

JOHN CASSIAN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF GOD¹

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In the Bohairic Life of Pachomius, the story is told of Theodore that one day after he had been in the monastery six months he came to Pachomius weeping copiously and said to him, "I would like you, father, to declare to me that I shall see God; if not, what is the profit for me to have been brought into the world? Pachomius admonished him: "Make haste to bring the fruit the Gospel speaks of, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' And if an impure thought enters your mind, be it hatred or wickedness, jealousy, envy, contempt for your brother, or human vainglory, remember at once and say, 'If I consent to any one of those things, I shall not see the Lord.'" ²

This little story from a text never translated into Greek or Latin is of great interest for understanding the spirit of early monasticism, for it corresponds exactly with the conception of the monastic life proposed by John Cassian in his two works written in the early fifth century in southern Gaul. The literary forms are quite different, to be sure, but the theological vision is the same, that is, the possibility of making spiritual progress through the struggle against the vices to the point where it is possible to see God. Cassian also makes use of the beatitude to describe the spiritual itinerary that he is proposing. The quest for purity of heart, which Cassian, using a Greek word borrowed from Paul, calls the *scopos* of the monastic life, is essential in order to arrive at the final goal, the kingdom of heaven or "seeing God." Already in the rhetorically elaborate prologue to the *Institutes*, where he announces the program he is going to develop, Cassian insists that he is proposing something new that cannot be found in existing writings on the monastic life. In addition to Basil and Jerome whom he names explicitly, that must have included for his Latin audience Athanasius' *Life of An-*

¹ This paper was delivered originally in a symposium at the University of Graz sponsored by the faculties of Theology and Sociology

² A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia: The Lives, Rules, and Other Writings of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples. 1 The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples*. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publ., 1980. p. 58, 273 (note).

tony, the writings of Sulpicius Severus, and some writings of Augustine, especially his monastic ones.

The search for God was of course reinforced for monastic men and women through the recitation of the Psalter. With Psalm 13 (14):2 they prayed regularly: "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God." And in Psalm 27:8 they prayed: "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek."

There is little doubt that Cassian saw himself as a reformer, although he did not use the word and did not identify himself as such.³ Yet he created and proposed an authentic "tradition" to counter what he found in southern Gaul.⁴ In response to requests from bishops in the province of Narbonensis Secunda to produce works to guide the nascent monastic movement in southern Gaul, John Cassian produced writings aimed at reforming and introducing theological coherence into a popular movement with whose social (the Gallic nobility) and spiritual orientation he disagreed. He saw that monasticism as superficial and misguided.⁵

When Cassian arrived in Gallia Narbonensis about 415 (we do not know where he spent the previous ten years), he brought with him a wealth of experience and learning. His many years in Palestine and Egypt had given him broad experience of the monastic movement in the East. His first hand experience of the Origenist controversy in Egypt in 400 and later of the sad events surrounding the condemnation and exile of John Chrysostom, who had ordained him deacon, made him well acquainted with the results of unchecked human passions and vindictiveness. Although he had been educated in the classical Latin tradition of poets such as Vergil and was clearly familiar with the rhetorical tradition, he was also obviously bilingual in Greek as well and even hints that he had picked up the Egyptian language later known as Coptic. His rich vocabulary makes clear his knowledge of the grand philosophical-theological tradition of the Greek-

³ See M. Sheridan, "segregati a credentium turbis: historical and theological reflections on monastic origins" *Cristianesimo nella storia* 36 (2015): 1-33.

⁴ See M. Sheridan, "John Cassian and the formation of authoritative tradition" *Foundations of Power and Conflicts of Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism. Proceedings of the International Seminar, Turin, December 2-4, 2004* (ed. A. Camplani and G. Filoramo, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 157; Leuven: Peeters, 2007) pp. 157-173.

⁵ See R.J. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian. Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth Century Gaul*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Goodrich has reconstructed in some detail the social background in southern Gaul of the early fifth century in which Cassian was writing.

speaking Christian East. It is not surprising that bishops in Gallia Narbonensis, a province that was becoming increasingly provincial, where such experience was rare and where the earlier rich bilingual culture was dying out, sought his assistance. He did not disappoint them, but produced the greatest classics of western monasticism.

The quest for the face of God inevitably raises the question of theology in the original sense of the word, that is, the discourse about the nature of God. And that brings us in turn to the central question of this essay, Cassian's understanding of the divine nature and how that influenced the positions he took on a number of questions. Cassian has been rightly characterized by several modern writers as a theologian rather than a historian.⁶ However, if one thinks of theology in the modern sense of the word, which covers numerous so-called "theological" disciplines, this characterization may be something of an anachronism. On the other hand, if taken in the ancient sense of the word *theologia*, the discourse about the nature of God, it may be very accurate.

This article seeks to explore Cassian's *theologia*, his understanding of the nature of God and how that affects his treatment of a number of key themes in his works including the interpretation of Scripture, the use of the concept of the "inner man" and the question of free will. Cassian invokes the traditional notion that a correct interpretation of Scripture must be "worthy of God," a criterion found already in Philo of Alexandria and many later patristic writers both Greek and Latin. He uses the notion of the "inner man" as the focus of God's real interest, which of course presumes some understanding of the nature of God. Cassian was the first to use this concept to explain the relationship between the external "practices" of the monastic movement and the goal of personal spiritual development.

His treatment of the question of grace and free will presumes that God would not grant free will without also making possible its exercise. This too reflects a certain understanding about the nature of God. In this question, he was reacting against Jerome and Augustine, both of whom had introduced what he considered theologically destructive ideas. In his overall conception of the spiritual journey, Cassian was undoubtedly indebted to the earlier tradition stemming from Philo through Origen to Evagrius of Pontus to whom he was indebted in particular for

⁶ See A.J. Casiday, *Tradition and Theology in St John Cassian*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Jean-Claude Guy, *Jean Cassien: vie et doctrine spirituelle*. Paris: Lethielleux, 1961.

the scheme of the eight principal vices, but in his treatment of the above-mentioned themes, he was quite original and creative. Here we will explore in turn these three areas.

1. A correct interpretation of Scripture must be worthy of God.

In explaining the need to struggle against the vice of anger, Cassian insisted that there was no justification for anger and took the position that it must be eliminated completely, but he noted that there are some who appeal to the authority of Scripture to justify their anger:

And so, since these things cannot without horrible sacrilege be literally understood of him who is declared by the authority of Holy Scripture to be invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible, inestimable, simple, and uncomposite, the disturbance of anger (not to mention wrath) cannot be attributed to that immutable nature without monstrous blasphemy.

Although John Cassian (d. 435 ca.) did not write commentaries on the Scriptures, he did, as the principal western monastic author, have considerable influence on the methodology of later Latin commentators. He was the first to present what was later called the fourfold sense of Scripture. Cassian was concerned with correct interpretation above all because of the influence this could have on the spiritual life of the monks for whom he was writing. The reading and interpretation of the Scriptures belonged to the core activity of the monastic life. Wrong interpretations could seriously mislead and damage the spiritual well-being of the readers. They could influence behavior or be used to defend mistaken behavior. In his fourteenth Conference Cassian sketched out a theory of biblical interpretation that was to have great influence in the Middle Ages.

The quotation above from Cassian contains strong language: “horrible sacrilege” and “monstrous blasphemy” to describe literal readings of many biblical passages. However, they accurately express Cassian's concern for correct interpretation, which for him must always be “worthy of God.” In dealing with the vice of anger, Cassian observes that there are people who try to defend or excuse their anger by citing the Scriptures and by claiming that since God gets angry with wrongdoers, we are justified in doing the same. “They do not understand that, in their eagerness to concede human beings the opportunity for pernicious vice, they are mixing the injustice of fleshly passion into the divine limitlessness and

the source of all purity.” (Inst. 8,2) To answer this mistaken opinion Cassian first cites the absurdity of taking literally the anthropomorphisms of Scripture:

For if these things that are said of God are to be accepted according to the letter and with a carnal and crass understanding, then he of whom it is said: “Behold, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121:4) also sleeps, since it is said: “Arise, Lord, why do you sleep?” (Ps 44:23) And he stands and sits, since it is said: “Heaven is my seat, and the earth is a footstool for my feet” (Isa 66:1 LXX) - he who “measures the heavens with his palm and encloses the earth in his fist.” (Isa 40:12) And he gets drunk with wine, since it is said: “And the Lord rose up as if from slumber, like a strong man drunken with wine” (Ps 78:65) - he “who alone has immortality and dwells in inaccessible light” (1 Tim 6:16).

All of these anthropomorphic descriptions of God are to be interpreted metaphorically in a way that is worthy of God. He explains that: “by the term 'mouth' we should understand that conversation of his which he is wont to carry on softly in the inmost recesses of our souls, or what he spoke to our fathers and to the prophets” (Inst. 8,4,2). By the attribution of “eyes” to God “we should be able to recognize that sharp and unobstructed gaze with which he surveys and views all things, and the fact that nothing that is done or will be done or that is thought by us is hidden from him.”

After listing various other such interpretations, Cassian concludes: “Thus, when we read of God's anger and wrath, we must not think of it anthropopathōs (written in Greek letters) – that is, in terms of lowly human disturbances, but in a manner worthy of God, who is free of all disturbance.” (Inst. 8,4,3). Here we see combined once again the two criteria of attributing passions to God and the notion of what is fitting or “worthy of God.” Cassian does not deny that the perception of God as a just judge may be helpful to sinners: “For human nature is accustomed to fear those who it knows get angry, and it hesitates to offend them.” However, the burden of the perception is in the souls of “those who are afraid.” It cannot be attributed to God. Rather: “With whatever mildness and gentleness of spirit it may be carried out, this is nonetheless considered high wrath and the cruelst anger by those who are to be deservedly punished.” (Inst. 8,4,3) The perception of God as angry, in other words, arises in the soul of the sinner. But this perception becomes an obstacle to growth in the spiritual life if it is used to justify anger on the part of the individual, because the passions are ob-

stacles to union with God, who is free of all passion. The goal is to become like God, free from anger.

2. God is interested above all in the "inner man"

The phrase "inner man," which Cassian uses more than thirty times, is found in the New Testament in Eph 3:16-17 where Paul expresses the wish: "that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man,[17] and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" [cited by Cassian in Inst. 5.21.5] and in the Letter to the Romans 7:22-23 and in 2 Cor 4:16. The latter two texts are not cited by Cassian. Cassian was not the first of the Latin fathers to make use of this concept. It had been used earlier by Tertullian and was found in the Latin translations of Origen. Cassian of course, being by-lingual, was also familiar with its use by Greek writers. However, Cassian was the first monastic writer, east or west, to use this concept to tie together the external practices that had been developed in the early monastic movement such as fasting, the recitation of the psalms and the distinctive monastic garb with the idea of the progressive development of the interior life. That such an idea of spiritual progress was already present in Egyptian monasticism we have already noted at the beginning in the story of Theodore. Even more important than the Pachomian literature in this regard are the works of Paul of Tamma, probably from the second half of the fourth century, which bear eloquent testimony to the centrality of the inner life in early Egyptian monasticism. These also were never translated into Greek or Latin.

In the second book of the Institutes, after mentioning what he calls the method of canonical prayer of the Egyptian monks, Cassian makes this comment:

Nonetheless I think it necessary, as the occasion offers and given the opportuneness of this place in our account, to touch upon a few things at present so that, once we have sketched the activity of the outer man and as it were laid a kind of foundation for prayer (which we are doing now), we may with less effort later on, when we have begun to discuss the condition of the inner man, reach the pinnacle of his prayer.

He concludes the section with a more general observation:

3 We are likewise intent that those who will perhaps encounter only the present treatise and be unable to get to the other one may find at least some instruction

here with regard to the character of prayer and that, just as they have been taught about the garb and the clothing of the outer man, so also they may not be ignorant as to how he should appear when offering spiritual sacrifices. For the present books, which we are now setting ourselves to toil over, with the Lord's help, will be better suited to the behavior of the outer man and to the teaching of the cenobia, whereas the others will pertain rather to the discipline of the inner man and perfection of heart, and to the life and teaching of the anchorites. (2.IX.1)

In fact the first four books of the *Institutes* are dedicated to describing the "outer man," that is, the way the Egyptian monks dress, their diet, how they pray, etc. These are the external and superficial practices of the monastic life. The real goal of the monastic life has to do with the inner man.

The last eight books of the *Institutes* are devoted to the struggle against the eight principle vices, which are the obstacles to the development of the interior life of contemplation. In the fifth book on the subject of gluttony and the need for the practice of fasting, Cassian notes the need for an interior fast:

But if, when fasting in bodily wise, we involve ourselves in vices most ruinous to the soul, fleshly affliction will profit us nothing, contaminated as we are in our more precious part and transgressing in the very substance by which we are made the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. 5. For it is not the corruptible flesh but rather the pure heart that is made a dwelling for God and a temple of the Holy Spirit.²⁸ While the outer man fasts, then, it behooves the inner one as well to abstain from harmful foods and, in particular, to make himself pure for God so that he may deserve to welcome Christ in himself as his guest, as the blessed Apostle teaches in these words: "May Christ," he says, "dwell in the inner man through faith in your hearts."²⁹

Here again it is a question of what God is really interested in, which is a question of theology, what God is really like.

Another aspect of the relationship between the inner and outer man is the possibility of perceiving the inner state of a person through the external signs. Only God can know the state of the inner man directly. Both demons and other humans can know the state of the inner man only through the manifestations of the outer man. In his treatment of the last of the eight principal vices, pride, Cassian illustrates this possibility with a detailed description of the signs of pride in the outer man that illustrate the disastrous state of the inner man: 12, XXIX. 1. Let us, for the sake of those who long to be instructed in perfection, briefly synthe-

size what has been said about this kind of pride and, as best we can, list a few of its signs, so as to point out to some degree its characteristics from the behavior of the outer man. I think it necessary to go over these things in a few words so that in summary fashion we may recognize the indications by which it can be discerned and grasped. Then, when the roots of this passion have been laid bare and brought to the surface, and have been clearly exposed to sight, they will that much more easily be able to be plucked out and avoided. 2. For this pestilential disease will completely disappear not when a tardy glance has been leveled at its pernicious commotions and noxious impulses, after they are already in the ascendant, but when we have an advance on it, recognize its shape, so to say, and cut it off with a farsighted and wise discretion. For, as we have said, its existence within is recognizable from the behavior of the outer man. By the following indications, then, that carnal pride of which we have spoken is made manifest.

First of all, a person's talking will be loud and his silence bitter; his joy will be marked by noisy and excessive laughter, his seriousness by irrational sadness, his replies by rancor, his speech by glibness, and his words will burst out helter-skelter from a heedless heart.

3. God would not give free will without the grace necessary to exercise it.

In his notorious thirteenth conference for which Cassian was to be vilified by Prosper of Aquitaine and which has been the basis for the anachronistic charges of semi-Pelagianism ever since, Cassian wrote: "For it must not be believed that God made the human being in such a way that he could never will or be capable of the good." This is in fact a statement about the nature of God. It is inconceivable that God would do such a contradictory thing as this, that is, create a being with free will and then not permit the being to choose the good. Human beings do indeed behave in arbitrary and contradictory ways, but God does not behave like human beings. A little earlier in the same conference Cassian had invoked the principle that "God is merciful."

Behind this statement lies a complex social and literary background. The Conference belongs to the second volume of Conferences written about 426-427 and is held by a number of scholars to be a direct response to Augustine's work, *De correptione et gratia*, which had been written a short time earlier, perhaps in the same year. In this work, in which Augustine was at pains to explain why sin-

ners should be rebuked if they are predestined, he insisted on and developed some positions that have been described as “doubtful theology.” Relying on rather literalist readings of certain biblical texts, Augustine had so insisted on the necessity of grace and predestination of the elect/saved that genuine free will appeared to be excluded.

It appears that Augustine's work was written in response to or at the urging of Prosper of Aquitaine and Hilary of Arles, who had reported to Augustine the resistance among the monks of Gaul to his positions regarding grace and free will. However, the monks of Provence were not the first to object to Augustine's positions produced in opposition to the Pelagians. Earlier, perhaps as early as 418, the monks of Hadrumentum in North Africa had apparently objected to some of Augustine's statements that did not seem to be in conformity with traditional doctrine. Among Augustine's somewhat startling affirmations in this work are the following

“For they are not made to differ from that mass of perdition by the foreknowledge and predestination of God, and therefore are not called according to God's purpose, and thus are not elected; but are called among those of whom it was said, Many are called, not among those of whom it was said, But few are elected. And yet, who can deny that they are elect, since they believe and are baptized, and live according to God? Manifestly, they are called elect by those who are ignorant of what they shall be, but not by Him who knew that they would not have the perseverance which leads the elect forward into the blessed life, and knows that they so stand, as that He has foreknown that they will fall.” (ch. 16)

Or if you say that it pertains to man's free will— which you defend, not in accordance with God's grace, but in opposition to it— that any one should persevere in good, or should not persevere, and it is not by the gift of God if he persevere, but by the performance of human will, why will you strive against the words of Him who says, I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith fail not? Luke 22:32 (ch 17)

It is, indeed, to be wondered at, and greatly to be wondered at, that to some of His own children— whom He has regenerated in Christ— to whom He has given faith, hope, and love, God does not give perseverance also, when to children of another He forgives such wickedness, and, by the bestowal of His grace, makes them His own children. Who would not wonder at this? Who would not

be exceedingly astonished at this? But, moreover, it is not less marvellous, and still true, and so manifest that not even the enemies of God's grace can find any means of denying it, that some children of His friends, that is, of regenerated and good believers, departing this life as infants without baptism—although He certainly might provide the grace of this laver if He willed, since in His power are all things—He alienates from His kingdom into which He introduces their parents; and some children of His enemies He causes to come into the hands of Christians, and by means of this laver introduces into the kingdom, from which their parents are aliens; although, as well to the former infants there is no evil deserving, as to the latter there is no good, of their own proper will. Certainly, in this case the judgments of God, because they are righteous and deep, may neither be blamed nor penetrated. Among these also is that concerning perseverance, of which we are now discoursing. Of both, therefore, we may exclaim, O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments! Romans 11:33 (ch. 18)

In other words, Augustine seems to accept that God acts arbitrarily! And this is justified on the basis that “we cannot trace His unsearchable ways.” (ch. 19) He does not give the grace of perseverance to all: “Nor let it disturb us that to some of His children God does not give this perseverance.” (ch. 29) There appears to be a theological vicious circle: “Be this far from being so, however, if these were of those who are predestinated and called according to His purpose—who are truly the children of the promise.”(ch. 20) Those who are predestinated do receive the grace of perseverance.

Cassian's affirmation is the opposite: God does not act arbitrarily; he does not deny the grace necessary for perseverance, for genuine free will. Cassian is hardly affirming that the will can be free without grace, but rather that God gives both. Prosper of Aquitaine, in his intemperate highly polemical attack on Cassian a few years later after Augustine's death, was more obsessed with defending Augustine than with facing the theological problem, the concept of God that is at stake. This he did not understand at all, for he was a polemicist, not a theologian like Cassian. Cassian's critique of Augustine is that God is not like that, not as Augustine portrays him.

The question of free will was not the first or only question over which Cassian clashed with Augustine. In his repeated insistence on the distinction between the *scopos* and the *finis* in the spiritual life and the need to aim at purity of heart in Conference 1, Cassian was taking a position against Jerome and Augustine, both

of whom had denied the validity of the concept of *apatheia*, a question which also touched on the nature of God. The phrase “purity of heart” is equivalent in Cassian's terminology to the notion of *apatheia*, a term never used by Cassian, undoubtedly because of the polemic of Jerome and Augustine against it. Evagrius of Pontus, a source for Cassian, had already used the phrase in this sense. The phrase “purity of heart” comes of course from the beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:8) “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” In this tradition then the question of *apatheia* or “purity of heart” is directly related to the possibility of seeing God or the contemplative life.

Jerome had insisted erroneously that *apatheia* means that one becomes either a god or a stone. It is true indeed that in the earlier tradition God had been almost unaimously considered to be *apathes*, without human passions. In order to see God, one must aim at that passionlessness which is part of God's nature. Jerome had also stated that the concept of *apatheia* is equivalent to sinlessness (*impeccabilitas*), an equivalence not found in the previous tradition. This error was due to that fact that Jerome was engaging in polemic against Pelagius, who, he claimed, believed that humans could be or become sinless. The denial of the validity of the notion of *apatheia* or insisting on its equivalence with sinlessness called in question the entire monastic quest and the idea that spiritual progress is at all possible. (an idea developed already by Philo of Alexandria and continued through Origen and Evagrius).

In fact, to aim at *apatheia* was to aim at becoming like God, imitating God and an essential step toward deification.

Conclusion: a sphogos

Instead of a conventional conclusion I would like to conclude with what is called in the Greek rhetorical tradition a *sphogos*, one of the *progymnasmata*, that is, the exercises that students practiced in order learn the elements of rhetoric. Basically it is an exercise in polemic. As you are undoubtedly aware, Benedictine monasticism was restored in France in the middle of the 19th century after a hiatus of about two generations caused by the French revolution and the abolition of the monasteries by Napoleon, not only in France, but in the wake of the Napoleonic march toward empire. Austria and Switzerland (and even England) were in large part spared from this disaster, but not entirely from the baneful influence of French romanticism, which played a leading role in the restoration of

monasticism in France and then in Germany as well. You are also certainly aware that French romanticism idealized the Western Middle Ages, the perfect relationship between church and society that supposedly then existed and all things gothic. Such ideas even crossed the ocean and flowered in the United States in works such as the famous book by Henry Adams: *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*.

Not surprisingly the 19th century restorers of monasticism also looked to the Middle Ages for their ideal and model. In this idealization of past glories and aesthetic wonders gothic architecture and Gregorian chant were seen as essential aspects of this ideal monastic past. There was a strong aesthetic component in this restored monasticism. To accompany and legitimate this new monasticism (for restoration, and indeed reform, always produces something new) a romantic version of history was produced. The monastic version of this is exemplified above all in the work of Montalembert, *Les moines d'Occident*. There the figure of Benedict of Nursia is so glorified that he seems barely less than divinely inspired. This is very far indeed from the critical history that existed in France at the end of the 17th century in figures such as Richard Simon, Lenain de Tillemont, and Jean Mabillon.

In romantic monastic historiography, the Rule of Saint Benedict came to be seen as the most perfect development of the monastic ideal to such an extent that it was thought to have superceded early writings, even though such an evaluation clearly contradicted the author's own self-perception. Benedict had stated in the last chapter of the Rule, the 74th, that he had written a little rule for beginners and recommended that those who were eager to make further progress should study the Scriptures of course and the writings of Basil and especially the lives and conferences of the fathers, a clear reference to the writings of John Cassian. However, Benedict's modest and realistic self-evaluation has been treated as conventional or false modesty. In the course of the twentieth century the glorification of the Rule of Benedict has continued with the production of "critical" (but theologically uncritical) commentaries on the model of biblical commentaries with the result that the Rule is treated practically as Scripture, as the unique norm and source of monastic spirituality, a far cry from what the author intended. The author himself saw things far differently. He saw his own generation as decadent compared with that of Cassian, a hundred years earlier. He seems to have been aware of his own dependance on Cassian, Basil and other earlier monastic writings to which he looked for inspiration. He was seriously

interested in the search for God, the quest for spiritual progress in contrast to the romantic glorification of the aesthetic aspects of medieval monasticism and the vision of western monasticism as the vehicle of cultural transmission. The romantic restoration has led to many spiritual tragedies. One might even ask if western monasticism today is not, from a theological and spiritual point of view, in a worse situation than that which John Cassian found when he arrived in Gallia Narbonensis in 415. It has yet to discover the inner man of which Cassian spoke so eloquently. Perhaps it is time also for a theological-critical evaluation of the Rule of St. Benedict.