  - ii. Repose of the mind
  - iii. Contemplative repose
  - iv. Is there a Latin form of *hesychasm*?
- (d) Thirteenth Century onwards
- i. Cistercian and Carthusian traditions – the hermitage
  - ii. *Tranquillitas animi* and interior peace (Paul Giustiniani 1476-1528) highlights the danger of *negotioissimum otium*
  - iii. *Vita quieta* (Louis de Blois d. 1566)
  - iv. Maurists - '*Repos de l'oraison*' (Dom Claude Martin) and '*ce sacré repos, ce bienheureux silence*' (Dom Benoît Vincent)
  - v. '*Travaillons dans le calme de l'esprit et le repos du coeur*' (Gueranger in a letter dated 1830)

- vi. 'The object and life and reward of the ancient monasticism was *summa quies* – the absence of all excitement, sensible and intellectual, and the vision of eternity' (Newman, *The Mission of St Benedict in Essays and Sketches* edited by C F Harold 1948)
- vii. Speaking of the monastery '*Il est, sans doute, un lieu de loisir, de liberté, de repos (et tel est le sens primitive du mot schola σχολη), mais ce loisir a pour fin l'étude des choses de Dieu et l'entraînement, l'éducation de ses soldats, de sa garde d'honneur.*' (Delatte 1913)