

Article

Contestation as an Essential Feature of Monasticism

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Abstract

This article explores “contestation” as a constitutive and enduring dimension of Christian monasticism. From its origins in the *contemptus mundi* and *fuga mundi* of the Desert Fathers to its modern cultural and ecological expressions, monasticism has embodied a form of resistance—spiritual, social, and existential—toward dominant models of life, thought, and power. This study examines the multiple modalities of monastic contestation: withdrawal and protest, spiritual combat, constructive critique, and the creation of alternative forms of living. Drawing upon sources ranging from Cassian and Benedict to contemporary thinkers such as Panikkar, Jonveaux, and Hervieu-Léger, the paper argues that monasticism’s critical stance toward the world is not mere negation but a creative search for simplicity, authenticity, and integral humanity. By analysing its expressions in education, economy, art, and ecology, the paper demonstrates that monastic contestation remains a vital, transformative force capable of renewing the dialogue between faith, culture, and society.

Keywords: monasticism; contestation; protest; resistance; asceticism; culture; ecology; education; Benedictine tradition

1. Why Contestation?

Among the many perspectives on monasticism, attempting to encompass its manifold scope while nevertheless taking into account its universal character, one attracts particular attention. It is the first term contained in the title: contestation. It is not easy to define it unambiguously. The *Cambridge Dictionary* describes it as “the act of arguing or disagreeing about something”¹. This definition, used as a point of departure, will be extended by inclusion of related notions that help capture the subject in its full scope. It will be done by using a whole palette of expressions, such as resistance, revolt, protest, opposition, provocation, non-conformism, anti-systemism, being an outsider, polemics, and calling into question. The sum of these notions spells out the proper field of meaning. In this paper, we aim to demonstrate how various dimensions of monasticism—anthropological, social, cultural, economic, and political—align with these categories. Within this context, contestation is to be understood as a paradigm of a specific disposition or attitude, as a conscious turning towards another reality, defined differently, as: the world, society, culture, politics, and so on. The multifaceted nature of contestation, as outlined above, also derives from its inherently dynamic character. This will serve as the axis of our analysis, which unfolds through the following concepts: opposition to the world, withdrawal, protest, combat, active resistance (swimming against the tide), creation of alternative—possibility of integration (economy, arts, ecology). These concepts mark a transition from a negative and static understanding of contestation to one that is positive, active, and integrative. These will be examined through the lens of certain historical phenomena, foundational texts of the monastic tradition, and relevant sociological, philosophical, and theological works.



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Finally, drawing on this body of literature, we will address the risks involved in interpreting monasticism through the lens of contestation. Such an approach to monasticism will enable us to show various aspects of its specificity, making it easier to read its history and, more importantly, to understand it today, with the hope of showing its dynamics, benefits, but also risks.

2. Withdrawal from the World, *Contemptus Mundi*

The first form of contestation, certainly historically, is withdrawal from the world, classically described as *fuga mundi* or *contemptus mundi*. M.B. Pranger portrays this phenomenon as follows:

When taken literally, the technique of the *contemptus mundi* seems to function as the means through which the monk withdraws from the world, both the world at large and the world within himself. Yet its real focus alerts us to a problem that is more serious than the status of what is supposedly left behind when fleeing the world. It is the fullness of the divine presence itself that is problematic. As a result, the monastic claim of a real and intense life versus the weakness of the world is under the permanent threat of falling short. (Pranger 2003, p. 6)

The monk-world opposition, which is, in a sense, the basis on which the monk's identity will be built over the following centuries, is clearly outlined here. This means an unequivocal, negative assessment of the world and drawing the appropriate consequences. They set out the basic principles of how monks live in the world, i.e., the foundations of the theology of the monastery.

In the monastic concept the big and evil extramural world contracts to tiny proportions. Technically speaking, this process is brought about by *contemptus mundi*. In a general sense, this concept indicates contempt for the world. It is a state of mind required of the monk who has left the world behind. More man condition, the broken images" of both the world and the individual soul. (Pranger 2003, p. 22)

This open opposition to the world throughout the history of monasticism brings its consequences in both theoretical and practical terms. Over the centuries, the contrast between the monastery and the world grew, which had its good and bad sides. The former was particularly noticeable at times of historical turmoil (e.g., decline of the Roman Empire, Charlemagne's policies). The latter since the turn of the millennium, when, with the privilege of exemplification, monasteries began to enter the feudal network. The notable solstice of this situation came at the time of the Reformation, which Max Weber put in the following words:

The monastic life is not only quite devoid of value as a means of justification before God, but he also looks upon its renunciation of the duties of this world as the product of selfishness, withdrawing from temporal obligations. In contrast, labour in a calling appears to him as the outward expression of brotherly love. (Weber 2001, p. 41)

The social as well as the anthropological context is evident here. Opposition, as a necessary precondition of contestation and by its very nature demanding symmetry, is now countered by the domination of the world. Using Weber's terms, it is a confrontation of "innerworldly" asceticism of people living in the world with the "otherworldly" monastic form of asceticism of monasticism (Weber 2001, p. 97). Of course, initially this opposition was based on seeing the world as devoid of God and therefore dangerous. This was clearly described by C. Taylor:

‘Secular’, as we all know, comes from ‘saeculum’, a century or age. When it begins to be used as one term in an opposition, like secular/regular clergy; or being in the saeculum, as against in religion (that is, some monastic order), the original meaning is being drawn on in a very specific way. People who are in the saeculum, are embedded in ordinary time, they are living the life of ordinary time; as against those who have turned away from this in order to live closer to eternity. The word is thus used for ordinary as against higher time. A parallel distinction is temporal/spiritual. One is concerned with things in ordinary time, the other with the affairs of eternity. (Taylor 2007, pp. 54–55)

Monasteries offered shrouding from “the danger of the world”, and the life with God. Subsequent centuries of evangelisation of the world, as well as the gradual degradation of monastic life, resulting from its increasing links with the feudal political and economic structure, brought a change in this situation. It was precisely this situation that provided the impetus for Luther’s rejection of monastic life, which became reflected in Weber’s aforementioned views. Without going into the further implications of this situation, however, it must be said that the moment of contestation remained an indicator of the quality and integrity of monastic life. When, at a certain point, the monks lacked it, it became apparent in its own way in the emergence of new forms of monastic life (Cistercians, Mendicants), but also in the Reformation. This makes it even more worthwhile to analyse the contestation dimension of monasticism proposed in the title.

3. Protest

Standing in opposition to the world also implies an attitude of protest. There is, however, a difference between the protest of the Reform and the original protest inherent in monasticism. The latter has never rejected any of the constitutive elements of the Church, whether dogma, sacraments or hierarchy. It has always respected them completely, objecting exclusively to the way of life of Christians not fitting the teaching of Christ and the Apostolic tradition. Yet the monks have rarely claimed to exclude from the Church those who do not live in the orthodox way. They have been content to separate themselves from them, in order to live differently. In this way, they create centers of perfection on the fringes of the Church, not outside it.

This situation, however, leads to a paradox: Contesting the quality of the Church’s life, while nevertheless remaining within the Church, monks prove to be at the very heart of the Church (*Théologie de la vie monastique*, Roques 1961, p. 23). As Evagrius, Cassian’s teacher, put it: “A monk is one who is separated from all and united with all” (Ponticus 2006, p. 206). And L. Whalen adds: “when Constantine (306–337) supported the Church, which also became more worldly, the Desert Fathers protested by trekking into the desert” (Lai 2000, pp. 605–6). Cassian describes this protest spiritually, as “a protest against the decline of Christianity” (*Théologie de la vie monastique*, Roques 1961, p. 220). It was in line with classically accepted genesis of monasticism, understood as the continuation of radical Christian witness after the cessation of the times of martyrdom (Pozzo 2018).

The world is therefore not just an external enemy of Christianity, but it insinuates itself among the ranks of Christians. For after persecution ceased, it simply began to pay to be a Christian, which definitely reduced its quality. In this sense in Cassian monasticism “is the protest movement that led to this singular situation was carried out in the name of a return to the sources. It was the ‘memory of primitive perfection’, the nostalgia for the apostolic community, that gave rise to the coenobia” (*Théologie de la vie monastique*, Roques 1961, p. 221). Over time, this attitude of monastic protest expanded. It began to move towards the institutional and hierarchical dimension of the Church. According to Workman:

the monk, in his origin, was the protest of the laity against an encroaching sacerdotalism; the emphasis that the laity also are kings and priests unto God. Throughout its career, instead of the intermediate communion of the soul and God through priests and sacraments—the ideal of the Catholic Church—we find Monasticism upholding the ideal of direct intercourse of the soul with its Maker. We are not surprised, therefore, to find in the Middle Ages that it is to the monasteries we must turn for the rise of the Mystics! (Workman 1962, pp. 343–44)

J. Séguy puts it in these words:

In their origin: every monastic creation first appears as a protest against a previous form of the monastic institution in the most general meaning of the term, against a state of the Church considered as unsatisfactory, against an ensemble of social relationships (in the Church and in the global society) explicitly or implicitly rebuked by the new foundation. (Séguy 1971, p. 338)

The attitude of protest described above, characteristic of the origins of monasticism, despite altered conditions, continues to manifest itself even in the present day. As I. Jonveaux writes, “Monks and nuns are more charismatic today because they are lesser numerous, that they are no longer recognized by society in their religious role and that they adopt some positions of protestation against the secular order” (Jonveaux 2014, p. 83). Today’s times are creating new areas and forms of protest, thus requiring protesters to be more creative and determined. In this context one may say about “cultural protest” (Hervieu-Léger 2014, p. 31), pointing out, however, that in an age of secularisation, the very presence of monastic life takes on a distinct character of contestation, not to say provocation. If so, another important aspect of the mishmash of contestation becomes topical: the element of combat.

4. Combat

The metaphor of the Christlike soldier, taken from St Paul (Eph. 6: 10–18), often appeared in the teachings of the early monks. It is sufficient to mention only Cassian or St Benedict. The struggle was directed against the powers of evil—above all within the monk himself, in the fastness of his passions, but also externally, in the environment and the world. Here, protest meant a concrete confrontation, demanding specific activities. The monk on the desert of Egypt was “a combatant, advancing toward love, freedom from the passions, and contemplation of God despite resistance from his demon foes” (Brakke 2006, p. 241). Such a struggle could have had far-reaching consequences, even carrying a certain risk. According to C.L. Marquis, at the root of this combative attitude lay the experience of radical asceticism, consisting in a violent confrontation with demons. In their struggle against the powers of evil, the monks often sought to imitate the angels.

This personal spiritual struggle was often closely intertwined with external confrontations. It was not difficult to project this perspective onto political opponents—barbarians or pagans (Marquis 2022, pos. 122–126). “The desire to perform an otherworldly, paradisiacal body made ascetics susceptible to confusion with the barbarian neighbors who also populated the desert” (Marquis 2022, pos. 3001). From such an attitude it was only a short step to the facile sanctioning of acts of violence as divinely sanctioned (Marquis 2022, pos. 364–365). The impetuosity was well in keeping with the reputation of Egypt in Roman times (Marquis 2022, pos. 370–372).

Anyway, it was a serious and engaging fight, waged precariously against many enemies. This tradition was continued and developed by successive generations of monks. Peter Damiani thus extolls the monastic cell:

O cell, you are the tent of the holy army, the battle line of the victorious array, the camp of God, the tower of David, built as a fortress, hung round with a

thousand bucklers, and each the shield of a hero. You are God's battlefield, the arena of spiritual combat, a spectacle for angels, the wrestling ring where brave men are engaged, where the spirit comes to grips with the flesh, and the strong man is overcome by weakness. You are a rampart for those rushing to battle, a bulwark for the brave, a defense for fighters who know not the word 'surrender'. (Damiani 1989, pp. 282–83)

In the first instance, however, the combat was about personal vices and passions. It is in this field that the "white martyrdom" of the monks is played out. As A. Pozzo writes, "Death to the world and renunciation of life in human society, self-sacrifice, faith offered in place of spilled blood, martyrdom of conscience, fruitful virginity, purity of morals, strict observance of the divine commandments: these are the elements with which the concept of monastic life as spiritual and daily martyrdom is elaborated" (Pozzo 2018, p. 2). It should be recalled at this point that the Greek term *martirion* also contains an element of confrontation. For it signifies a testimony, that is, a conscious attitude presented to other people in confirmation of certain values, in our case Christian values. It is therefore, in a sense, a play between active and passive forms of contestation. The monastic tradition provides rules of life that trace ascetic modalities. In the case of the definition of the semantic field of martyrdom by hagiographic literature, the active or passive form of the testimony given by the martyr makes it possible to establish to which form of martyrdom to ascribe the existence of an exemplary person (Pozzo 2018, p. 92).

The aforementioned attitude of struggle, once characteristic of the origins of monasticism, now manifests itself in new forms. As R. Panikkar noticed, gradually, over the course of history, "the 'world' has shifted from meaning 'bishops and women,'" to quote facetiously from the first Christian monks (Cassian 1894), i.e., from the dangers of the social life of the community, civil and religious, to the political and socioeconomic structures, along with the ideologies of all sorts that nowadays represent a danger to combat and an enemy to conquer. To fight the world and its demons today may mean to combat the system and its technocrats" (Panikkar 1982, p. 43). This perspective is progressively becoming the natural context of monkish contestation today, as will be the content of further discussion. And this is also true for Eastern monasticism, where the ascetic spirit is understood today "as a means for combating social injustice and serving the common good in the face of the passionate forces of secularism, consumerism, envy, and greed" (Pahman 2015, p. 561).

This situation testifies to a certain reevaluation of the profile of monastic contestation, conditioned by the current, much weaker position of the Church in the world in comparison to the past, the new relationship of monasticism to ecclesiastical institutions (fundamental integration with them, with some cases of being an alternative) and the general cultural and social situation in the world. What this means in practice is that disagreement with one attitude or another—both in the Church and in the world—is not tantamount to mere opposition or rebellion, but is organized in a non-violent, environmentally friendly, revolutionary and radically different way to this world (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 149). Contestation here takes on the dimension of an inviting, positive striving for an alternative, perhaps more evolutionary than revolutionary. And the history of monasticism shows how its forms have gradually mellowed, while the subject matter they encompass has expanded considerably.

Looking only roughly at the various more-or-less drastic incidents with monks in the history of the Church, one can see that their contestation from spiritual areas spills over into sociological and geographic space, passing from a "dialogic break" (Marazzi 2015, p. 12), through "anti-urban polemics" (Marazzi 2015, p. 15), the proposal of a "new citizenship" (Marazzi 2015, p. 15) till "the alternative of urbanity" (Marazzi 2015, p. 20). In short, this provides a concise account of how monastic life has evolved in its struggle with the world.

The otherwise natural primordial arena of monkish contestation in the form of the opposition of the desert to the city becomes a symbol of the role and importance of monks in the world, but also in the Church. Confrontation is by no means abolished here, but gradually becomes a constructive interaction. This is well reflected in a phrase of Athanasius' *Life of Saint Anthony*: "the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens"². One expression from this phrase was used as the title of D.J. Chitty's already classic work *The Desert a City*. In the author's explanation at the end of the introduction, one can understand the nature of this interaction:

This making a City of the Wilderness was no mere fight, nor a rejection of matter as evil (. . .). It was rooted in a stark realism of faith in God and acceptance of the battle which is nor against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual things of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Chitty 1977, p. xvi)

This interaction, in a sense confirmed historically, irrevocably gives monastic contestation an expansive and constructive character. In various forms, this is gradually becoming the norm of monasticism's relationship with the world until our time. The next sections of this article will outline some of the threads of this. In general, it could be described as a constructive swimming against the tide of the negative phenomena of our time.

5. Swimming Against the Tide

The above comparison is drawn from the already cited book *The Blessed Simplicity* by R. Panikkar. It contains the following words:

The monk is the one who tries to swim upstream, against the current, to the origin which one supposes to be simple. God is simple. Brahman is utter simplicity. The monk believes the Absolute is simple and that the goal of his life is to attain that very simplicity. The way may be hard, and at the end there may even be no way, but it is all simple. (Panikkar 1982, p. 30)

These words outline the constructive horizon of monastic contestation: it is not a negation or protest in itself, but a perspective of something simple, essential, better. In the first place, it would be a struggle for the true identity of man. The monk should be the protagonist of such a struggle. This is a natural consequence of the transcendent—if not explicitly theological—dimension of monastic identity:

In order to provide an overview of the nine canons, we give them here before the corresponding glosses and commentaries: The Breakthrough of the Primordial Aspiration; The Primacy of Being over Doing and Having; Silence over Word; Mother Earth Prior to the Fellowship of Men; Overcoming Spatio-temporal Parameters; Transhistorical Consciousness above Historical Concern; The Fullness of the Person over the Individual; The Primacy of the Holy; The Memory of the Unultimate and the Presence of Its Gate. (Panikkar 1982, p. 39)

The list above outlines the values engaged in a dynamic relationship, wherein, within the monk's life, one is called to give way to another. Seen in this light, the monk's life is an ongoing, creative tension between competing values, where one is consciously chosen over another. In this sense, by accepting the thesis of the archetypal nature of monastic life, we may affirm with Panikkar that "We cannot simply follow the spirit of the times, but must be authentic monks" (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 171).

One of the fundamental spheres of this positive contestation is education, which has been practically linked to monasticism since the very beginning of its history. The very idea and form of promoting monastic ideals has always been, at its core, a formative and

educational endeavor. It suffices to recall the *Life of Saint Anthony* by Athanasius or the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of Cassian. From the moment of their composition until today, these works have shaped countless generations of monks. The subsequent centuries of monastic development bring forth figures such as Cassiodorus, Benedict, and Alcuin, whose educational and formative work extended far beyond the walls of the monastery, producing social and cultural effects that resonated throughout Europe. The legacy of this tradition is the network of Benedictine schools (ICBE³) that exists to this day, enjoying sustained interest and high prestige—a phenomenon that appears paradoxical in an age of growing secularization and declining monastic vocations. In a certain sense, every educational endeavor is a form of contestation against ignorance. In the case of Benedictine education, this contestation is particularly profound, as it draws upon the values contained in the *Rule* of Saint Benedict, written fifteen centuries ago—values that are both existential and universal in nature. Here are *Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine Education*:

1. Love of Christ and neighbor
2. Prayer: A life marked by liturgy, *lectio* and mindfulness
3. Stability: commitment to the daily life of this place, its heritage and tradition
4. *Conversatio*: the way of formation and transformation
5. Obedience: a commitment to listening and consequent action
6. Discipline: a way toward learning and freedom
7. Humility: knowledge of self in relation to God, others and creation
8. Stewardship: responsible use of creation, culture and the arts
9. Hospitality: openness to the other
10. Community: call to serve the common good (*The Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine Education*, Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities 2010).

Clearly, each of these values is inherently dynamic, acting as a constructive challenge to whatever stands in opposition to it. The strength of this contestation arises from the organic union, within the monastic tradition, of the present with the past. Here, the contestation takes on a concrete and broader dimension. In it, the contestations of the past are revived and reflected anew. As D. Hervieu-Léger once put it:

The porosity and the exchanges between the exogenous interpretations of monastic life and the “believing perception” produced by the monks themselves is no less attested to in the past than now. But this is the very point of this dialectical argument—for it inscribes monasticism powerfully in the environment of time—that justifies making it a privileged analyzer of the relationship between Christianity and culture. (Hervieu-Léger 2014, p. 33)

Such contestation, anchored in historical tradition and thus especially attuned to universal values, presents a demanding task: it must be constructive and compelling, capable of demonstrating the enduring continuity and contemporary significance of these values.

That would be a fitting style for us monks and our monasteries: descriptive, multi-layered, melancholic, but not depressingly sad, but not loaded with resentment. And out of this, with a humorous sense of adventure: to society, to the monastery, to oneself and to the few people for whom one is destined. And enjoy—sometimes suffer joy—in the diversity of the tradition of Christianity, culture and the contemporary world. That seems to me to be the only thing we can cultivate. (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 209)

And, in other words:

A monk in a monastery must send out a message: I am a modern person and live in tune with the times. He can show this by communicating, for example, that

success and record-breaking do not fit in with the spiritual life. As human beings, we naturally need success, but on a different level. If I radiate this, I become credible again. To achieve this, we need to regain our competence in serving one another in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity. (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 255)

6. Creating an Alternative

Considering the current social, cultural, and economic context, one may conclude that the proper attitude of the monk would be to create, or even to become an alternative. For some monastic circles, it means the conscious adoption of a positive and constructive attitude, developed in a spirit of freedom and autonomy—somewhat in the spirit of St Benedict’s independent and practical approach to the monastic tradition that existed before him (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 109). This would also mean not reproducing patterns or expectations already present in the world, but rather shaping new ones, in harmony with the values professed and grounded in an authentic faith in God (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 30). This is possible only on the condition of a proper sensitivity to the true and profound needs and expectations of society. These are expressed in the continuing, and even growing, interest in monastic life despite secularization, in visits to monasteries, and in extended stays within them. Recognizing this phenomenon, understanding its causes, and attempting to respond to it appropriately constitute great challenges facing monks today. As a sociologist claims:

People are increasingly looking for alternative ways of life, and they can also find these in a monastery. I see this as a great opportunity for monasticism today—but also a great challenge. What is specific to monasteries is that they attract the attention of society. (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 336)

This challenge and call to be an alternative may and should take various forms, depending on the different dimensions of life in which we live. One of them could be the promotion of a universal and organic attitude, which also carries a political dimension. It could be the theme of unity, or even integrity, as an antidote to division. J. Leclercq mentioned this in reference to the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians (7:32–35), where Paul speaks about the division caused by involvement in worldly affairs, from which the celibate is spared and thus able to concentrate entirely on the search for God.

From the fourth and fifth centuries onwards, this passage became the foundation of monastic theology, which implied the renunciation of worldly goods, liberation from the turmoil of thoughts through unceasing prayer, and a total dedication to the Lord (Leclercq 1961, p. 19). In fact, it came to be seen as an alternative to married life, which Pseudo-Dionysius described as the ideal of an interior life—undivided, free from distraction, a “life of union,” “directed towards union with God and the perfection of holy love.” The emphasis on unity and separation from the world led to an interpretation of the word “monk” as “unity in multiplicity” (Leclercq 1961, p. 8). In Augustine, the word “monk” (*monos*) means being one with the community⁴. The source of this integrating alternative would be the above-mentioned, anthropologically archetypal understanding of monasticism (Panikkar 1982, p. 7):

Firstly, monasticism is an archetypal, classical form of human and religious life that also exists in other cultures. We could actually cherish this a little more and visualise it with greater self-confidence. We do not have a specific spirituality, but monasticism is an elementary order of life that fuses space and time in such a way that a convention before God and with each other is possible. Of course, this

order of space and time also causes us problems when it is stylised. But it is a great guideline. (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, pp. 199–200)

E. Salmann interprets the constructive monastic alternative in a philosophical key. According to him

Monasticism as an “exposition” (*Darlegung*) of the true philosophia, that is, of an attitude “connatural” to that Love which embraces us and thus succeeds in seeing and giving shape to human history as a process of forming communicative freedom, and to the world as a reflection of the absolute mystery of Being. (Salmann 2000, p. 278)

Monasticism would thus be a philosophical proposal. Here as well, the history of monasticism manifests a deep continuity. It is no coincidence that the first monks were called philosophers⁵. According to E. Salmann, from a contemporary perspective, “monastic philosophy” can be characterized as follows:

Monasticism is relativity, openness, estrangement lived in the seriousness of rootedness; and a rootedness in the awareness of the uniqueness/relevance of all Being and of every homeland (Salmann 2000, p. 299).

In this case, monasticism remains a philosophical proposition, or rather an existential alternative, relevant today. The history of the Church attests to numerous instances of monastic involvement in political affairs, whether deliberate or indirect. Notable examples include the tensions between monastic settlements and certain urban centers in Egypt, the rivalry between Alexandria and Constantinople in the fifth century (Pietras 2016, p. 22), as well as the theological and political controversies of iconoclasm (Calisi 2011) and hesychasm (Dedon 2014; Meyendorff 1974). In Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, in the East, monks were involved in some urban political factions (Fafiński and Riemenschneider 2023, p. 22). It must be acknowledged that political tension often accompanied the relations between ancient monks and bishops. At times, bishops exploited the zeal of the monks for their own political purposes (Pietras 2016, pp. 36–37).

One of the consequences of such a “politicization” of monasticism was the work of remembering and forgetting particular figures or their ideas, depending on the political context. This could take the form of a theologically justified condemnation (*damnatio*) of evil, according to the dominant theo-political configurations of a given moment (Marquis 2022, pos. 2073, 3357).

More recently, a new monastic political and social alternative has been presented in R. Dreher’s influential book *The Benedict Option* (Dreher 2017). Dreher proposes that the Benedictine way of life could serve as a model for Christian communities seeking to preserve faith and moral integrity in the midst of what he perceives as a profound cultural and political crisis. The book has generated considerable discussion not only in ecclesial, monastic and theological circles, but also within broader cultural and political discourse, where it has been variously praised as a constructive strategy of cultural resilience and criticized as a form of withdrawal, donatism or neo-monastic separatism⁶.

7. Passages of Integration

Monasticism, however, is not only an alternative but at times controversial or combative. It is also, especially in recent times, an attempt at integration and constructive synthesis. It essentially concerns three areas: the attitude towards material goods (economy), towards culture (art), and towards the environment (ecology). One could describe it as a constructive form of protest. In all three of the areas mentioned above, it arises from a positive and holistic vision of the human person, which in itself becomes a source of protest against any system directed against humanity. Such is the case with the approach to material goods. In

recent decades, various monastic proposals concerning management and economics have emerged. This represents a kind of ongoing dialogue (Frey et al. 2010), a search for new and efficient inspirations (Müller-Stewens and Wolf 2018), seeking balance in the human relationship to material goods, in order to rediscover the right harmony between activity and contemplation, matter and spirit (Jonveaux 2023). Simultaneously, it is a constant fight for the utopian ideas of monastic working ideal (Jonveaux 2011, pp. 161–345), equally challenging and necessary.

All these phenomena stem from the historical conditioning of the monastic tradition. They are made possible by its enduring reputation—still alive today—often bordering on the mythical or utopian, yet (perhaps precisely for that reason) remaining irresistibly attractive. Undoubtedly, this state of affairs owes much to the centuries-old continuity of monasticism, a heritage no company can boast of. It is therefore hardly surprising that many are eager to “attach themselves” to the monastic image.

(a) Economy

The monastic ethos also finds resonance in the field of branding (Sawicki 2019). This is not only about the still high level of trust in the monastic “brand,” but also about the increasingly widespread recognition that authenticity, honesty, and coherence are the best guarantees of marketing success (Stăniculescu and Țirca 2010). Monastic contestation in the field of marketing has, in some cases, had to take on radical, organized forms. In view of the increasing misuse of the monastic brand—namely, the invocation of monastic tradition by producers who have nothing to do with it—organizations and networks of monasteries have emerged with the aim of defending the authenticity and integrity of the use of the monastic brand⁷. In the case of commercial goods, these would be *Monastic* and *Authentic Trappist Product*, while in the field of tourism, the network Klösterreich⁸, as well as the growing number of monastic pilgrimage and tourism routes that are being created through the collaboration of monastic communities and secular organizations, such as Cisterscapes⁹, Via Benedicti¹⁰, Fédération Européenne des Sites Clunisiens¹¹, Abbayes de Normandie¹².

The success of these “products” is rooted in the care for and cultivation of the monastic ethos, which, by its very nature, seeks to link the product with a broadly understood spiritual context encompassing both culture and ecology. Monastic products can thus be seen as a constructive alternative to industrial goods. In this sense, they cannot be accessible to everyone (quality comes at a price), yet they embody a philosophy of moderation and simplicity (Jonveaux 2021, p. 305). “They can be interpreted by secular society as an alternative economy and as sustainable development” (Jonveaux 2021, p. 309). An important form of this contestation is the awareness of, and in a sense fidelity to, the monastic utopia—and the consequences that flow from it. The protection of this utopia lies at the very heart of the monastic tradition, through the broadly understood practice of enclosure, designed to shield the community from the “harmful influences of the world,” that is, external dishonesty and corruption (Boudon and Bourricaud 1986, p. 78). Yet even the mere recognition of, and approach to, this utopia constitutes a form of constructive contestation, particularly significant in times of increasing monetization and commercialization of everything.

This utopia has multiple dimensions: from concern for quality and even added value of a product, to the continuous optimization of the context in which it is produced—an environment that inevitably influences that quality. Monks, at least in theory, strive for the product to be the result of balanced human activity, guiding the recipient toward such equilibrium. As D. Hervieu-Léger put it, “monasteries are confronted with the ‘fatal dilemma of each utopia’. This dilemma can also be observed in the economic sphere, where monastic communities are trying to find an activity which is profitable and can be integrated into monastic life and its values” (Hervieu-Léger 2017, p. 232).

(b) Art

Contestation, even when constructive in nature, would here concern the culture of contemporary consumer culture and, consequently, the modern individual's attitude toward material goods and the world at large. In this way, it naturally extends into the two other aforementioned areas: culture and ecology. From the very beginnings of monasticism the conscious life of a monk is marked by sensitivity and creativity, which arise as a consequence of humility—both before the grandeur of creation and before human limitations (Cook 1984). In this sense, monasticism represents a path of reclaiming the posture of the artist that belongs to every human being, though often lost¹³. Just as an artistic approach to life, in all its depth and integrity, constitutes a clear form of contestation against today's dominant standardized and pragmatic style, so too the relationship of monasticism to artistry is something natural—though only recently has it been more fully rediscovered and consciously acknowledged. The life of a monk serves, to a greater or lesser extent, as an inspiration for many artists—and is even, at times, unconsciously adopted by them as a way of life (Valters Paintner 2011). In this sense, one can speak of an “anonymous monasticism” of artists (Sawicki 2011). Through contemplation, nourished by meditation and liturgy, the monk's approach to the world grants him, at least in theory, a distinctive access to sensitivity and creativity, as attested by the numerous works of monastic art, most often created by anonymous hands. The encounter between monasticism and art has also been a field of ongoing contestation of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane (Lafont 1957; Leloir 1972; Rousseau 1957; Leclercq 1963). This is expressed in the paradoxical and ever-renewed interaction between enclosure and the external world, between personal expression and divine revelation. It bears witness to the universal scope and enduring appeal of monasticism (Panikkar 1982; Peters 2018), as well as to the multiplicity of its forms—including its non-institutional expressions, such as interiorized monasticism (Evdokimov 2013).

(c) Ecology

Sensitivity to beauty and harmony also finds expression in an ecological sensitivity toward the environment. This constitutes a particular form of contestation against disintegration, manifested for instance in the treatment of the landscape. From the very beginning of their existence, in seeking dwelling places where they might find peace and the conditions necessary for life—while maintaining due separation and protection from the outside world—monks entered into a distinctive relationship with the landscape (Dimier 1964; Debuyst 1997). This took shape through a respectful cultivation of the natural environment aimed at achieving harmonious coexistence with it. Recent research on the monastic landscape confirms this, revealing the monks' approach as a paradigmatic model of ecological awareness. It is not merely a matter of energy or agricultural self-sufficiency. Rather, it represents an attitude which, in view of today's exploitative treatment of the environment, must be understood as a form of contestation. It would be a contestation of disintegration (Mizerski 2010) and, from the very beginning of the history of monasticism, a constructive protest against the chaos of the wilderness.

Thus, nature and the bond with it become part of monastic identity, marking both the living space and the universe of metaphors and imagination, defining the framing of space, the boundaries of memory and identifications through boundaries (Casidy-Welch 2001; Marazzi 2015, pp. 88–89). In other words, the monks are proposing constructiveness and ecological harmony against widespread degradation (Smolina 2016). They are nevertheless accompanied by the awareness that this was easier to achieve than “it is far easier to build a new city in the desert based on solid ascetical and moral principles than to try to reconstruct the old decadent urban order” (Mohler 1971, p. 235).

As we can see, constructive contestation here concerns not so much the feasibility or value of specific actions as their moral and spiritual sources. This, moreover, may become yet another dimension of monastic contestation: an emphasis on the search for causes rather than a mode of thought confined to the categories of effects.

The ecological sensitivity of monks is also linked to the theme of landscape preservation. This involves not only the natural inclusion of their territories within the global network of protected landscapes, but also the use of their values, principles of administration, and modes of management as an inspiration for sound landscape protection practices in wealthier contexts (Mallarach et al. 2016, p. 75). An example of such initiatives would be the New Monastic Communities, for which environmental protection constitutes an alternative to consumerist society. As small communities, they seek to approach this issue not in a utopian manner but rather by striving for a delicate balance between economic development and sustainable management (Gilli and Palmisano 2017, pp. 109–11).

8. Risks

The monastic involvement in significant areas of social, economic and cultural life, as outlined above, delineates new dimensions of monastic identity in the context of secularization. As in the past, so also today, this identity is defined in various relations to society, although the forms of such relations change. Yet the manner of their functioning remains a constant threat to this identity. For monasticism, as a movement and as an alternative proposal to various forms of social reality, remains in dynamic confrontation with that to which it presents itself as an alternative, and is therefore exposed to diverse risks. Developing resilience to these risks may help to strengthen its identity. On the other hand, inattention or imprudence may endanger it.

Such risks became evident when we outlined above the monastic involvement in politics. This involvement consisted of the difficult confrontation of ideals and spiritual values with concrete forms of power and their consequences. If, in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the network of monasteries served as an aid in building the foundations of a new statehood (the Lombards in Italy, Charlemagne in France), at the same time it also entailed economic and political dependence on secular rulers (Brown 2013, pp. 82, 86–87, 225, 240, 373, 478), who often pursued their own interests through monastic endowments (Marazzi 2015, pp. 171, 175). In this sense, while laying the groundwork for a united Europe (Cusimano 2013), Benedictine monks were compelled to leave the cloister, becoming in fact missionaries. Seeking the right balance within different social and cultural configurations is becoming increasingly difficult.

Today, a major challenge lies in the use of the internet and participation in social media. This entails a constant oscillation between the truth of the inner life and the necessity—along with the expectation—of presenting oneself attractively to the outside world in order to gain the greatest possible popularity. The monastery and its values risk being reduced to mere products for sale. In this way, the spiritual sphere becomes intertwined with tourism and history, which may have positive aspects, yet also carries the danger of trivialization. According to Stausberg

The abbeys themselves actually nourish and cherish a wide range of expectations in the way they present themselves and in the varied spectrum of activities they offer, ranging from traditional liturgical prayer, modern meditation techniques such as yoga, to wellness activities and spending one's time in a non-specifically religious way: walking or cycling in the environment, or enjoying products manufactured at the abbey itself or at an affiliated abbey. (Stausberg 2010, pp. 111–15)

Ultimately, such tendencies are symptomatic of the growing secularization of contemporary society, whereas the monastery ought to remain a stronghold of spiritual values and a constructive alternative to secularization (Jonveaux 2019; Jewdokimow 2014).

The boundary between bearing witness to values and merely seeking to please others is a fluid one. The fact is that the changing cultural context compels us to look at the question of identity in a different way. Monasteries in today's secularized society play a role that is no longer the same as it was a century or several centuries ago. This also applies to the matter of securing financial resources, which inevitably has an impact on identity. If an attitude or a given activity (or its absence) results from dependency on specific economic configurations, it is difficult then to speak of alternative, since its very condition is autonomy. In a commercialized world, it is hard to attain such autonomy without participating in the ordinary "market game." This is one of the major challenges of contemporary monasticism.

As Lars van Tongeren has noted: "The many initiatives and activities are not only relevant and interesting to the abbeys commercially, but they are also efforts on the part of the abbeys to spread their religion and spirituality from a monastic background through easy access and to connect these to their activities" (Van Tongeren 2017, p. 95). It may turn out that the market economy and commercialization (that is, practical materialism) will prove to be a more formidable adversary to monasticism than numerous wars and ideologies. This is evidenced by the steadily declining number of monastic vocations in the secularized countries of the North. The decline is striking, although contemporary technical and communicative means make monastic life better known and more accessible¹⁴. Yet perhaps this very accessibility does not serve monasticism well?

Another risk—or perhaps by now a very real threat—for contemporary monasticism is the material comfort and stability enjoyed by monks. Clearly, for a life entirely dedicated to God, often in contemplation, certain material conditions are necessary, and care for them has been present throughout the history of monasticism. Today, however, in a time of increasing poverty and widespread precarity, life in a monastery is becoming a privilege, or even a luxury. Here is the testimony of one of the modern monks:

That's what I also like about our Benedictine way of life: I don't have to have a car, I don't have to worry about food, I don't have to subscribe to a newspaper, I'm not exposed to many things. On the one hand, I gratefully accept this as a privilege and on the other, I see it as an opportunity to devote myself to others and other things (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 192).

Of course, from a purely human point of view there is nothing wrong with such a confession; yet in today's social and economic context it stands in open contradiction to the contestatory stance developed by monks over the centuries, even when understood as an alternative. In this sense, it seems appropriate to draw attention—or rather to return—to the spiritual and evangelical values that stand at the very origins of the monastic movement; in other words, to take up a clear and distinctive position both in the marketplace of spiritual offerings and in the pastoral proposals within the Catholic Church. This would entail a new understanding and experience of monastic identity—precisely in its function as a social message. As E. Bianchi wrote:

In increasingly de-Christianised societies, monasteries will be catch basins for Catholics and people of other faiths who are looking for an intensive life. The more the parishes become spiritual and often hardly strive for an authentic spirituality, the more decisive the hospitality of monasteries, their spiritual accompaniment, the offers for confession and spiritual impulses become (*Mönchtum der Zukunft*, Eckerstorfer 2020, p. 376).

Such an attitude of witness requires a particular coherence, which in our times is as necessary as it is significant. Its cultivation could become a new sphere of constructive

contestation, which, however, unfortunately does not always take place, as in one quite recent publication was written: “with the exception of individual monks or secular employees, monasteries as an organization rarely link ecological practices with their ethical and spiritual foundations” (Freyer et al. 2018, p. 575). This lack of monastic coherence is, however, a separate topic, yet no less important than the increasingly urgent need for constructive contestation of the ever more pervasive hypocrisy.

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Notes

- ¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/contestation> (accessed on 16 September 2025).
- ² Chapter 4, 14. *The Life of Anthony* (Athanasius 1980, pp. 42–43).
- ³ <https://benedictineeducation.org/> (accessed on 15 October 2025).
- ⁴ *Monos* is one. Not one in any manner, for a man in a crowd is one, but though he can be called one along with others, he cannot be *Monos*, that is, alone, for *Monos* means “one alone.” They then who thus live together as to make one man, so that they really possess what is written, “one mind and one heart,” many bodies, but not many minds; many bodies, but not many hearts; can rightly be called *Monos*, that is, one alone. Augustinus (n.d.), *Enarrationes in psalmos*, CXXXIII, 5.
- ⁵ Evagrius’s definition of anachoresis corresponds to the definition of philosophy given by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* V, 11, 1) and Gregory of Nazianzus (*Letter* 31 to Philagrius), both of whom draw on Platonic ideas. Cf. Pontu (2007, p. 242, n. 49).
- ⁶ <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/qual-e-il-compito-dei-cristiani-nella-societa-di-oggi/>, <https://www.vita.it/loptione-benedetto-una-via-per-salvare-il-cristianesimo/> (accessed on 16 September 2025).
- ⁷ *Monastic, Authentic Trappist Product, Klösterreich*.
- ⁸ <https://www.kloesterreich.at/> (accessed on 16 September 2025).
- ⁹ <https://cisterscapes.eu/en/> (accessed on 16 September 2025).
- ¹⁰ <https://viabenedicti.it/> (accessed on 16 September 2025).
- ¹¹ <https://home.sitesclunisiens.org/> (accessed on 16 September 2025).
- ¹² <https://www.abbayes-normandie.com/> (accessed on 16 September 2025).
- ¹³ Palayret and Véron-Denise (2021). Other monastic artists: Thomas Merton; Theodore Baily, Silja Walter, Desiderius Lenz.
- ¹⁴ “Rapid globalization and online communications have made convents and monasteries increasingly visible to people who may have previously had no contact or knowledge. Along with print media and the liturgies, workshops, and retreats they offer in their physical spaces, monastic communities have an increasing virtual presence. Through their own community websites and online platforms such as YouTube, they give lessons on monastic sensibilities, theologies, and practices which offer alternatives to more prevalent social norms. An added benefit for those in cloistered life, online forums allow monastics to teach while preserving their seclusion. Further, monastics are in a strong position to get their message across. They often have considerable social and cultural capital such as institutional authority, formal education, social connections, creative approaches to ritual and various media, and rhetorical, diplomatic, and technical communication skills. Whether through online resources, print media, or real-space interactions, the current scale of teaching that has emerged from convents, monasteries, and associated organizations is unprecedented” (Pryce 2019, pp. 85–86).

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