**Conversatio Morum Suorum**

*Br. Steven Olderr, OSB*

Dealing with this term is sometimes reminiscent of trying to lay hands on a fish wriggling on the end of a fishing line. The original meaning was lost about 200 years after Benedict first used it, and it took approximately 1200 years to recover that which was lost, but even at that it remains elusive.

Poetry has been described as a form that allows one to say things that cannot be said in ordinary prose. It seems that even in Benedict’s own day the term *conversatio morum suorum* was somewhat confusing. Could it be that Benedict chose this peculiar term to express something that was otherwise ineffable?

Be that as it may, Benedictines all take this vow (although for some odd reason the word *suorum* is often omitted), and all of us are called to follow it. So how are we to deal with it? Following is commentary by some Benedictine scholars that may help point us in the right direction.

The vow *conversatio morum* means the monastic life according to the Rule of St. Benedict. The reason why I present it in the original Latin is that for almost twelve hundred years Benedictines have been professing something else – *conversio morum* – which means the conversion of one’s morals and manners. St. Benedict says the monk who is making his profession promises stability, *conversatio morum suorum*, and obedience. Some two hundred years after St. Benedict it was difficult to understand just what he meant by this expression, so copyists changed it to *conversione morum suorum*. In recent times critical editions of the Rule have restored the original to the text, beginning with that of Abbot Butler in 1912, and scholars have debated its meaning ever since. *Dom Wulstan Mork, OSB; Benedictine Way*

*Conversatio* means manner of life, habitual way of acting, conduct, but *conversatio morum suorum* is either clumsy or meaningless—the manner of life of one’s morals! No wonder it was changed to *conversion of manners*. But in 1959 Dom Basil Steidle of Beuron gave a satisfactory solution to the problem: the puzzling term was a low Latin idiom of St. Benedict’s time, a “genitive of identity,” and it meant “his manner of life and moral conduct, or his manner of life, that is, his moral conduct.” *Dom Wulstan Mork, OSB; Benedictine Way*

That St. Benedict expects one’s growth as a Christian to take time is the point of the third vow a Benedictine takes: *conversatio morum*. This Latin phrase is difficult to translate, but the basic thrust is that the monk promises to commit himself to the monastic life as an ongoing process. He is not making an unrealistic promise that he will become instantly perfect; he is making the realistic promise that he will struggle to embody the monastic ideal throughout his life. *Abbot Andrew Marr, OSB; St. Gregory’s Abbey and Benedictine Monasticism*

*Conversatio morum* does not mean only the interior, spiritual, or moral life of each member of the community. It means a life of service and refers more directly to the external life of monastic discipline. Better still, it is the life of monastic discipline in its true spiritual dimension, that is the observances of one’s own monastery used as a precious instrument to encounter God, serve him, purify the heart and grow into the likeness of Christ. This is the service to which St. Benedict refers when he states, “We intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service.” It is the imitation of Christ, “who did not come to be served but to serve.” *Fr. Augustine Roberts, OCSO; Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession*

*Conversatio morum* is inseparable from stability. While some Benedictines still translate this Latin phrase as “conversion,” most of us prefer to keep the Latin words, since there is no satisfactory simple English equivalent. Conversion—especially religious conversion—suggests a major change in direction, even a reversal. *Conversatio morum* promises fidelity to a way of life and behavior in a community that is on the move. *Sr. Verna Holyhead, SGS; Gifts from St. Benedict; www.benedictineoblates.com*

Fidelity to the monastic lifestyle (*conversatio morum suorum*) is one of the more controverted terms in the Rule of Benedict, but scholars seem to agree that it essentially refers to the traditional external practices of monasticism—the things monks ordinarily do. Thus the three promises suggested by Benedict are not really equivalent to the three modern vows, for *conversatio morum* includes the other two and describes the whole life. Since the word contains the evocative root *converti*, such an interpretation seems pretty bland, but the ancients assumed that acceptance of the monastic lifestyle would imply a thorough change of the person on a deep level. On a purely philological level, the addition of *morum suorum* to *conversatio* may add a moral element to the question. *Fr. Terrence G. Kardong, OSB; Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary*

For Benedict, stability, fidelity to the monastic lifestyle, and obedience were really just parts of one intention: to be a good monk. . . . We make our promises before God, and it is He whom we offend if we do not hold fast to them. *Fr. Terrence Kardong, OSB; Day by Day with St. Benedict*

For St. Benedict in particular, the whole life which he outlines and for which he legislates in his Rule is the monk’s *conversatio*, his chosen way of growth in the following of Christ. By it, the monk hopes to purify his heart in dependence on the Master and thus “deserve to share in his kingdom.” This way of life, modeled above all on the first Christian community, is so important for St. Benedict that he makes it the object of the monk’s principal commitment at the time of profession. By his solemn promise of *conversatio [morum]*, each brother pledges fidelity to the apostolic life described in the Rule and in monastic tradition as a whole. *Fr. Augustine Roberts, OCSO; Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession*

If the body or framework of monastic life consists in its essential practices—solitude, silence, lectio divina, divine worship, austerity, common life, work, and the like—its soul is found in Christian humility, that is, in the humble Christ. *Fr. Augustine Roberts, OCSO; Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession*

In monastic formation . . . one begins with exterior practices which form an atmosphere in which the interior practice can grow. *Fr. Thomas Merton, OCSO (1915-1968); Cassian and the Fathers*

It is important to realize the *conversatio morum* implies an internalization not only of a way of life, but of Christ himself. *Fr. Augustine Roberts, OCSO; Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession*

Just as the human soul does not emerge mechanically from the body, but comes spiritually from outside by a special creation of God, so also the observances merely form a favorable environment in which the spirit of God tends to have fewer obstacles in transforming the human heart. *Fr. Augustine Roberts, OCSO; Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession*

Monasticism is primarily a lifestyle, not a philosophy. *Fr. Terrence Kardong, OSB; Day by Day with St. Benedict*

Spiritual life practices as such have to be seen as a mere means to the end of union with God. Still, it has to be insisted that monasticism is very much a set of practices—and not a set of ideas. There is something inherently concrete about monasticism; it must be done, not merely talked about. Furthermore, even though monastic practices have symbolic value, it is almost impossible to disentangle the letter from the spirit. We can also note that in many cases, the practice must come before the understanding. That is, before one has practiced something like silence, one does not know what it is. Only when we have done it can we know what it means. *Fr. Terrence Kardong, OSB; Day by Day with St. Benedict*

## The monastic style of life that evolved in the West after the Desert Fathers and St. Benedict is supported by a triple base. Sacred reading, manual work, and liturgical prayer constitutes a threefold footing of our daily life. The personal stability of each monk or nun in the monastic vocation depends in part on this triadic foundation. Fr. Charles Cummings, OCSO; Monastic Practices

I hope this all helps in some way. Still, it all calls to mind the Buddhist parable of the blind men encountering an elephant for the first time and imagining what it is like by touching it. Each blind man feels a different part of the elephant's body, but only one part, such as the side or the tusk or the tail. They then describe the elephant based on their limited experience and their descriptions of the elephant are all different from one another yet each contains some truth.

May God bless you on your journey.