

CHAPTER THREE

Monasticism

3.1 Monastic Christian Spirituality

The origins of Christian monasticism go back as far as the first century church where men and women, even entire families decided to live a life of perfect continence. An example is the Consecrated Virgins as brides of Christ, mentioned by Tertullianus who led a life of prayer, fasting, retirement, and good works, individually at home or in small groups generally living on the outskirts of towns. The first doctors of the church praised this ascetic way of life: Clement of Alexandria (215), Origenes (253) in the East, Tertullianus (220), and St. Cyprian (258) in the West. They described the control of a person's thoughts and passions as a necessary condition for one's purification and dedication to God. When the Desert Fathers went into the desert they went there to lose in a sense their identity, to eradicate the personality, to become anonymous, to make of one self the void, becoming in the process an embodiment of silence (Cowan 2002:26). They believed that this in turn could potentially facilitate receiving light of the word of God and the empowering to love him even more. Virginity (or celibacy) consecrated to God realises in the soul the union of Christ with the church and replaces martyrdom as the way to give oneself to God (De Dreuille 1999:75).

The example of St. Anthony (251-356) one of the first and most famous hermits in Egypt and one of the most famous of the hermits persuaded many to take up solitary life. He was a pious boy who lost his parents when he was still very young. When he was twenty, he was moved by the New Testament's call to leave all and follow Christ. He divested himself of all property and material things and put himself under tutelage of an experienced monk. He went into solitude in the year two eighty five

entering a deserted fortress, where he stayed for twenty years living an austere life of self-denial. The sayings of Anthony included in the collections of sayings by the desert monks and nuns, show a wise ascetic who learned wisdom experientially in struggling against the obstacles of the world and the flesh. He willingly supported the lawful appointed bishops of his time but left doctrinal arguments to them and to the theologians. Prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, charity, love of the poor, faith in Christ, meekness and hospitality were the virtues he emphasised and which later became part of early monasticism (Feiss 2000:192-193). Many followed this path of ascetics and solitude in the desert and soon monasteries were born in the mountains of Egypt where the desert became a city of monks who left their own people and registered themselves for citizenship in the heavens.

A new society was born that owed its allegiance to no man save he who was prepared to dedicate himself to cultivate the blue flower of *ascesis* (Cowan 2002:28). The Desert Fathers (330) lived semi-eremitic life in solitary cells scattered in the desert around a central church where they gathered on Sundays, under Pachomius followed the development of highly organized types of cenobitic life (293-346). St. Benedict (550) dismayed by the low moral standards in Rome where he studied, fled the city to a deserted spot called Subiaco with the desire to please God alone, the spreading of monastic life in Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Europe brought with it abundant literature. The monastic ideal of unification excluding any diversion, leading monks or nuns to the divine and to the perfection of the love of God began to flourish (De Dreuille 1999:85). Many centuries later St. Francis (1182) would strip himself naked as a mark of complete renunciation of his family, the world and material things to serve God, literally following Christ in poverty and thus began in twelve hundred and nine the Order of Friars Minor. As late as nineteen forty Brother Roger would arrive at Taize where to since nineteen fifty people

from all over the world flocked to experience some of the flavour and aspects of monastic life together with the brothers living there (Ramon 1994:7; cf Spink 1999:9). Although monasticism experienced decay and reform, degeneration and renewal through the centuries the monastic ideal to be united with God and linking heaven and earth in monastic community-life stayed alive and well (Mills 1982:127). Characteristic of the present spiritual trend in monasticism is a return to monastic tradition with a balanced synthesis of the values brought forth by the previous centuries. Bible, liturgy, and the Fathers meditated on during *Lectio Divina* are considered anew as main sources of monastic spirituality. Time for silent prayer is given pride of place in the monastic timetable and guests are invited by abbot and monks to share in the quest for God by the monastic community (De Dreuille 1999:108).

The historian Hans Lietzmann's (1951:153) assessment of the monastic approach to the bible was representative of many Protestant Reformers suspicion of the way monks supposedly engaged with the bible. He states, "The mechanical reading and memorization of texts did not penetrate the heart and gave only the faintest biblical tinge to the world of ideas in which the monks lived." The perception that the bible had a negligible influence upon early monastic life, playing a minor role in their spirituality, was one of the reasons according to Burton-Christie (1997:70) why Luther, Melancton and others found the Christian monastic ideal problematic. After studying the way the monks approach and read the bible since the Desert Fathers in monasteries, he concluded this to be an unfair assessment. He argues just the opposite (see Burton-Christie 1997:70-81). My research journey also showed that the monastic passion for the bible has been from the start deep, intense, and pervasive. The early monks cultivated a profoundly biblical spirituality, as an entire way of living, in order to be informed, and transformed by the word of God. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers (trans. Ward 1981), one of the earliest and

very important Christian monastic texts and my own exposure during the visits to monasteries, reveal an interesting hermeneutic of the bible. A word or text would come to the fore during a Divine Office or liturgical gathering of the monks or read or proclaimed by the abbot or a fellow monk. Followed by a careful discernment or scrutiny of these word(s) asking what possibilities did they offer, what challenges? During this process of discernment, they strived not only to understand the meaning of the words but also to root out any passions that could prevent them from interiorising the word of God deeply into their lives. The goal is to become transparent and open to new worlds of meaning opened up by the word of God, transformed by its power, and to become as monk a new sacred text or mediator of Gods' presence in the world. Their hermeneutical focus is the following:

- Careful attention to the power of language or power of words in all its expressions be it during the Divine Office, the meditation on it in the solitude of the room or cell, the dynamic word uttered by an elder or even words of slander or gossip spoken in carelessness or anger.
- Emphasis is put on language and praxis, in the sense that the word in whatever form, meant mutual engagement becoming part of every fibre of a person's life.
- As in the spirituality of the desert fathers, the handling of the bible reflects a lived, embodied character. The interpretation of sacred texts and the processes of radical personal transformation and conversion are viewed inseparable.

Central themes of monastic spirituality identified during the reseaech journey are the following:

➤ *A search for God and a renunciation of the world.*

Renunciation means to turn away from the mundane world by entering into the solitude of nature: the wilderness, a cave, a desert, or entering a monastery. The key is not so much the outer journey as the inner journey into the wasteland of the own heart or a climbing of an inner mountain (Skudlarek 1982:250). The quest for God or burning desire for God remains the heart of monastic life and not so much secondary aims (teaching, preaching, nursing, or other kinds of outreach) that are sometimes characteristic of some of the modern orders (De Dreuille 1999:110). Monastic life does however allow the search for God to take on a great variety of form (an inclusive approach) for example in Franciscan spirituality. Some monastic traditions focus more on a life of silent contemplative prayer (ascetics), others finding God more easily in liturgical music or worship, others in charitable services in society, and others combining these elements. My own experience at different monasteries is that various accents can be found in the monasteries; their proportions vary and give each house or abbey its particular unique character. For Mills (1982:152) the primary goal of monastic spirituality has been to offer monks on earth an image of heaven and to praise the virtues of transcendental life and avoiding the vices of sinful nature. The way to win this victory is an arduous denial of the body and will. He is convinced that throughout history this ideal was reserved for an elite group, spiritual elite that largely corresponded with the social elite. Although it could be true in certain instances, the praxis of the Desert fathers, Benedictine, Franciscan, and Taize spiritualities that I studied and experienced convey an openness and invitation to everyone to partake in the monastic journey of searching for God.

- *A striving for peace, via discernment of and detachment from desires that may inhibit union with the divine within oneself.*

There is vigilant attention paid to the mastering of passions and the development of virtues that may lead step to step to peace of heart. Although a potential danger this need not imply a dualism or a despising of the body or material world but more a striving for a state of perfect balance and harmony in life. It refers to a state of detachment, a dispensing of diversion or a letting go by re-establishing the soul's control over the body and material world in order to enter the highest/deepest spiritual state possible. It is a journey into the light of God and the holy quiet, a state of stillness, freedom from care, and freedom from the need to own things, tranquillity, peace, and silence of the heart (Cowan 2002:36-38; see Burton-Christie 1997:76-77; cf De Dreuille 1999:111).

- *An emphasis on silence and solitude in the forest, desert, or the monastery.*

The monastery is perceived as first and above all a gate of heaven, a place where God comes down in his infinite charity to be seen and known. I experienced the monasteries as a Tabernacle or an upper room. The research journey revealed that monastic retreats become such gateways for many pilgrims. Silence facilitates a meeting moment between God and pilgrim. It was in the silence of the forest, in the atmosphere of peace in the early morning with the breeze moving the branches of the trees, the solitude and silence of the chapel that I became intensely aware of Gods' presence. Many of the pilgrims/retreatants at the monasteries that I interviewed felt that it was in the silence and not in commotion, in solitude and not in crowds that God as revealed most intimately to them. Silence is highly valued in monasticism as longterm workable social behaviour in order not to disturb the peace of others and to remind them of the desert. The monastery according to one of the monks I spoke to, is a creation of an artificial desert, a quietness and loneliness amid the crowd whilst

striving together to be one with God. The community of monks in the monastery, together in the common regular places where they work or in studying and praying together, enhances the whole atmosphere of silence and prayer. It was to me as if the common effort to be one with God as well as the common silence made it possible for the fruit of each one's prayers, merits and virtues to become the spiritual possession of all (Mills 1982:138; see De Dreuille 1999:112-113).

➤ *Hospitality is valued highly in monastic spirituality*

Spirituality is viewed not as a private, individualistic blissful trip but as an authentic journey of holiness overflowing in the welcoming and blessing of others (Skudlarek 1982:251). As retreatants and pilgrims, we experienced warm hospitality in the monasteries and amidst the stability and rhythm of the monastic life; we were invited and welcomed into the rhythm and community of monastic life. I experienced the idea of stability (monks) and change (the passing guests) at the monasteries in a symbolic way as representative of two complimentary faces of Christ: Christ staying and Christ welcoming, Christ knocking at the door and welcomed. These experiences made the monasteries to me not so much the house of monks but also symbol of the presence of God. Hospitality involves the creation of a free and friendly space where one can discover the possibilities of reciprocal mutuality. Pohl (1999:13) comments as follows:

In hospitality, the stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal, and comfortable place, a place of respect and acceptance and friendship. Even if only briefly, the stranger is included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations...[Yet] Strangers rarely bring only their needs;

within the hospitality relationship, hosts often experience profound blessing.

People flocked since the earliest times to the Desert Fathers to receive spiritual guidance and encouragement; sometimes they built monasteries purposefully along pilgrim's roads for easier accessibility. Even when placed at the outskirts of civilization and the high value put on solitude, the idea prevailed in many instances still to keep contact with members of the parish or society in different ways. Both the communion with men and search for God are valued in monasticism. Could the search for God or the hunger for an experience with the infinite or mystery be made more accessible at such places? Could the atmosphere of peace, silence, stability, charity and prayer be helpful to people going there on retreat or for a short visit to appreciate not only the horizontal dimension of equal hospitality and charity to all but also the vertical dimension as a focusing of all human activity on God in living and personal prayer, individual or common? The answers to these questions by pilgrims interviewed on the research journey are that it could indeed.

➤ *Work and tasks are considered holy and a means to spiritual perfection.*

During long hours of solitude and silent meditation, a simple repetitious task like making ropes or plaiting baskets functioned for the desert fathers as an anchor to thoughts avoiding distractions. Later on in the history of monasticism, the times between work and vocal prayer were divided to facilitate even more concentration on God. Work is perceived as a means to develop special virtues like humility, generosity, obedience, detachment, and purity of heart, and to alleviate temptations like sadness and despondency. Monks work in order to be able to be self-efficient and to give in charity to help others. Material things demands respect not for itself but for the sake of God to whom it belong. Pilgrims experienced the

life in the monasteries visited as an order of events and tasks to maintain an atmosphere that is enhancing to a life of prayer and being consciously in Gods' presence. The isolation of the places itself, the various forms of work the monks do in order to be self-supporting, the study and reading done in their rooms (cells), the daily prayer offices, the meals all contributed to a monastic rhythm. A rhythm focused on keeping the monastery a holy place, a sanctuary, a haven where God is met, adorned, and experienced.

➤ *The cenobitic or community life is viewed in monasticism as a way to union with God.*

The Desert Fathers stressed the importance of this virtue integrated into monastic spirituality. The main lesson that St. Anthony learned from his first visit to the solitary Egyptian monk was devotion to God and mutual love (De Dreuille 1999:121; see Skudlarek 1982:89). Monks interviewed, witnessed about the importance of being one another's servant in the monastery, living together in peace as symbol serving God, and experiencing of his peace. The community life is furthermore to them symbol of the harmony of the angelic community. Monastic life is not mere secret dialogue between the soul and God but also a turning together towards the infinite Mystery. The sharing in Christ's life and giving it to each other make monks mutually responsible for each other's spiritual growth. In the Life Commitment made on the day a new brother makes his life commitment in the Taize community he is asked the following: "If you have to rebuke a brother, keep it between you and him, be concerned to establish communion with your neighbour, be open about yourself, remembering that you have a brother whose charge it is to watch over you..." (Schutz 2000:71). The presence of Christ in the individual members and community affects also the role of the abbot or prior where one of his main functions is to create harmony and consensus in the community. Nowhere perhaps does the monastic community find a better

expression than in the daily common prayers or Divine Office. De Dreuille (1999:123) describes it in the following way: “United with the heavenly choirs, monks praise God in the name of the Universe; participating in Christ’s life-giving sacrifice they are welded in a common love and with Him they embrace the whole world and offer it to God”.

3.2 The Taize, Benedictine and Franciscan Communities

The history and spirituality of the following communities or monastic traditions are relevant. The motivation for deciding on the three orders is the following: The order of St. Benedict is the oldest order within Christian monasticism and Benedict wrote the first official written Rule of Life for a monastic order. My first experience of retreat was a meaningful Benedictine private retreat. It was the beginning of the more monastic and mystical chapter of my story. The story of the Franciscan order began a few centuries after St. Benedict with the frail figure and simple lifestyle of St. Francis of Assisi. His literally living out of the Gospel story about Jesus amongst the poorest of the poor, came like a fresh breeze and prism of new colours in a stuffy dark era of the Catholic tradition caught up in the deadlock of rigid religion, rational ritualism, monotonous monasticism, hedonistic hierarchy and indecent ideologies. The focus of the Franciscan way of life is on life in simplicity, solitude and silence balanced with a reaching out to the needy, love for Gods’ creation and nature (eco-friendliness) and was later captured in the Rule of St. Francis followed by Christians worldwide outside monasteries as the Third or Tertiary order of St Francis. The Taize story started much later in the late nineteen fifties and has over the years become a buzzword worldwide and also in South Africa amongst Dutch Reformed pastors and parishioners. It is the only monastery and order where an equal number of monks from the Protestant and Catholic tradition live in community by the rule or source of Taize in one monastery. Hundreds of thousands of young people under

the age of twenty two from all denominations visit the Taize monastery each year for a ecumenical monastic type weekend or a weeklong retreat. The Taize community at Taize in France, The Benedictine community of La Pierre Qui Vire in France and the Franciscan community of Sacro Conventio Di San Francesko in Italy were visited as part of the research journey.

3.2.1 The History of the Community of Taize

A tiny village called Taize with only about a dozen stone buildings in Upper Burgundy Southern France; ten kilometres from Cluny, so small it is not even on most maps of France has come to be well known amongst pilgrims around the world. At any given time of the year, especially in summer, mostly University aged people and younger from any continent of the world get off at Taize. They come with their packs on their backs trudging up the hill through a small village to what somewhat looks like a big summer campground and 'n big "strange looking" church building (the church of reconciliation with the round Orthodox shaped towers protruding from the roof. The church has expanding halls and can accommodate up to five thousand people. There is also a monastery, home to an ecumenical community of brothers from around the world (celibacy and communal life). During Easter weekends up to twelve thousand people of whom ninety percent are under the age of twenty gather at Taize, living in dormitories and in tents.

Roger-Schutz-Marsauche was born on 12 May nineteen fifteen as a Protestant but surrounded by a living Catholic faith around him (Brico 1978:11). After a difficult adolescence, tried by doubt and severe illness (tuberculosis) and an attraction to writing that will never totally disappear, he had a monastic vocation and a dream of the foundation of a community. The greatest influence that shaped his life was his grandmother who lived as widow in the North of France during world war

one. Her three sons were fighting on the front lines. She remained home in order to welcome refugees even when bombs were falling nearby. She looked after old people, little children, and pregnant women. She left only the last minute when everybody had to flee. Her one desire was that no one else would ever have to through what she and others had experienced. Christians she believed so divided amongst themselves and killing one another in Europe should be reconciled to prevent another war. She came from a family who had been Protestant for generations. However, to make reconciliation a reality, she went to the Catholic Church, not being perceived as a repudiation of her own people (see Schutz 1990:83). It was probably especially these two aspirations of his grandmother, taking risks for those in need at the time, and becoming reconciled with the Catholic faith as a Protestant in order to symbolise and contribute to peace, that influenced Br Roger for life. From the days of his education, he expressed an interest in monasticism. A student of theology in Lausanne Switzerland, he wrote his licentiate dissertation on St. Benedict and the beginnings of Western monasticism, with the aim of showing it to be consistent with biblical ideas and themes. While a student, he also chose to live with some twenty friends in a so-called “Grand Community” or third order group (Hicks 1992:203). He also became president of the Protestant Student Federation. From the beginning, he stood for and lived an authentic and intense spirituality, convinced that island situations or desert experiences like retreats were necessary for much converse with God and little converse with His creatures. He believed in meditation, the examination of conscience and confession as important aspects of retreat (Brico 1978:13). He had a vision of an ecumenical retreat and monastic community as well as a constant reaching out to the poorest of the poor.

In nineteen forty at the outbreak of the Second World War, he at the age of twenty-five, left his native Switzerland for France, the country of his

mother. On his bicycle, he soon came across a road sign: “Cluny.” He found the ruins of the famous monastery and a small town with shops and a notice in the window of the local barrister:” houses for sale in Taize.” Taize is ten kilometres from Cluny and was only a little further from the dividing line that separated free and occupied France until November nineteen forty two. He settled there and began welcoming political refugees, mostly Jews whom the war has compelled into exile. On his own, he prayed three times a day in a tiny oratory, just as the community whose creation he was contemplating would do later. He wrote at this stage of his life an eighteen page pamphlet on the monastic ideal that started with the following: “everyday let your wake and your rest be quickened by the word of God, keep inner silence in all things and you will dwell in Christ and be filled with the beatitudes of Joy, Simplicity and Mercy” (Brico 1978:15). During nineteen forty to nineteen forty two, Roger found friendship and a sense of community in Max Thurian and Pierre Souvairan and the beginnings of a society was established. However, the citizens of the village of Taize did not trust what they were doing for example in helping Jews and refugees and out of fear for possible bad consequences for the village, reported him to Nazi interrogators (see Hicks 1992:204). He was then betrayed to the Vichy police after living two years on meagre resources and was only in nineteen forty four able to return to the village of Taize after being ordained as Protestant pastor in nineteen forty three. Nevertheless, during his exile in Geneva, a few young men have already joined him, attracted by his first booklet on monastic community life. A sentence from this booklet will be at the heart of their life “keep inner silence in all things, in order to remain in Christ...be filled with the spirit of the beatitudes: joy, simplicity and mercy”.

At the end of the liberation, in a crippled France, when they returned, the first brothers struck by the suffering of the German prisoners, who were held in camps nearby decided to reach out to them. They soon received

permission to receive these prisoners for a meal once a week. In the simple and deeply human hospitality that was extended, a Gospel reality is sown, a word and a calling that hundreds of thousands will in years to come take back from this village to all the continents. They also kept and fed twenty orphans and shared food with German soldiers as well as Jewish refugees not taking side in the war. The post-World war II period was for the brothers a slow process of finding their way toward the goal of community. Community life and a great simplicity of life started in nineteen forty nine when the first brothers made life commitments to celibacy. They were actively involved in farming, caring for orphans and helping the sick. As a community, they were also involved in service and compassion motivated by a desire to live for Christ. The brothers had a passion for reconciliation, to live as a people reconciled. The first members of the community were from Protestant backgrounds; but soon Catholic brothers also entered the community. The first group of seven brothers made lifetime monastic commitments: celibacy, common life, and a great simplicity of lifestyle, acceptance of the ministry of the prior, community of material and spiritual goods. For the first time the century old monastic ideal became a reality in the Reformed tradition. In the nineteen fifties the brothers perceived new needs that need addressing and started to form small fraternities of brothers around the village and France and later in countries of poverty and turmoil where they became priest-workers (Hicks 1992: 204, 205; see Schutz 2000:79; cf Brico 1978:19; Schutz 1990:84).

The church of reconciliation was dedicated in nineteen sixty-seven, and since nineteen sixty nine, the community became more ecumenical with Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic brothers joining the community. A parable of community and of reconciliation began to take shape. To the diversity of the various Christian denominations was added the diversity of nations. The hundred brothers are form approximately thirty countries and from all continents. The objective according to the

brothers I have spoken to is also broader in the sense that the entire human family is their concern and striving to live as people who are reconciled in order to be a leaven of peace where people are suffering or experiencing conflict (for example war, ethnic violence). Since nineteen fifty, the Taize brothers would go to live for long periods at a time to live amongst the poorest of the poor and earn their own living there. The community also refuses donations and inheritances because of the conviction that simplicity sustains creativity and stimulates communal life. To them it is an act of faith (risk of faith) and a symbol of a community to give themselves for Christ and for others. They do this because of Christ and of the Gospel and to live each new day for God without expecting anything in return and without demanding to see any results of their self-offering.

The overall atmosphere at Taize is saturated with the experience of God and no emphasis is put on propositions of faith, dogma, or holding of correct opinions. Absolute creeds, membership rituals, regulations, laws, and bureaucracy are perceived as peripheral. The emphasis is on God and the experience of God, on communion with the Divine through prayer and action but action then dependent on and forthcoming from this experience and communion with the Divine. The focus, the heart of Taize is prayer. Prayer in the church of reconciliation three times a day, prayer as communal prayer; meditative, repetitive with simple words through music, silence, silent prayer, listening, resting in God, kneeling at the cross, celebrating communion and reflection on the bible. I experienced together with co-researchers this “form of prayer” in a very profound way and as part of a process during the week staying there that took me deep inside myself and into inner silence and deeper into the presence of God.

3.2.2 The History of St. Benedict, Founder of Benedictine Spirituality

Not much is known about the life and personality of St. Benedict (480-547 AD.) himself. He was born in the Umbrian province of Nursia in 480. Two names are associated with his youth with the one Scholastica whom was according to tradition his twin and later becoming a nun. She might have had something to do with Benedict's resolve to become a monk. The other is Cyrilla who accompanied him to Rome to complete his education with her function to keep a motherly eye on him as a housekeeper. Rome has fallen in 410 and the Barbarian hordes were dismembering the empire, the Huns were ravaging Northern Italy. The church too has been torn apart also theologically, particularly on the question of grace. Then according to Ester de Waal (1984:15) a man appeared on the scene who later built an ark (the Rule of St Benedict) to survive the rising storm and in which human and eternal values may enter to be kept until the water drained away again. This "ark" lasted for fifteen centuries and still has the capacity to bring many safe to land. Benedict went later to Rome to study liberal arts and maybe Law but abandoned his studies, left the city and went to Subiaco where he lived a solitary life for three years in a cave on a hillside. What he saw of the prevalence of vice among the students made him retreat and what he experienced in decadent Rome shocked him so that he decided to become a monk (see Maynard 1954:7).

He left the world, gave up his inheritance, and despairing of society as hopelessly evil he wanted only to contemplate God as a hermit. His aim was to spend himself laboriously for God and not be honoured by the applause of men especially after people heard of a miracle that took place at Cyrilla's place. As he was journeying northwest, he met a monk named Romanus who helped him find a cave nearby for seclusion without any danger of anybody pointing him out as a miracle worker. He gave Benedict a suitable habit, a *melota* or sheepskin garment of utmost

simplicity with the promise to supply his simple needs as well as he could. All this were very far removed from the monastic practice Benedict introduced later when he abandoned the eremitical for the cenobitic life, but for three years, he lived in his cave. Beautiful mountain scenery surrounded the place with a view also of the ruins of Nero's palace and broken arches, which were symbols of the crumbling imperial greatness. Benedict never once left the cave not even for Mass or confession. This was quite an extreme form of individual retreat into solitude. It exceeded even some of the Desert Fathers practices who occasionally or at least on Sundays would go to the nearest church for Mass. Hidden as the cave was it was not utterly concealed, so with time people came for guidance, many recognizing his holiness and wisdom and bringing him food (Chapman 1929:27-34).

An interesting (mythical) incident happened there while he was alone and a powerful temptation assaulted him, first in the form of a little blackbird that fluttered around his face. He managed to catch it, and after making the sign of the cross, let it fly away. Immediately afterwards he so overcome by the memory of a woman he had once seen in Rome, that he nearly left his religious project immediately. He adopted a drastic cure to overcome the sumptuous desires of the mind and flesh: At the entrance of the cave, a thick patch of briars and nettles grew. He took of his clothes and flung himself among the thorns, rolling in them until his whole body was covered in blood. Afterwards he apparently said that the excruciating pain quelled the desire so completely, he never again was tempted in the same way. There is also in the tradition a story (Chitty 1966:115-117) that St Francis of Assisi many centuries later visited St. Benedict's sacred cave, finding the thorn bush still there, blessed it, upon which it immediately burst into full bloom. Cardinal Schuster, Benedictine adds that upon a visit by him there, he saw the thorn bush was still growing but that upon each of the leaves may be discerned what looks like the outline

of a small serpent. Even if it is probably because of a mark left by a parasite, it filled him somewhat dreading evil.

Benedict's fame was growing and he was attracting more and more disciples and even important personalities from Rome visited him. At one stage during his hermitage, a group of monks from a monastery at Vicovaro whose abbot died persuaded him after long conversations to go with them as their Abbot. The monastery was nothing more than a series of cells cut into rock with a refectory and oratory. It did not work out well because of changes for example regarding hard working and moderation in all things that Benedict made. They tried to serve him poisoned wine and when he blessed it as was customary, the glass vessel was shattered. He left with the words: "My brethren, may Almighty God have mercy upon you! Why did you treat me thus? Did I not tell you before that my ways and yours would never agree? Go then and seek an Abbot according to your way of life, for me you can have no longer" (Cabrol 1934: 78). People flocked to his cave now in still growing numbers. He then made the decision to leave the eremitical life and to proceed to the cenobitical having learned after Vicovaro what a community of monks living together should not be like. The second stage of his career had started. Since then many others would join him there and with time, he built and began twelve small monasteries scattered on the hillside of Subiaco with twelve monks in each on probably donated land. It may be a plausible conjecture that Benedict wrote a rule for Subiaco that has since disappeared, except for parts becoming part of his later Rule. Without regulations, there could have been no orderly life. Perhaps even they followed an adopted version of the Basilian rule (Maynard 1954:22-23, 29). In the year five hundred and twenty eight (or 529) Benedict at age forty left with a few fellow monks for Monte Cassino where he built, after destroying pagan shrines of Apollo and Jupiter his new monastery. It was an ideal place for a large monastery on an extensive plateau rising dramatically from the plain. It was secluded

but a landmark on the main road between Rome and Naples. During the building process, another miracle happened when one of the monks died after a heavy masonry stone fell on him. The other monks were told to bring him to St. Benedict's cell where they put him a reed mat and after an hour of prayer, the monk returned to work again. Many more miracles and prophecies and rationally unexplainable events (myths) are ascribed to him but what stands out to me is the man in his cell in the tower of Monte Cassino meditating and praying about the monastery and on what kind of monasticism God wished him to establish. He read and studied available literature in this regard and would eventually provide a rule upon which nearly all-monastic traditions after him would build their models to a greater or lesser extent (see de Waal 1984:16). He would remain at Monte Cassino for the rest of his life. His reputation as a holy person grew, and after he died in five hundred forty-seven, his remains ultimately found its way to the abbey of St. Benoit-Sur-Loire, where they remain today.

St. Benedict's life (as portrayed in the second book of St. Gregory the Great written in Rome in 593-594) can be viewed as a quest, a *pilgrimage* that started in the narrow mountain passes of Subiaco and progressed through the broad sweep of plains that eventually led to the mountain top at Monte Cassino. Yet as person, he much remains hidden and the Rule remains the ultimate source to reveal the personality of the man. It seems that Benedict never thought of himself as founding an Order but that his idea was more that each abbey or monastery should be completely autonomous although following the principles of the Rule of St. Benedict. It is indeed possible to look upon each separate Benedictine abbey today as constituting a religious order in itself. There is no Benedictine general or any provincials or councils that govern but only an abbot for each community (de Waal 1984:18; cf Maynard 1954:81). It is into the individual abbey that the monk enters to stay there usually for his whole life, except if transference is granted for compelling reasons.

I stayed for a week during the research journey at the *The Abbaye ste Marie De La Pierre Qui Vire* Benedictine Catholic monastery situated just outside Reavraux in France near the village of St.Leger Vauban in beautiful countryside within a forest and a small river flowing nearby. It dates back to eighteen fifty when Father Muard, I was told while staying there, a Catholic parish priest received a vocation to live a more monastic life. He left France for Italy to find an appropriate order to join and live the prayerful life. In Subiaco in Italy where St. Benedict also started his calling, he found “by chance” a little booklet on the Benedictine order. He returned to France looking for a place to start a fraternity of brothers. A friend showed him the beautiful woods of St Leger Vauban and by providence, a rich man gave him the grounds on which the current monastery is built. In the beginning, only the priest and a few companions lived there but in time, more brothers arrived and joined. They lived in simple quarters, in five to six cabins. Father Muard died in eighteen fifty four and his successor attached the Benedictine rule formally to this community of monks. Thus, a Benedictine congregation of Subiaco was formed in France. The beautiful church (Cathedral) was built in eighteen seventy. The front part of the cathedral was only added in recent years. Many pilgrims visit the monastery for a day, weekend, or weeklong retreat. Others come only on Sundays to participate together with the community of monks in the liturgy of Holy Mass

3.2.3 The History of St. Francis, Founder of Franciscan Spirituality

Francesco was born in eleven hundred eighty one or two into a rich family in Assisi in Umbrian Italy. Nothing is known about his boyhood other that he could read and write and learned some Latin but not scholarly inclined. The rivalry between Assisi and its neighbour town Perugia was fierce and in the twelfth century, struggles between popes and emperors led to

clashes between them in petty warfare. Italian cities were developing into communes, each striving to bring neighbouring towns under its rule. Within the cities, there were rival groups of noble families and a growing influence of merchants and bankers. The end of the century also saw the third and fourth abortive crusades. It is against this background of rivalry and strife that the story of the life of Francis Bernadone must be seen (see Reynolds 1983:9-11). He was likeable, fun loving, gregarious and sensitive with a love for poetry and love songs. His dreams of knighthood led him to a battle with Perugia and he was taken prisoner in twelve hundred and two and spent a year in prison suffering a prolonged fever. Returning home he lied sick in bed reflecting on what to do with his life (Ramon 1994:6). In twelve hundred and four, he set out to fight in a papal army in Apulia but twenty-five miles out of Assisi, he had a mystical experience that told him to turn back to Assisi. He saw a vision of a hall filled with military weapons and heard a voice asking him: "is it better to serve the lord or the servant?" Francis responded "the lord of course", and the voice replied, "Then why do you serve the servant?" (Short 1989:7). This was the beginning of a conversion process and after receiving a startling vision of the crucified Jesus, he began to seek God in solitude and prayer (Ramon 1994:6). He travelled to Rome as a pilgrim, started to mingle with the beggars at the door of the church of St. Peter, and exchanged his clothes for theirs. On returning to Assisi, he found himself embracing a leper and sought a new home, with the priest of a run down little church, San Damiano outside town. Here he was praying with fervour and longing in the church when he heard the Christ of the crucifix saying: "Francis, go and repair my church which, as you see, is falling into ruins." Interpreting the message in a literal sense, he made a clear and painful break with his family and the world of business. Taking cloth from his father's store, he rode to Spoleto where he sold the cloth and the horse in order to raise money to restore the San Damiano church. His father denounced him a thief and summoned to court, Francis denounced his

father giving back to him even the clothes he was wearing. The bishop of Assisi Guido took of his own cloak and put it around Francis with the words: “have faith in the Lord, my son for God will give you what is necessary for the work of the church” (see Reynolds 1983:18). The cloak hanging action took place metaphorically and for Francis the approbation or at the least acquiescence of the church was a primary need. He worked within the church and not against it and always gave due respect to the presiding priests.

After this calling and new commitment he decided he would call no one father except God and embraced a new life. So began twenty years of loving service to God, and the literal following of Christ in poverty. During the next two years, in hermit dress he repaired three small churches near Assisi – San Damiano, San Pietro, and St Mary of the Angels – the Portiuncula. It was there, on the feast of St Matthias in twelve hundred and nine that God spoke to him in the reading of the Gospel from St Matthew 10:7-10, outlining the life, which Francis yearned for. His literal obedience to Scripture caused him to throw away his staff, take of his sandals, and exchange his leather belt for a rope. The Order of Friars Minor or lesser brothers had just begun, emphasizing that humility was a virtue they should cultivate and that they should not take on the duties of the higher clergy (Ramon 1994:7; cf Reynolds 1983:32). The early years of the new penitent life of Francis, are not described in detail by his later followers. The Penitents were members of a widely diffused movement striving for the renewal of Christian life that spread throughout Europe. In Francis’s time, many of them lived in and around the fast-growing towns while others lived in remote areas in the hills and forests. They did not belong to mainline religious orders and were lay people from different levels of society who shared a desire to live according to the Gospel, as they understood it: giving up property, dedicating them to prayer and fasting, working for their sustenance, begging for alms and sometimes preaching.

Some lived in communities and others were solitaries. It is within this broad movement that Francis chose a way of living: praying, fasting, and working on the repair of small chapels.

In twelve hundred and eight, his life changed dramatically when the Lord gave him three brothers and Francis' personal conversion since then became integrated with a common project of life; and the Franciscan family was borne. One-year later twelve brothers formed the family who set out for Rome seeking approval from the Pope for their way of life. Francis (in Short 1989: 10) wrote many years later: "and after the Lord gave me brothers, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it to me." Others joined the group and they continued praying, working on church repair and other kinds of manual labour, serving among the lepers, begging for their bread when they received no compensation for their work. Francis also received permission to preach and in twelve hundred and twelve spoke at the cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi. He also received in the Order the eighteen-year-old Clare who eventually became the Abbess of the Second Order of poor Clares (see Ramon 1994:7). She decided to follow the life of the Gospel practiced and preached by Francis and the brothers. She cut her hair and dressed in a plain tunic and went to stay with a women's Benedictine community at Bastia and shortly afterwards with a community of women penitents. Then she and a few sisters stayed at the chapel of San Damiano. They were called Poor Ladies, Lesser Sisters or the poor recluses of San Damiano (see Short 1989:12). These nuns were contemplative women who lived an enclosed life with a deep experience of sisterhood, without fixed income and living a life of prayer, manual labour, and poverty

The order of St. Francis needed a church where their priests could say Mass and where prayer and meditation could be fostered. The Benedictine monastery of Subiaco gave permission for them to use the Porziuncula church called Santa Maria Della Porziuncola as well as the little church of San Damiano. They also made use of the caverns in the rocky side of the deep mountain gorge in the foothills of Mount Subiaco about a half hours climb from Assisi. It became their retreat or hermitage where the brothers could retire secure from interruption and renew their spiritual fervour (Reynolds 1983:35). When the friars gathered at Porziuncula in twelve hundred and seven there were some five thousand of them there, many from foreign countries. The phenomenal spread of the Friars Minor could probably be ascribed to a mounting discontentment with the church at that stage because of immorality, corruption, and power struggles of many priests, bishops, and cardinals. In addition, the ideal of the Franciscan movement of reaching back to the early church and also back to the Gospel message as well as striving for a simpler form of religion, their preaching and example attracted lay people to share in their ideals and labours. Pope Innocent III and his successors apparently sensed that this fraternity as group of “loyal to the church” men could bring new life into the church, so they were absorbed, encouraged, and not rejected by the papal authorities.

The early Franciscans lived according to the contemplative and active mode of life sometimes accentuating one above the other. It seems from the history of Francis’ life that he himself spent roughly half of his life in retreat alone or in community with the brothers at the church or monastery. The other half was spent on missions and reaching out to the poor. He had an intense desire to go into solitude or alone with three of the brothers to a secluded place where they could pray and meditate but had also a strong vocation to evangelize and bringing the Gospel message of peace, repentance, and reconciliation. He had in mind

according to Reynolds (1983:51) two kinds of friars: those who were more active in the world and those who chose to live as hermits or with a few brethren to keep the chain of prayer unbroken. The indications are that he was inclined to the second course. But there was also a third course that some of the brothers could take in practice; when they were tired of all the wandering and preaching they could withdraw for a while to some secluded retreat to refresh their spiritual lives in prayer and meditation far from the noise and business of the world. Most of the friars seem to blend or combine then the contemplative and active life. Many of the friars that I met at the Basilica in Assisi tend more to a contemplative mode, although not so much in the radical individual ascetic sense, but managed a balance between solitude and community. They were very active in the Upper Basilica Church during the day doing service there for example mass for the pilgrims and tourists. Others also travelled a lot to other parts of the country and world on outreach to other Franciscan communities.

Francis' rule or way of life received verbal approval from the Pope in twelve hundred and sixteen and official recognition in twelve hundred and twenty three. In twelve hundred twenty four during his time of retreat at the mountain of La Verna in Tuscany, he underwent a mystical experience of the crucified Christ and returned from the retreat with the stigmata, the marks of Christ's wounds in his hands, feet, and side (Short 1989:15-17). He was already approaching death now worn out by physical pain and illness and suffered from a serious eye disease. During this time, he wrote and composed his spiritual masterpiece, The Canticle of Brother Sun, a hymn that spoke of Gods' goodness and the goodness of all creation and impending death. On the evening of October 3 in twelve hundred and twenty six he died at the Porziuncula and his body was carried up to the city for burial first in the church of San Giorgio and four years later in the magnificent Basilica built in his honour. On the way to the town gates, the procession carrying the dead "little poor man" stopped at the monastery of

San Damiano where Clare and her sisters saw for the last time their brother and friend, now marked with the stigmata (signs of Christ's wounds) (Reynolds 1983: 102).

The Minor Brothers brought about a renewal of religion during the twelfth and thirteen centuries and according to Reynolds (1983:109); "no one has equalled Saint Francis in the freshness and power of his impact on religious life." Vast multitudes of people who have never met a friar owe much to the spirit and message of Saint Francis. A Benedictine historian, David Knowles (1948:126) has written in this regard the following:

The new life that Francis himself had lived and shown to others remained and remains in the Church, and has in all centuries inspired individuals and groups within the Order as the model for a type of sanctity which all recognize as Franciscan. It has besides, enriched the spirit of all Europe, not only, or even principally, as a new manifestation of the brotherhood of all men and of the share of all creatures in the beauty and beneficence of God, but as a showing forth of the Gospel lived in its fullness with a detail and clarity rare to equal in any age, and as a revelation of the imitation of Christ crucified, in love and suffering, which though present in all Christian sanctity, appeared in Francis in a new form to which the growing mind of Europe responded at once, and which was to prove the prototype of much which was to come in the religious life of the West.

The Franciscan Third Order or Brothers and Sisters of Penance (first order is the Friars Minor, second order is the Poor Sisters of Clare) is the Franciscan family or lay movement and embraced today by millions worldwide. The Poor Clares also called the Second Order live in hundreds

of autonomous communities scattered around the world. There are tens of thousands of lay and ordained men of the First Order divided into three branches: Friars Minor Conventual's (more adaptive approach, Friars Minor Capuchin (renewal and a purer Franciscan observance) and the Friars Minor. There are Franciscan communities in the Anglican and Catholic Church traditions.

3.3 Monastic Way of Retreat

3.3.1 A Benedictine Way of Retreat

Research data show that the Benedictine monastic tradition leans more to the contemplative than an active mode of life. The importance of and emphasis in the Rule on the Divine Office (see rule 8-20; cf de Vogüé 1977:127-169) as well as my own experience at the monastery of La Pierre Qui Vire confirms that Benedictine spirituality promotes silence and contemplation. It makes ample provision for it in the Divine Office for chapel, private prayer, study, silence, and work. The goal is to seek God and union with God and to be constantly conscious of the perfect love of God, for example to be in continual prayer between the seven prayers of the hours (Divine Office) in the chapel. The Benedictine, though he/she may engage in various forms of active work, is not committed by the Rule to any kind of work at all, except what is essential to perform in the monastery. I noticed gardens, a workshop, library and also books and works of art created by the monks and on sale in the shop on the premises, with monks behind the counter at La Pierre Qui Vire.

Benedictine spirituality also emphasizes relationships between members of the community. The monastic ideal preceding Benedict was that of a novice finding a holy man and asking to learn from him and the monastery had been a group of individuals gathered around the feet of a sage. One of the earlier monastic rules, the Rule of the Master had given enormous

powers to the Abbot. St. Benedict came and changed this exclusively vertical authority structure by focusing on the interpersonal relationships of the community of monks. They are there to focus on learning about and seeking God but they are brothers bound in love to each other. He devotes three chapters (RB 69-71) to this topic. In Chapter 72 of the rule five to eight he states the following: “the monks are to bear with patience the weakness of others, whether of body or behaviour. Let them strive with each other in obedience to each other. Let them not follow their own good, but the good of others. Let them be charitable towards their brothers with pure affection” (de Waal 1984:19).

As retreatants we ate together as a group, sometimes in silence and afterwards would clean up the tables and wash dishes. At times one or two retreatants would be invited to eat in silence with the monks in their refectory or dining hall. One group bible study per day, usually in the morning after breakfast for retreatants led by a monk can also be attended. The story the one morning was about the bath of Bethesda, and the question of Jesus “do you want to be healed?” The “new” or fresh interpretation of the well known story by one of the monks and deep theological insights was to me very stimulating. He expanded on two levels of healing, talked about desperate and distressed people, the “boiling water, the Sabbath, the fact that the same word is used here to get up that is used for the resurrection for example a new life or exodus or walk that begins here for the man. It all became an allegory for the group of retreatant’s pilgrimage and my own retreat journey as potential source of regeneration and renewal. The group bible studies at the monastery were much more formal and less spontaneous than those I have experienced at Taize. The retreatants are welcome to join the community of monks in the chapel during the seven prayer offices. A definite border between the abbot and the monks sitting in front around the altar (enclosed area) and the retreatants or other visitors are maintained at all

times in the cathedral. Nowhere perhaps does the Benedictine community find a better expression than in the common prayer or Divine Office where the monks believe they unite with the heavenly choirs to praise God, participating in Christ's life giving sacrifice, bonded in a common love to embrace the whole world and offering it to God in prayer.

The liturgy or seven daily prayer offices (The Divine Office) in the cathedral were:

- *Vigiles* (night office): at 2h05 in the morning, the rule of St. Benedict says it must be early in the morning thus the time for this office may differ from monastery to monastery.
- *Laudes* : 6h35 commencing with long bell ringing to announce a new morning (day).
- *Eucharistie*: 9h15.
- *Sexte*: 12h30 the Afternoon prayer.
- *None*: 14h45 on Sundays and other holy feast days.
- *Vespres*: 17h30 Evening prayer.
- *Complines*: 20h30 before going to bed.

Bell ringing: during night office at 2h05 it was rung nine times

During the day: three times in the morning, afternoon and evenings (from tradition the annunciation by angels as well as silence). Bell ringing three times daily I was told serve also as a reminder to pray three times a day.

The monks explained the aim of the Divine Office to me: It functions as a tool or means to arrive at unceasing prayer where the function of the specific prayer hours is then not to dispense from the calling to continual prayer, but recalling it to memory and outlining its fulfilment. De Vogüé (1977:129-138) describes it as going back to the early Egyptian (Desert Fathers) spirituality that focused on the continuity of prayer and prayer

vigils only at the beginning and end of the night with the rest of the day without offices. The movement from the prayer of the hours, two times daily to seven corporate prayer hours in Benedictine monasteries, is a move from solitude to public gathering and from liberty to obligation. He rightly warns against legalism and forgetting that the purpose of the seven supports (Divine Office) are to build or support the bridge to spontaneous unceasing communion with God. This warning is also applicable within the context of designing a way of retreat and all the elements build into it.

The following is an example of three liturgies at La Pierre Qui Vire:

Laudes

Organ music

Overture

Hymn

Ps 142 and 137

Canticle

Ps 150

Lecture Rom 12:1-2

Organ music

Canticle

Litany

Notre Pere

Benediction

Organ music

Vesperes

Organ choral music

Overture

Hymn

Ps 141

Ps 47

Ps 116

Canticle

Lecture Eph 2:4-6

Organ music

Canticle of Mary

Litany

Benediction

Organ music

Complines

Flute

Hymn

Ps 15

Lecture

Canticle of Simeon

Benediction

Chant

It was apparent that the Benedictine liturgies aim to create an atmosphere between simplicity and solemnity. The focus according to the the monks I interviewed, is the Divine Office and for them “perfection” lies right here. The monks stated that Benedict does not give exact prescription as to how the Divine Office ought to be conducted but stressed that Gods’ presence is everywhere and everything done for him must be done carefully and exactly. The Psalms play an important role and are recited every week, all of them. Mass or Eucharist is not conducted in the same way in every Abbey for example some will retain the choir to say most of the office and others will sing it. The value of private prayer is accentuated but the consensus seems to be that the more monks are penetrated and saturated by the spirit of liturgy, the better they will be able to reach

heights of interior prayer. They recommend the cultivation of personal and mental prayer in order for the recitation of the Divine Office to become more spiritual and contemplative. The praise of God is highly valued during the common prayers (the Divine Office). The canticles and rest of the Office in the words of one of the monks I spoke to is the official voice of the Bride of Christ who sings, united to Christ and under Gods' very gaze. The Rule does not deal with what chants should be used by the monks although the Gregorian mode seemed common and trained singers were used to good effect. Psalms are usually sung during the different offices. Each monastery develops its own liturgy within the framework of the Benedictine rule. There is a specific choir office for the chants and singing. The scripture readings are the decision of the abbot. The divine office was not only the main way of retreat whilst visiting the monastery but is intended to support and stimulate a monastic way of life. Private prayer supported by personal silence and the community atmosphere is closely connected with the common prayer of the community namely the Divine Office (cf Campbel 1983:40-43). Psalms and silent prayer succeed one another both occupying an equal place. The singing of psalms connect the monks to the prayer of the people of God which go back for centuries making the Divine Office writes (De Vogüe 1977:145): "an ecclesial memorial". The whole atmosphere of the liturgies in the Benedictine monastery where I stayed was more "high church" like, and the group of monks very solemn and serious.

One of the questions put to the monks was how Benedictine monastic spirituality views prayer and whether the Benedictine tradition offers a particular way of doing it that is also practiced in the monastery of La Pierre Quie Vire. The response was that one of the expressions of the search for God is the desire to follow the recommendation given by Jesus and recommended by St. Paul to "pray at all time, continually" (Luke 18:1, Eph 5:20). The monastic tradition offers a particular way of accomplishing

this. The first Egyptian monks fulfilled the twofold duty of work and prayer in the footsteps of St. Anthony (the father of Christian monks) and St. Pachomius by reciting psalms or other scripture texts when working. From time to time, they stood or knelt to express their own prayer. Later when work had to be done in the fields or in workshops, fixed times were dedicated to the communal recitation or reading of scripture texts. St. Benedict continued this tradition and used the following complementary means to pray constantly that is also used by the monks at this monastery namely the liturgy and choir office, private prayer, and *lectio divina* (sacred reading). *Lectio Divinia* (RB 48) or sacred reading as a way or process of reading a sacred text, meditating on it and responding to it in prayer in order to reach contemplation is valued highly in the monastery.

In the liturgical or divine office, monks celebrate Christ's mysteries and it unites the faithful to him. St. Benedict made use of the *lectio divina* tradition when monks began to separate work from prayer and prayed seven times a day (seven symbolizes the whole/fullness/completion). The aim was that these liturgical prayers would help the monk to pray the whole day. St. Benedict placed the liturgical offices at the points of the day where the activities change, in order to offer to God what had just been completed and to entrust him with the next duty. The divine office is not only a means to pray continually but has also a value of its own as a service of praise and supplication for the whole world in the name of humanity. Care, beauty and a prayerful atmosphere in the Eucharistic liturgy in the chapel is a cherished tradition where mass is celebrated daily and seen as a prolongation of the Sunday mass. The choir office is closely related with the liturgy. They view the Psalms as words of Christ and the monks are invited to sing them wisely by sharing the prayer experience of the psalmist and Christ himself. In this way, the psalm may become a personal prayer, a word of God touching the heart giving light and comfort and answer to personal questions. The monks are invited to build their

continuous contemplation on these and other texts read during the liturgy. Following the example of Christ, the first monks used to retire often in solitude to pray. St. Pachomius requested his disciples to recite verses of scripture when going from one place to another and St. Basil recommended meditation of scripture while doing manual work. Private prayer in Benedict spirituality is thus clearly flowing from the recitation of the word of God and in an atmosphere of humility and reverence for the presence of God. The monks do not find it necessary to say a great deal but to say or listen constantly in the heart the words, which have touched the soul, to keep it in memory and repeat and meditate it during the day. To a Benedictine monk then these texts are not just mantras or repetitive phrases to help concentration on Gods' presence but words of God pregnant with his creative and formative power and able to shape the heart of the monk that prays in the image of Christ. The aim or ideal is to stay in the presence of God to reach pure prayer where the soul pours itself out in God like a blazing fire.

I shared with the monks my experience of the monastery as an extremely quiet place, and that I noticed that they converse very sparingly. During the mealtimes in the refectory they would refrain from talking with the exception of one brother reading passages from a book. I asked them to reflect on this atmosphere of silence in the monastery. Some of their thoughts on silence were the following: Silence and control of thoughts go hand in hand and are monastic observances found also in the Hindu (some sannyasis make vows of silence lasting several years) and in Buddhist monasteries (to reach the interior solitude of meditation and to move beyond the senses). Following the example of Jesus (going to quiet places for silence and solitude), the first Christian monks left the world and went to the desert. However, the world and the neighbour were still in their minds so their first struggle was with their thoughts and the passions of the human heart. They fought it with prayer following the image given by

Ps 136 “to break the evil thoughts into pieces on Christ as soon as they arise.” St. Pachomius recommended the same vigilance to the monks of his communities to repeat in their hearts some Scripture texts in order to avoid temptations and to keep the mind in Gods’ presence. Silence was from the beginning the usual atmosphere of monasteries, also silence as result from a more controlled way of speech in the use of words. To use words sparingly or to use a few words as a reminder of Gods’ presence, promote virtuous silence that expresses the respect due to God and creating an atmosphere of recollection helpful to listening to God and to others.

St. Benedict heir of the monastic Christian tradition takes the teaching on silence (RB chapter 6 and numerous other allusions to silence in the rule) by his predecessors for granted. He defines specific times and places where a stricter silence ought to be kept for example in the chapel. Benedictine monks should strive at all times to keep silence. The monks do not interpret it as a strict rule but rather an effort towards self-mastery and mutual charity. For a Benedictine monk the first degree of humility is a constant control of the mind (inner silence) and the control of the tongue (outer silence). Their main thesis is that monks should refrain not only from bad or unnecessary speech, but also even from good speech in order to cultivate listening silence. When words are used, the rule insists on the practice of the good word. After the Divine Office, all leave the chapel in complete silence, so that a brother wishing to stay and pray alone will not be disturbed by the insensitivity of another. During the day when someone chooses to pray privately he will go into the chapel to be there in silence. When words are used they us it wisely and in an edifying manner for example the abbot’s teaching functions like a leaven of divine justice kneaded in the mind of his disciples. The cellarer or bursar sees to it that no one is upset or saddened in the monastery as household of God and speak in a way that promotes calm, courage and comfort. The needs

of the guests or retreatants are met with all charitable service and a brother will sit with us to listen and speak towards our edification. At mealtimes complete silence is maintained and the brothers are very attentive to one another's' needs as they eat and drink, so that no one needs to ask for anything. In the background, the reader's voice is all that is heard, reading from the bible or passages from other books. My observation was that the monks strive to find the right balance between silence and speech in order to help them to reach the silence of the heart where the words of Scripture, transform the soul and culminate in the ineffable experience of the encounter with Gods' love. Silence in a monastery is not only an important ingredient or element of a monastic retreat for them but a way of life.

On the question, why many people come to the monastery for a day, weekend, or weeklong retreat some of the responses from monks and retreatants were the following: "Because of spiritual needs, a spiritual hunger for God and His presence. There is not enough time in busy schedules and overfilled lives to find God and self. People are *scattered* in mind and lifestyle therefore, they come here for *recollection*, to refocus on and to find God in their hearts and in others whilst here at this silent, holy, and beautiful place. Visitors came to monasteries over the years as places where men are permanently living close to God and with the expectation to receive either spiritual or material help form the brothers. The monastery as the house of God is the meeting place for God and man and has the duty to welcome all those in search for God. Since the time of St. Benedict (and even before that the Desert Fathers) people visited monks to receive from their spiritual guidance and encouragement. People built many monasteries purposely along the pilgrims' helping them to get over difficult mountain passes or to cross the river fords and for spiritual support. More generally, they were situated at the outskirts of civilisation;

to keep contact with it but in solitude; they were in communion with men and in search for God.”

As to whether retreat, is commendable to all Christians and other seekers or not and on their personal view on retreat, monks replied as follows: “The needs and spirituality of people differ and therefore there would be different styles or ways of retreat to meet the different needs. For example in the Jesuit tradition, they will conduct a retreat specifically to help retreatants make important decisions. Retreat may also serve as a stimulus or reminder by participating in the *fixed rhythm* in order that when going back home something of the prayer and silence rhythm may become part of everyday life. The monks at La Pierre Quiévre and in the Benedictine tradition only speak when it is really necessary and will eat together in silence in order to develop interior communication and listening to God’s voice. There is much time wasted that could rather be spent in prayer, wasted time as time that must be filled with stuff or noise or people. The repeated singing, chanting of Psalms in the cathedral becomes part of our everyday life and reminds us of the presence of God. As monks, they want to keep God’s Word close to their hearts and think about God all day while working and studying. Retreat may be necessary for some Christians to help them *practicing the presence of God* to become part of their lives when they return home. The atmosphere of prayer and peace and silence of the monastery invite pilgrims to discover the vertical dimension in living prayer and communion with God individually and in community. In the modern and materialistic times we live in, the monastery are to many seekers privileged places where the return to God and experience of his presence may become easier. The atmosphere in this house of God may be helpful in enriching life of the seeker bringing it in harmony with what God asks from them. The kind welcome given to retreatants and hospitality could help them also to appreciate the horizontal dimension of charity for all.”

3.3.2 A Franciscan Way of Retreat

I stayed with the community at The Church and Convent of San Francesco in Assisi (*Sacro Conventio di San Francesco*). The Fraternity of brothers residing in this monastery is part of the *Fratre Minori Conventual*, a fraternity with a more adaptive and relaxed approach to the Franciscan way of life.

The Monastery at the *Basilica di San Francesco* is the most beautiful and awesome place I have encountered. Millions of tourists and pilgrims flock here every year and the splendour of the place inside and outside is breathtaking. The Building style and art inside is a great tribute to a man who owned nothing and lived the simple poor life al his life. I have visited the Basilica once before as a tourist and has mingled with the crowds and looked at everything more through the eyes of a tourist than a pilgrim. To go there again as part of the research journey was quite different. To stay with the brothers in the deep chambers of this very special place and experience the grandeur, art, and symbols in complete quiet when all the tourists have left. For example, I knelt at the tomb with the remains of St. Francis during the day with my first visit with many other tourists but during the research pilgirmage also late at night during evening prayers with the fraternity of monks.

Rising on the lowest slope of Mount Subiaco, by the will of Pope Gregory IX and of Friar Elias, the double Basilica expresses in the concatenated articulation of its architectonic masses, the determination of making eternal through the centuries, the figure, and message of St. Francis. On the Romanesque framework of the lower basilica (1230-1232) where the tomb Church destined to guard the remains of the little poor man was constructed the upper basilica (1232-1239) which in the ascension motif of its arches presents itself as the exemplary type of Italian Gothic and to me

one of the most beautiful houses of prayer. My visit there was indeed a pilgrimage but I was not prepared, after getting to know Francis better through the eyes of the work of authors I have read, for the contrast between the poverty and humble and simple life of the saint and this magnificent basilica that entombs him. I experienced this incongruity throughout my stay at the monastery not only because of this vast structure of grandeur and opulence but also whilst living in the monastery itself. Although I do understand the desire of his successors and the great multitude of followers to pay tribute by visible tokens in buildings and paintings, I just could not reconcile the man and his way of life and this magnificent shrine with all the grandeur built in his memory. Even the visitors or pilgrims that knelt at his tomb and visited the cathedral in their thousands daily, were most if not all of them that I saw upper middle class affluent people. I did not see many *lepers*, poor or the very humble of society there!

According to the brothers interviewed, the Basilica was built as a manifesto of Franciscan spirituality and a temple of glory. They showed me the various homilies depicted on the semi-darkened walls of the lower basilica that flow together into a thematic crescendo in the famous Giotto allegories above the central altar. These invite the pilgrim to follow the saint in his mystic labour, morally sustained by the Christ of Bethlehem and Golgotha and demonstrated by his life of obedience, poverty, and chastity, reaching final glory in heaven. The artists tried to participate in the passion and beatitude of the saint by going beyond the traditional Byzantine Roman art schemes. Their depiction is truer, more violent, sweeter, and more human. In the upper basilica, the pictorial cycles of the great schools of Italian art and the stupendous windows painted by Italian, French, and German artists narrate in choral format the life of the founder of the Friars Minor. The Old Chapter Hall houses the relics of St. Francis. Originally it served as the chapter hall of the first friars since twelve

hundred and twenty eight. The relics of St. Francis I saw displayed there were his ashen habit or tunic, Ivory horn, Chalice and Patten, Embroideries of Jacopa Settesoli, the white tunic, the blessing to brother Leo and the Franciscan rule.

The fraternity of eighty brothers gather each evening at nineteen hours fifteen in silence in what is considered by the Franciscans the most holy place of the Franciscan order; the Tomb of St. Francis. One of the brothers told me how Francis originally was buried in a sepulchre in San Giorgio where he had preached his first sermon until a more permanent shrine could be erected. Four years after his death the building of the Basilica was sufficiently advanced for his body to be transferred, and May 5 twelve hundred and twenty eight was the momentous day. With the specific orders of Pope Eugene IV (1442) and Sixtus IV (1476), the tomb containing the sarcophagus with the bodily remains of the saint was sealed in such a way that they could not be disturbed or interfered with. It was only in 1818 that Pope Pius allowed the tomb to be freed from the solid rock it was encased in. This also allowed the mortal remains of the saint to be uncovered and properly investigated by the Umbrian bishops, medical experts, and archaeologists from Rome and nearby towns. Then a crypt chapel was formed around the burial place, which was now guarded by a heavy iron grill. Today near his mortal remains, rest the bodies of four of his most faithful companions, who, shattering the taboo of their different social classes, offered a moving witness of Gospel fraternity: friar Leone, friar Maseo, friar Angelo and friar Ruffino. On the entrance stairway, facing the tomb of Francis rests the noble matron Jacoba of Settesoli, whom Francis called affectionately friar Jacoba.

The evening prayers in the tomb would start in complete silence, followed by scripture readings (the first evening of the visit Rom 5, Eph 1 and Luke 1 were read), then psalms were sung, followed by some intercessory

prayers and the last twenty five minutes spent in silent scripture meditation. I experience the silence in the enclosed final resting place of St. Francis as dense with the love and presence of Jesus whom Francis followed so literally and wholeheartedly.

Supper afterwards was a very big surprise to me as some of the brothers served wine, five different vegetables, salads, pasta, cheese, and pudding in absolute abundance to us with everybody talking and laughing heartily. Very different from the meals I had with the Benedictine brothers at La Pierre Qui Vire and especially very different from the diet that St. Francis himself followed. The novice friars sat in the middle of the big dining hall and they did all the dishing out of food and serving. There were also five young girls in the refectory that helped as volunteers in the monastery. I experienced a lot of warmth, joy, and spontaneity among the brothers during my stay and the atmosphere much more spontaneous and relaxed than for example the Benedictine monks at La Pierre Qui Vire. What do saints really look like and how do they behave I pondered at one stage during the visit, what is the image the community of saints reflect to others or should reflect? The surface behaviour of the community of monks I met in Asissi was *not so pious* (high-church) at all depending on what a person's perception of pious are. The life of St. Francis and his spirituality of humility, simplicity, and joy could be a reminder that the more people are of the saints, the more human they become. Bodo (1985:131) makes the statement: "The way of communion with other people *is* the way to union with God." Francis's love for his brothers as fellow human beings emphasized love with no conditions attached between the communities of saints. The only friar there from Africa confided in me that, he was not happy there and felt that he did not fit in at all and did not really feel accepted there especially by the other Italian friars. Listening to his narrative united me even more to this fellow pilgrim from my home

continent. The Franciscan friars do not stay at one monastery for a lifetime but may spend time in a variety of different monasteries worldwide.

Morning prayers start at six twenty five with a Mass conducted in the splendour of the Upper Basilica before the daily multitude of tourists and pilgrims would start to arrive. The music was beautiful; the sound of the friar's voices reverberating through the big cathedral had a goose bump effect on me. The ritual of the Eucharist and liturgy by the brothers in front with their white robes and purple stoles and *hostie* being given and humbly and gratefully received by myself spoke to my heart and I as Protestant experienced deep communion with Jesus and my Catholic brothers during the Eucharist.

In the convent of St. Francis, there is only the rhythm of morning and evening common prayers in comparison with the seven prayer offices of St. Benedict and three prayer offices of Taize. There are no group discussions or group bible studies. During the day the friars' study, work, conduct many Holy Mass liturgies in the Upper Basilica for pilgrims and tourists during the day, hearing confession, doing service at the doors, or merely standing outside and smiling the people in and out. They always had their black tunics on with a rope as belt and sandals but during their free time, they would wear plain clothes. To my experience, they were very down to earth, friendly brothers with the exception of a few more aloof, seemingly dogmatic, and more serious friars. Most of them were very open and receptive to me a Protestant stranger in there Catholic midst. The novices were most of the mornings busy with lectures. The Gospel and Psalms are the heart of their common prayers. The *Ave Maria* is also prayed aloud during evening prayers.

Other observations while experiencing life on the hill in Assisi on which the Basilica was built and the surroundings were that of a vast area, with just

too many people during the day. There are many other churches within walking distance of the convent, priests and nuns and monks can be seen almost everywhere. Also in abundance were the merchants selling icons and holy replicas and other haberdasheries, and many hotels and restaurants. To come here for retreat or pilgrimage would be difficult if not staying in the inner sanctuary of the convent where I have stayed, which is mainly open to Franciscan friars who come to the visit. In the midst of all the hustle and bustle there is the monastery enclosed with its wall and spectacular view from the nearly all-round balcony over the valley below filled with friars who live their more relaxed or liberal interpretation of the Life or Rule of St. Francis. The Basilica was for the pilgrims I have spoken to and many tourists who visit there for a day or morning an important symbol of holiness, uniqueness, celibacy, and commitment. Especially Catholic pilgrims I interviewed, view their visit there more as a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Francis, spending time in quiet reflection before returning home and not so much as a day or weekend retreat.

3.3.3 A Taizé way of Retreat

I arrived on the hill at Taizé for my first visit as part of the research journey but I viewed it also as part of a *pilgrimage of faith*. I realised when arriving there that I have arrived at a place where hundreds of thousands of young people (and a few thousand older people like me) have spent time there at the wellsprings of faith. Many came here in their search for a meaning for their life, a place I was told by one of the brothers that Pope John Paul once referred to after visit there as “Taizé, that little springtime of faith.” On my arrival at Taizé, a relaxed atmosphere prevailed, with many groups of young people sitting around chatting, some on their own reading the bible and others in deep discussion.

“Welcoming with simplicity is so important”, one of the brothers emphasised in an interview. He quoted what the leader of the community

Br. Roger (since my visit deceased) once had said: "something is simplified within us...Even with poor means and however destitute we are, we can do so much through faith in Christ...and the radiance of Christ will be light for many others across Europe and elsewhere." One of the marks of Gods' love is that pilgrims are always welcomed with forgiveness and compassion. This was my experience on arrival and during my stay at Taizé. All the volunteer workers and brothers made me feel welcome, loved, and tried their best to help me on my journey as pilgrim and retreating for a week on the Taizé hill. Hospitality and love for those arriving at a monastery were also characteristic of the monastic community of Taizé.

The programme for seventeen to nineteen year olds and the programme for those thirty years old and upward are not the same and the thirty-something's eat and have group meetings at a different venue. During the prayer Meetings or the Divine Office in the Chapel (church of reconciliation) everybody are together at eight hundred hours thirty, twelve hours twenty and twenty hours thirty. Pilgrims or retreatants are welcomed by a community of brothers who have made a lifelong commitment to follow Christ in common life and celibacy, in simplicity of life. The invitation to all is to take part with people from many different nations and the community of monks (brothers) in this way of life (the monastic rhythm of Taizé) by way of prayers, small groups, meetings, times of silence, tasks and meals. The community prayer or Divine Office (three times a day in the church of reconciliation) is at the centre of the life of Taizé and pilgrims and brothers confirmed that they view it as the centre of the retreat. The brothers of the community are available after the community prayers for spiritual direction in the church of reconciliation.

My first experience of community life at Taizé was having supper (I didn't realise I should eat at another venue for older people) in the youth dining

hall together with more than a thousand people all under twenty nine, which made we feel much older than my forty six years. Everybody was talking, laughing, and eating from plastic plates a simple meal of soup and bread and cheese afterwards appointed teams of pilgrims did the washing up. Work is part of monastic life also at Taizé with the young people doing a project or chore every day in groups.

The first prayer meeting in the church of reconciliation announced by persistent bells (five of them in different sizes) ringing for the first time about twenty minutes beforehand for five minutes and then growing silent to start ringing again five minute before the prayer meeting starts, was a real surprise and highpoint. Nearing the church, the “silent” posters outside is obvious and creates a zone of silence around the church. The liturgy for the evening is available at the doors as well as songbooks. The place inside astounded me. The hundreds of small candles in front with the deep orange draperies high and long from the floor to the roof, the more subdued or “darkish” illumination (semi-darkness pierced by tiny lights from the high ceiling helps to centre oneself), immediately started to enfold me and invited me to be immersed in the atmosphere, ritual and liturgy to follow. There was the faint smell of some sort of incense, everybody sitting on the floor or using little kneel bunks, others sitting on steps more to the side of the church, and few older people on chairs, bunks to the side of the one wall, the icons, cross, the green shrubbery that enclose the inner circle (rectangle) of sanctuary.... Near the icon of John, the Baptist a fountain of water evokes the life of baptism that seeks to water our day-to-day commitments. At the entrance to the choir, the reserved Eucharist is offered for adoration. Everyone is in complete silence, no words, and music. When the brothers (priests, monks) walk into the church (the bells stop ringing) in their white simple “garments/frocks” (70 of them taking about 6 minutes to fill the space and kneeling), the music starts. The brothers fill the space marked out by the

clumps of branches (shrubbery), kneeling in rows facing the cross and to the front of auditorium as if forming a kind of heart or backbone of the assembly, bearing the whole and leading it onwards. After several moments, the bells go quiet and another silence seems to permeate the church, more dense than before. The hill is now entirely still and the church is full. There is still a few more minutes of silence before the organ starts playing and after a while, the singing begins. A single voice begins; one of the brothers sings the first measure of an opening hymn to which the whole assembly immediately joins in. After the introduction, a psalm is sung, and then a bible passage is read in several languages.

A response are sung by a young child of the village of Taizé then a second response follows a repetitive melodic motive meditative in nature that tapers off into silence for about ten minutes. Several brother-cantors singing a litany of intercessory prayers in turn with the assembly, which answers after each petition with *Kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy follow this. There is a hymn and then Brother Roger (now deceased) the founder and prior of the Community read a simple benediction in several languages. The structure is familiar even if various elements, which contribute to the prayer's contemplative nature, may be new to some. In its essence, prayer at Taizé is no different from that which Christians of different traditions have practiced for ages in monasteries in the form of the liturgy of the hours. After the benediction prayer, another song follows and the brothers rise to leave the church, a signal – I assumed – that prayer has ended, until I noticed that few people (pilgrims) were leaving. A careful look at the front reveals that in fact a part of the Community has stayed on and continued to animate the singing, now with the help of several young pilgrims. The second part of the service unfolds, made up of simple melodies woven in succession into a kind of tapestry of continuous prayer. People trickle from the church, leaving when they wish. After evening prayer, many of the young people will stay on in prayer late

into the night. Several of the brothers remain available in the church for those who wish to confide a personal question or difficulty.

It is very difficult to bring under words what I experienced that first evening of the research journey at Taizé. An overwhelming experience of awe, peace, joy, gratefulness in an atmosphere drenched/soaked with the Spirit and Presence of God (not in a charismatic or reformed sense I have ever experienced before). Tears were flowing freely at one stage whilst singing the communal prayers/chants. The music is not so much loud, joyful, exuberant, or fast in tempo, but simpler, slow, meditative, repetitive prayer like, in up to fifteen languages. Nobody talks, announces anything, or preaches. The angelic like choir voices and those of the soloists and brothers, followed by the choruses sung by the pilgrims or retreatants were so beautiful, moving, and heartfelt that it stirred deep inside the spirit in a deep metaphysical sense. The number of the hymns that are sung can be seen on small electronic screen. The bible passage is read in six languages and available in print form when entering to the church. The brothers do the bible reading each in a different language and when this is done, everybody turns around facing the lectern more to the back from where the reading is done. After the readings, everybody faces to the front again and then follows a period of silence for ten to twenty minutes, which pilgrims use sometimes for reflection on the word or other forms of meditation, listening or just being still in Gods' presence. From the moment I could express with others (more than a thousand Christians from all over the world, from different denominations, languages and cultures) in a communal way via the words of the songs and the melody, the beauty of creation, of God and His people, His love, His presence, acts of compassion my way of looking at life, at myself, others and God, I felt transformed, deepened, enabled to discover the reality that is God around me and within me. Wonder took the place of despair or uncertainty, abandoning myself to the Light of Christ in the silence, whilst

singing prayerfully, waiting, listening, and pondering filled my whole being with hope and faith and love... God reminded me that He has living refreshing water (I was very thirsty the whole afternoon, drank a lot of water, thirsty again during the liturgy) – thirst after me and my light shines within you do not let your doubts and your darkness speaks to you. Near the end of the service, the cross in front of church is brought to the middle of the sanctuary. It is in the space where the brothers usually kneel. Some of the pilgrims kneel at the cross, then all of the would brothers leave except six staying within the church, scattered around in the building and near the doors for those who may need spiritual direction or who wants to receive the sacrament of reconciliation prepared by a conversation or by simply listening. The message of the brothers is simple and profound: “God buries our past in the heart of Christ, and is going to take care of our future.” Pilgrims then move forward with some taking of their shoes towards the cross and kneel around it in silence; the choir of pilgrims leads the rest of the music. Many pilgrims then start to leave the church while others stay longer.

Impressions after the first day on the Taizé hill were that the church of reconciliation is a special and holy place. Signs with the words “silence” on it are put out near the church. The whole venue on the Taizé hill is different and special. Ninety percent of pilgrims are younger than twenty-five, the variety of cultures, clothes, languages, and denominations are immense. Outside of prayer meetings, there is a relaxed, seeker friendly atmosphere. Many people cannot understand a word of English and not everybody are Christians. It is a *monastic retreat* but also very “consumer-friendly” or *seeker friendly*. There is a shop on the premises and a kiosk just outside the grounds. The brothers wear ordinary clothes outside of prayer meetings and lead the group bible studies in the mornings. They are available for appointments with pilgrims and groups from same countries or cities meet them in groups.

Community prayers take place at sunrise, noon, and sunset. It is symbolic of people's lives marked by the rhythm of darkness and light, day and night, sleep and awake, dying, and eternal life or the celebration of the buried and resurrected Christ. Prayer according to the brothers is at the heart of the Taizé community and the response of one of the brothers on the question why prayer is important, is also representative of the community: "life itself scatters man's attention, even when it most obviously has meaning only in relation to God. Prayer is hence a means of re-situating all our actions in the context of loving God and neighbour. Without prayer then it is easy for brother and pilgrim to lose their way and prayer is the only refuge through which human hardness, rebellion, and bitterness may become soft again. Prayer at Taizé is viewed as a necessity that complements other aspects of a whole life. Various elements are used to make prayer meaningful and to fit into the context of life for example the icons, candles, chants, silence, and kneeling. The brothers clothe themselves in white robes during common prayers as symbol and reminder that Christ clothes their whole being. The vestment allows them also to express their commitment and praises to God in a way other than with words.

The Divine Office or Liturgy is:

- Singing of Psalms,
- a Bible reading: mornings the Old Testament and Gospels and evenings from Paul's letters and other New Testament passages,
- another Bible text sung by the brothers and repeated by the pilgrims or congregation (hymns or chants),
- silence,
- litany or intercessory prayer : after each litany congregation respond with *Kyrie Eleison*,

- hymn, a short prayer by the prior and blessing, and
- morning prayers including the Eucharist.

The daily Bible readings are published in the “letter from Taizé” that is published every two months. A young child of the village of Taizé sings a response then a second response follows a repetitive melodic motive meditative in nature that tapers off into silence for about ten minutes. Then several brother-cantors sing a litany of intercessory prayers in turn with the assembly which answers after each petition with *Kyrie eleison*, Lord have mercy. There is a hymn and then Brother Roger (since my study-pilgrimage, deceased) the founder and prior of the Community read a simple benediction in several languages. The structure is familiar even if various elements, which contribute to the prayer’s contemplative nature, may be new to some. In its essence, prayer in Taizé is no different from that which Christians of different traditions or the Divine office have practiced for ages in monasteries in the form of the liturgy of the hours. After the benediction prayer, another hymn follows and the brothers rise to leave the church, a signal – I assumed – that prayer has ended, until I noticed that few people (pilgrims) were leaving. A careful look at the front reveals that in fact a part of the Community has stayed on and continued to animate the singing, now with the help of several young pilgrims. The second part of the service unfolds, made up of simple melodies woven in succession into a kind of tapestry of continuous prayer. People trickle from the church, leaving when they wish. After evening prayer, many of the young people will stay on in prayer late into the night. Several of the brothers remain available in the church for those who wish to confide a personal question or difficulty. The hymns (chants) in the Church of reconciliation consist of just a few lines, simple and meditative, helping pilgrims to centre on God in worship, repeated by brothers and pilgrims together. Interviews with various pilgrims show the importance and

attraction of this type of music as well as the popularity of the songbooks and the compact discs sold and used worldwide.

The central moment of the common prayers is the silence, when entering and during a central moment of the service after the scripture reading for ten to twenty five minutes. God speaks in the silence for example to Elijah and often in order to hear God, the inner noises, and outer sounds must first reside that may block out the voice of God. Sometimes it even appears that God does not speak when people are silent, but then again Gods' apparent silence could be concealing a communion, a kind of communion where deep calls to deep (Hicks 1992:211-212). Silence in the church of Reconciliation for the pilgrims I interviewed, was the time to hear and feel God at the deepest part of their being together with worshippers or pilgrims from all over the world. Although there were different Christian traditions, languages and cultures during those minutes of silent prayer retreatants became one community, transcending all human obstacles, with no divisions as they communicated with God listening and sharing in their hearts. All perceived as equal before God, kneeling or sitting on the floor. What was being communicated during those times of silence to each individual remained hidden? Some of the thoughts, images, prayer, dreams, struggle, conflict, doubt, peace, gratitude, liberation, pain, joy were shared during conversations and interviews. Afterwards we would feel closer to God and one other as pilgrims because we heard and experienced God as a community in a special profoundly deep way.

The principal icon in the Taizé church is Christ on the cross. A Christ portrayed as thin, with the ribcage easily seen through the skin and a Christ of a darker skin colour. Besides and just beneath Christ are two disciples (Emmaus or easily us). In addition, an angel watches above. Everything about this cross represents the simple style of Taize and more importantly the simplicity of the Christ who died on the cross.

I agree with Brico (1978:95) that the ecumenical character of the liturgy of the Divine Office may be recognized in the Psalms set to music (Reformed), certainty of Chorale (Lutheran), Beatitudes, polyphonic Alleluia's and Icons (Eastern Orthodox) and the Eucharist and Chants (Catholic). At the end of the service, no abrupt break is made between prayer or worship and the rest of life. Hence, there is no clear termination of the service but those present come out of silence beginning to chant, singing slowly moving from the contemplation mode toward the day's activities and tasks. Brothers would exit the church and retreatants stay as long as they want to leave when they feel ready. This transition from prayer to daily life according to the brothers helps to dispel the false dichotomy between life inside and outside the church building. It facilitates and accentuates the monastic way of praying always, and practicing the presence of God continuously and striving to make prayer part of life and work. The pilgrims I interviewed also experienced the prayer inside the church as invitation to be carried out to the rooms, fields, town, library, and kitchen of Taizé when leaving the church of reconciliation.

The Taizé way of retreat was an intensively lived experience for nearly all the pilgrims I interviewed. For some who have lost contact with denominational worship, the way of prayer in the Chapel was a new discovery, which opened up a possible road for the future to venture on. The breaking away from material comforts, simple food and sleeping quarters as well as the meeting of others from outside, the sometimes so important barriers of language, culture, and life styles are realities that not only provided spiritual sustenance for the week but could also provide for the journey of life onwards. The peace, love, and simplicity, the compassion for the needy and poorest of the poor, the feeling of accompanied by God, that he is with his people during their venture through the world, lifted up their hearts looking forward to the future. One

of the pilgrims from India described the experience of community prayer and the Taize music during an interview in the following way: “I like the music; it helps me a lot in my life for example to pray and make contact with God. The singing out of the same truths or experiences in prayer like form repeatedly was very enriching to me. God becomes more real to me in the process, I am able to see my problems in perspective, and it really made a difference. It was internal food and it made part of my life whole. Like repetition, the three prayer times in the chapel help me reflect and refocus my thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The Gospel readings and singing repetitive prayers helped me to realise during my stay here that there are many issues in my life I must deal with for example when I arrived here I was far from God, I blamed Him for problems in my life. Then in the times of silence in the chapel, it was as if a rephrasing of everything took place and it dawned on me – that the darkness and problems are not in God- and when His light fell on it, the darkness disappeared. The problems vanished, it is difficult to explain it in words, but it worked like Magic!”

Taizé is filled with a variety of people (different cultures, languages, denominations, beliefs, spiritualities), community of brothers and the old Gospel message in all its simplicity. I experienced no hype, emotional hogwash or trying to be more spiritual but only an evangelical simplicity as experienced in the church, group bible meditations, dining hall, sleeping quarters and the unpretentious way in which pilgrims were welcomed. The diversity of languages and culture and many times the need for more than one translation during group discussions, discourage complicated conversations and dogmatic theologising. The small group meetings under leadership of one of the brothers exhibited a simplicity and profound depth of the Gospel in a practical and revealing way. The monks’ way of life challenged pilgrims to avoid remaining on the surface of persons, faith,

and things and to listen with the heart to the Gospel, meditate on it, saturated by it and living it out in the world.

The park or wood of St. Stephen's spring at Taizé is a beautiful place of nature. It provided an oasis for retreatants to walk through, or to sit and meditate. My walk one afternoon from St. Stephens' spring to my room, a quite steep climb with lots of steps to the top became a metaphor for my life. I arrived tired at the retreat but realised that the retreat came during a phase of my life where difficulties, discomfort, and disappointments in my ministry at that stage have left me drained and a bit disillusioned. I realised I was there because of the research but that I needed a *renewal/regeneration*, a new rest in God, a refocusing and going back to the essentials of the gospel and felt a need for healing whilst moving deeper into the presence of God. The many steps while walking the steep path became a metaphor for my life as disciple of Jesus Christ and of all the issues that confronted me during the retreat. The exertion, sweat, and discomfort during the steep climb reminded me of how we tend to focus on "feeling good" and "instant gratification" trying to sidestep the difficult things. I realised that during our Walk with God on life's journey everything also the trials and tribulations are part of life. To try to sidestep it or trying to be on a high all the time is not the answer but to meditate on the presence of God and constantly drinking from the source of my being it is the resurrected Christ.

The group bible discussions every morning led by one of the brothers, the group interaction all contributed to reveal the presence of God and facilitating an experience of God. However, none more so than the community prayer meetings three times a day in the Church of reconciliation. Pilgrims spoke about becoming engulfed during the Divine Office and immersed in a monastic spirituality that they find easy to relate to, and for many also a life changing and spiritual enriching process. The

pilgrims I interviewed experienced the prayer offices in the church as high points in their retreat especially the music and *mystic* atmosphere. They made ample use of nature at St. Stephens' and the young people enjoyed and found the group discussions and group projects stimulating and meaningful.

Every person (pilgrim) on arrival at Taize receives a brochure (with relevant info, program etc) that has an opening paragraph: "Though Christ is united to every human being without exception, He awaits a simple, free response from each one of us. To pilgrimage to Taizé then means being invited to the living springs of the Gospel through prayer, silence, and searching. There are many opportunities on retreat here to discover or rediscover a meaning for life, to find a new vitality, to prepare to take on responsibilities when returning home.

Every evening after the first part of the service has ended and most of the brothers have left, two brothers of the community bring the beautiful Taize Cross to the centre of the church in an upright position with one candle burning at the foot of the cross. Pilgrims can move forward to kneel in silence in front of the cross. During the Friday evening ritual (as part of the weekly celebration of the Easter mystery an icon of the cross (icon of Jesus crucified painted on a wooden cross) is laid down flat on the floor (20 cm above ground) in the centre of the church, surrounded by candles. A few of the brothers form a circle and bow down to venerate it. Those who wish can come forward to the cross. People lined up (as long as it takes) to wait their turn, myself too. The cross is approached individually or in small groups. Pilgrims kneel at the cross, foreheads resting lightly on the cross with the icon of the Crucified Jesus painted upon it (reddish and orange colours). For some it became an opportunity for a silent renewal of a commitment towards those who suffer in the world. For others (like me) it was a letting go of the burdens and situations weighing me down.

Pilgrims witnessed that they stood up after a while feeling the resurrection power in their spiritual veins, reassured by a meaningful ritual that Jesus is Light, Peace, Power. The mystery of the Christian faith, the mystery of God incarnate becomes visible as a flash of meaning (difficult to describe in words) dawns in the hearts of pilgrims. It is a holy moment to recognize the victory of love on the face of a crucified man in the meaningful sacramental ritual rich in symbol.

Every Saturday evening a celebration of light takes place (part of the weekly celebration of the Easter Mystery – Fridays focus on the Easter mystery, Sunday on the Eucharist). This service is called Vigil Prayer of the Resurrection. More than a thousand pilgrims sat and kneeled in the Church of Reconciliation. This was a personal “highpoint” for many of the pilgrims and for me. At a certain moment during the service, small candles are passed on to one another lighting it in the process, and in five minutes time the whole church was lit up by candles burning. This happened while pilgrims sang a more lively joyous Taize song called “let us sing to the Lord.” In that moment with everyone rejoicing and candles burning we celebrated our oneness in Christ in spite of language, culture, colour, denomination, spirituality, spiritual growth. The Light of Jesus and His Resurrection power and presence became one overpowering reality. I prayed, “Lord if only I could stay here with you on this *mountain of transfiguration*. This mountain of transfiguration served as symbol for the pilgrimage to the inner mountain of the heart.

At times when I would become more of a detached observer, I observed the brothers (monks) coming in very straight faced and solemn in their white robes, kneeling at their little prayer bunks for the duration of the service, only turning around when the scripture reading starts in order to face the lectern from which it is being read. Some are very young and others very old, walking with some difficulty. Why and when and under

which circumstances did each receive the calling to community and chastity, which is Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic; how do they manage to be in ecumenical harmony as a community, I thought by myself? I observe some of the pilgrims in the church, here and there I could see those who seemed to be local people from the nearby villages, as well as new pilgrims that have since arrived. There is also a family from Latvia (families stay in houses near the community) with three children four to fourteen years old and some of the children appeared to be very bored at one stage. The liturgy for each service or prayer office is available at the entrances to the church of reconciliation. The monastic liturgy is not explained in any way not in the little brochures pilgrims receive on arrival or verbally in any way. People especially new pilgrims just try to find their own way during the service. Some of the new retreatants (first pilgrimage and first evening) would just sit and observe what is happening, others again listening attentively, others humming the songs and some trying to sing. Looking at their clothes and appearance some of the pilgrims really did not look like pilgrims at all or seekers (some were to me very strange looking actually but still there is a hunger or thirst hanging in the air). There were the sometimes loud and overconfident Americans, the more shy Korean women, the old grey haired couple kneeling with difficulty next to four very young, oozing with energy young people. Then I realised Gods' arms are open to all and inviting each one of us, each unique and free to be yourself before God ("come just as you are to worship"). Before I knew it, I moved again from more detached observer to participant pilgrim, grabbed by the simplicity, authenticity and the enfolding presence of God in this holy place drenched by prayer – silence and singing... incense etc...all drawing me forward to the cross, kneeling their in silence and listening to and sharing with God...heart to heart, Spirit to spirit... next to me are kneeling a variety of fellow pilgrims.... I become one with them at the cross without knowing them but soaked in the loving presence of God, I feel a love and compassion so deep for all of them.

There are different ways for a pilgrim to spend their weekend or weeklong retreat. The first is to be part of the daily Divine Office (community prayers in the church), group Bible meditation introduced by one of the brothers, group discussions morning and/or afternoon on questions put during the morning introductions, various tasks or projects (work) either in the morning or the afternoon. It is also possible to spend a week of prayer in silence: Participating in the community prayers, the daily Bible introduction, and the rest of the day in silence with the opportunity to speak individually with one of brothers. Accommodation is then provided in a separate area set aside for those who want complete to be in silence.

3.4 Aspects of Monastic Retreat

3.4.1 Silence

Silence has become over time the lost art in a society and in many church traditions made of noise, surrounded by words, sound, and clatter. Silence in the modernistic positivistic era tended to become more and more unpopular and fifteen hundred years of silence since the Desert Fathers (300 BCE) fled to the desert, started to wane (Muller 1997:5). Inner and outer noise (*surrounded by sound*) is an integral part of life. Silence for many became a fearful phenomenon leading to an itchiness, anxiousness, or nervousness. For example in my own church tradition in the past when the liturgist would say “let us be silent” in a church service people tended to become restless with one thought in their minds: “when is this going to be over?” Many of the first time retreatants reading the retreat information beforehand regarding the importance of silence during the retreat, felt threatened by the emphasis on silence or very unsure about the whole idea. Part of the observation during the research journey is that there is a trend or movement towards this neglected and undervalued element in the Dutch Reform tradition. Some of the Dutch Reformed congregations the

past few years have started to conduct more silent-meditative worship services during the week or on Sunday evenings, there is more room for longer periods for silence in Sunday morning services and the renewed interest in more monastic type of retreats. This may be symptomatic of a shift taking place in order to experience the mystery of God or the divine silence. I have participated in such liturgies in South Africa (containing ritual and elements of Taizé and other monasteries Divine Office) for example *Adoramus* in Lynnwood and I designed and led *Magnificat* type liturgies in Florandia and Murray congregations.

Silence and the control of one's thoughts are monastic observances found in most religions. Hindu sannyasis make vows of silence lasting several years, the Buddhist monk seeks to control words and thoughts in order to go beyond the senses within the atmosphere of calmness, order and silence in the monastery (De Dreuille 2003: 21). When the sea is calm and clean, it is possible for the fisherman/woman to see clearly the different movements beneath the surface. However, when the sea is rough and murky because of the wind and debris, what is obvious on a clear day is hidden in dark restlessness. Silence is the usual atmosphere experienced in the Benedictine, Franciscan, and Taize monasteries visited as well as an emphasis on control of speech, insisting on the practice of the good or edifying word or speech. The research companions and I experienced it as a virtuous silence expressing respect due to God, and creating an atmosphere of recollection, facilitating a process of listening to God and others. The Desert Fathers treasured silence as the mystery of the age to come, and words were viewed as trivial instruments of the world. Going into the silence of the desert was considered a first step into the future world from where wise words born out of silence could bear fruit. The power of Gods' silence teaches people to speak words of wisdom, and serves as a reminder of the pilgrimage of life to the inner mountain (Nouwen 1990:50-53, cf Cowan 2002:55). Silence within monastic

spirituality is cherished as oxygen that keeps the inner fire of the Spirit of God within burning. The right balance of silence and speech can be helpful to monks and retreatants to reach inner silence or silence of the heart (see Cowan 2002:67). In this state of interior silence, the words of the Gospel can transform the soul and culminate in a deep experience of the presence of God (De Dreuille 2003:23). Keating (2003:90) emphasises the value of silence as follows: “Silence is Gods’ first language, everything else is poor translation.” In order to hear the language of silence also during a retreat within the Dutch Reformed tradition, people (pilgrims) had to learn and grow into becoming still and rest in God, although there is no immediate tangible satisfaction to it (interior and exterior silence).

Silence is usually the first impression visitors to a monastery or a monastic retreat get which is not necessarily empty silence or threatening silence or mere background to sound but more a full, alert static free medium of communication, especially the listening aspect of communication (Norris 2000:68). I did experience silence in the monasteries especially in the beginning at times dense, or even scary or uncomfortable in a sense. Retreatants mentioned a discomfort and uneasiness during some of the longer period of silence during retreat. In certain cases, it was because they were not used to or so familiar with silence. In other instances silence brought pilgrims face to face with themselves reminding of obsessions, addictions, revealing that as Christians they are not resolved within themselves as they have thought, and much more vulnerable. There is no escape in silence from an awareness of self, especially the dark side of self. There are not enough cosmetics available to hide the scars, money, titles, or having the power to heal. Alone in the cave of silence it can become a place of grace where eventually God could be experienced in the centre, being silent or to speak if He decides to. Silence is not merely an absence of outer and inner noise but a receptive posture of waiting with patience. Hinson (1993:34-35) describes the sober silence of solemnity,

fertile silence of awareness, active silence of perception, expectant silence of waiting, tacit silence of approval, eloquent silence of awe and peaceful silence of communion. In Benedictine spirituality, silence kindles the deep profound peace that characterizes the monastery. T. S. Elliot (1952:65) breathes the spirit of silence when he writes: “where shall the word be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence. The right time and the right place are not here no place of grace for those who avoid the face. No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and clearing the voice”.

Monasteries and its inhabitants had developed through the centuries a strict discipline of silence and many also a doctrine of emptiness, which the early anchorites called a state of *hesychia* referring to the spirituality of the desert. This refers to a state of silence of the heart, a state of stillness and tranquillity, and a total rest in God (Ward 1975:71). Years of ascetical practice could lead to a perfect void, to emptiness with total silence of thoughts, words and desires in which no consciousness remains. Monks over the centuries strived to attain this sense of stillness or silence (Cowan 2002:37). According to St John Climacus (579-649 BCE), a seventh century recluse, to achieve the silent solitary life, one must choose places with fewer opportunities for comfort and ambition, but with more for humility (Climacus 1959:94). He lived the anchorite life in a cave for forty-five years near St Catherine’s monastery. By entering the Egyptian desert, the monks wanted to participate in the richness of the divine silence. To enter into the loving silence of God individually and also with a group of monks and other retreatants at monasteries or retreat centres, were for me and for many fellow-pilgrims/researchers a regenerative healing experience in the presence of the divine Counsellor and the holy quiet a quite illuminating experience. The research journey in this regard was a first step forward in understanding what the desert father Ammonias (in Merton 1971:42) and a disciple of St Anthony has written:” I

have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing it is to God...Know that it is by silence that the saints grew, that it was because of silence that the power of God dwelt in them, because of silence that the mysteries of God were known to them". The empiric data revealed silence to be a meaningful and essential element of monastic retreat in order to move deeper into the presence of God.

Pilgrims on a silent retreat may move into silence on the Friday evening after evening prayers, only breaking silence before going back home on Sunday. On the Sunday they can share and witness with one another concerning the dialogue experienced between God and them during the long silence. The study showed that this would be more appropriate when the retreatants have already made monastic retreat part of their lives over a longer period. They ought to be advised before they commit themselves to going on this type of silent retreat of the way it will progress regarding silence. During other types of monastic retreat consisting of different elements of which silence is but one, it could be stressed that nobody should feel compelled to enter silence, that not all people are accustomed or comfortable with silence. It should only be entered into with voluntary and loving obedience. It was also clear that especially the silence during meals whilst on retreat was for most a very strange and uncomfortable experience and I have decided to use this form of silence very sparingly in future. It is better to give the opportunity to those who wish to eat in silence whilst others may eat together as usual. In the instances when retreatants are all eating together in silence, the leader or spiritual director could read passages from a book or a volume of poetry. This is a ritual followed by the monks of La Pierre Qui Vire monastery during some of their meals. I have also found that the times of silence in the chapel during a retreat, could be enhanced by the play of soft instrumental music at certain stages of the period of silence. This indeed proved to be helpful to some of the retreatants to move deeper into silent communion with God.

Images either visual or as feelings and clear defined thought patterns, could also guide and confirm the heart becoming restful in silence. Fowler (1987:7) describes this process in the following way: “images hold together our conscious and un-conscious knowing. They hold in fused forms both what we know and how we feel about what we know. *The non-verbal dimensions of liturgy and sacraments address the wombs of images within us*. They evoke and direct our convictions.” The appreciation, that many of the pilgrims interviewed, showed for the symbolic and the esthetical in the form of images, music, art as elements of retreat, underlines the value of symbolic language (and non-verbal) for the experience of God. Babin (1991:149-150) also values the symbolic and writes from a communication research point of view the following: “symbolic language then, is a language of temptation before it is a language of explanation. It leads not only the spirit, but also the heart; it moves the body. It is a language full of resonance and rhythms, stories and images, and suggestions and connections, which introduces us to a kind of mental and emotional behaviour.”

My observation during my journey on the path of the Dutch Reformed tradition is that it was common to be drawn into and become entangled in complex debates, modernistic discussions, and arguments about God and about God-issues. Simply being in his presence, less conversation with fewer words, becoming silent and listening in the presence of God, deep reflection and meditation, became in the process more and more the exception than the rule. My journey through the monasteries showed that silence can function as a womb giving birth to the wise words of the monks which in turn again may lead one into deeper silence. When Arsenius, the Roman educator who exchanged his status and wealth for the silence and solitude of the Egyptian desert, prayed, “Lord, lead me into the way of salvation,” he heard a voice saying, “Be silent” (Hannay 1904:206). This conviction is shared by the Desert Fathers and later also

Desert Mothers from whom monasticism grew. A story about Abbot Macarius (Hannay 1904:206) illustrates this conviction:

Once the abbot Macarius, after he had given the benediction to the brethren in the church of Scete, said to them, 'brethren fly'. One of the elders answered him 'how can we fly further than this, seeing we are here in the desert?' Then Macarius placed his finger on his mouth and said, 'fly from this'. So saying he entered his cell and shut the door."

The primary purpose of the silence during a retreat is to prepare the way for a dialogue and communion with Christ; it is not an end in itself. In the church tradition I have grown up in and have been a pastor for twenty years, silence was most of the time the exception rather than the rule. The meetings, worship services, Bible studies, fellowship groups tended to be very busy, wordy; talking to God, singing, sharing with silence for many more embarrassing than meaningful. I have realised over the years and especially discovered again during the research journey that it is none other than Christ who wants to meet with us, who invites to enter the environment of silence in order for him to meet, touch, and speak to his people. Magee (1967:78) reminds pilgrims "It is none other than Christ himself who calls us into retreat. He wants to meet us far more than we want to meet him. We may only want to rest, meet one another, or meet with the retreat conductor. It is God alone and not the retreat leader who can lead us into silence and keep us in it."

The real test for the reality and creative power of monastic retreat with the emphasis on silence is in its fruit. The challenge actually begins when going back home after a retreat, sent by God right into the noisiness and clamour of the world. It is here that I have found from own experience and feedback from retreatants, and not in isolation, that the insights, wisdom

and life received during retreat can be tested and may become a way of life. It is a way of life that is observed by colleagues, family, friends, seekers, and neighbours. The monastic way for example manifesting in unselfish self-giving, humility, courtesy, quiet speech, patience, serenity, hospitality and compassion for others reflects the Ultimate Mystery, in his creation.

3.4.2 Solitude

The Desert Fathers regarded society as a shipwreck from which to swim for your life because passively drifting along and accepting the values of the society would end in disaster (Merton 1960:8). Anthony and his fellow monks believed that to flee this potential spiritual disaster and the compulsions of society, one had to flee and reach the place of salvation for example the desert, the place of solitude. The *desert* provided a place to find the much-needed concentration to orient oneself towards God. Solitude may be a value worth considering which does not suggest that all Christians become hermits. Waaijman (2000:262-265) sees this as a counter movement and describes it as a complex process. Christians going out into the desert were part of a culture in which ascetics were highly respected. Fasting, austerity, self-control, and abstinence were part of the disciplines on the way to enlightenment or wisdom. The message prevalent in the monasteries I visited was that of *detachment*, not seeking attachment as pilgrims, but life in simplicity because Christians are pilgrims and solitaries who should not to be tied down by anything. The ascetic impulse and throwing of the yoke of the world (possessions, family, friends, own will and desires) to become empty for God to fill, lies at the heart of all the spiritual disciplines, be it Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu. In order to create a *monastic mindfulness* for example an awareness of the mystery and sacred presence always everywhere, solitude is not the solution but a way to detachment of the false self and the tenets and values of the world and to attachment to God and his

healing transforming presence (see Nouwen 1990:6-30; cf Chittester 1998:23). The pilgrimage of solitude reflects the Mary alone with Jesus at his feet (with Martha busy in the kitchen) metaphor as best place to be. Avoiding noise and constant busyness, nothing contributes more in monastic spirituality to the love of God, than to be a solitary in this way (Casey 1994:153). Because it is difficult to see Christ in a crowd (for example Saggeus), certain solitude of gaze (*intentio*) is necessary. The contemplative and quiet life of the monk is the solitude that holy love longs for. At times pilgrims found this quite difficult but in the end very meaningful in the monasteries as well as on retreat alone with the Alone, to become empty of all thoughts and attachments. The advise of Nouwen (1989:39) to sometimes not try and exclude everything during silence and solitude but to voluntarily include thoughts, plans, ideas, worries, projects and concerns and make them into prayer proved helpful to myself and first time retreatants. The idea is not to direct attention exclusively to God, but to direct attention to all the attachments and lead them to and then place them in the all-embracing arms of God.

The term solitude could be misleading as some retreatants as being alone in an isolated place interpreted it beforehand. Such Loneliness can be fearful, dry and painful whereas solitude perceived and communicates as time alone to be with God, could become a garden of growth. Nouwen (1975:32-35) reminds us that to live the spiritual life you must first find the courage to enter the desert of loneliness and to change it gently and persistently into the lush garden of solitude. Understood this way, loneliness instead of a dead end, grave or abyss may become solitude as a threshold, a new creation, or meeting place deeper into the presence of God. Retreatants during retreat move into solitude (a secluded place or retreat centre) and spend ample time alone. Many have experienced this solitude as a place of encountering God, leaving behind convictions, fear, opinions, and projects and entering his presence open, receptive,

vulnerable, and naked. Some found the provision of prayers, poems, spiritual passages, scripture readings, stories to meditate on whilst in solitude, helpful on a retreat. In addition, they realised that he alone is God, love, care, forgiveness, and hope. Even when retreatants do not hear or experience him at first, the discipline of solitude (Foster 1989:121) as a simple, though not easy way may free people from the slavery of occupations, preoccupations, and compulsions. Solitude then may help to begin to hear the voice that makes all things new. Solitude as being alone with the Source of Life, the Ultimate Mystery was for St. Francis, St. Benedict or Br. Roger of Taize is not so much a place to gather new strength (a private therapeutic atmosphere) or to continue more efficiently the rat race or ongoing competition of life after the time of solitude. Rather monastic spirituality views solitude more as the place of transformation or conversion where the old self dies and the new person emerges in the furnace of Gods' presence.

Thomas Merton (1956:261), a Trappist monk experienced the transforming power of solitude as the development of a new attitude towards others and describes it as follows: "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them as well as reverence for the solitude of others". The aim of solitude during a retreat should not be to separate people from others but instead bring them into deeper communion with compassion for one another. Solitude as part of the journey of life with God and others can open our eyes to respect more the uniqueness, sacredness privacy and solitude of others in whose Gods' presence dwells and embraces with his love. Within the communal part of monastic life, space is created for living in solitude, for communion with God and for rumination (Casey 1994:138). "Where do the little people of the world turn to when the big structures crumble or grow humanly intolerable"? (Von Balthasar 1982:23-27). It is a relevant question in light

of paradigm shifts in epistemology. The monastic paradigm (premodern-mystic) may show a way in that personal solitude and a supportive community may help sort out what is authentic among our needs and give us courage to pursue these, not only for our own benefit but ultimately, for the good of all. The reflection on the relevance of medieval solitude (and the other elements of silence and *lectio divina*) within the context of modern era retreat was a focal point of my research journey.

Solitude as it appears in monastic texts of the Middle Ages is not only for hermits who lived more or less permanently in solitude but was also a quality of community, corresponding to a “separation from the world” (Casey 1985:37-46). It could be a communal withdrawal (for example, I have taken groups of spiritual leaders of churches on retreat) from worldly involvement and distancing oneself from whatever could blunt the sharpness of the spiritual life in order to *listen*. Rievaux (1969:167) answers the question “what does it mean to go into solitude? That it means to consider the whole world as a desert, to desire the Fatherland, to have only as much of the world as is necessary to accomplish the journey and not as much as the flesh desires”.

The challenge after a monastic retreat or pilgrimage is that solitude will become more a state of mind and heart than merely being alone with God in specific places at for example a retreat centre. Reys (1961:30-31) recounts the following story of an encounter between a Zen master and a disciple: “Daiju visited the master Baso in China. Baso then asked: What do you seek? Enlightenment replied Daiju. You have your own treasure house. Why do you seek outside? Baso asked. Daiju inquired: Where is my treasure house? Baso answered: What you are asking *is* your treasure house. Daiju was enlightened! Ever after he urged his friends: Open your own treasure house within and use those treasures.” Cowan (2002:62) writes about his own journey or pilgrimage as a journey to the *inner*

mountain. Greek ascetical writers call it *xeniteia* or “to live as a stranger.” It refers to a journey away from the world, withdrawing from its contingencies, in pursuit of a deeper awareness of God and mystery of life. I had the opportunity on retreat in the monasteries to experience something (very insignificant in comparison) of the desert experience of the Desert Fathers and began to realise that the *solitude of the desert* is not only a dry place where people can die from thirst. The *desert* is also a vast open landscape where God reveals himself and offers in love his promises for those who wait silently and in anticipation. Retreat and monasticism do emphasize withdrawal from a distracting world to a specific place or situation to be alone for a limited period of time or more or less permanently. However, the solitude that is strived for is the solitude of the heart or interior solitude that is more of an attitude or an inner quality. The aim is to experience solitude as a way of life after retreat not merely at specific hours or portions of daily life. To be at times alone in the monastery of the heart or chapel or sanctuary inside the heart with an inward attentiveness or monastic mindfulness of God waiting within you even with other people around and within very busy schedules. This is part of the challenge facing retreatants after such retreats.

3.4.3 *Lectio Divina*

This “method/model” or *lectio divina* approach has been associated with the Benedictine monastic orders and probably originated with the Eastern Desert Fathers, particularly John Casian. Considerable time is spent in monasteries on holy sacred reading (*lectio divina*). It is a process of moving from a slow repetitive reading of a sacred text as base, to intensified prayer deeper into *contemplation*. It is one of the main aspects of monastic spirituality and monastic retreat. It is intimately linked to St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality since it originated in the communities of monks that he founded (Michael & Norrisey 1991:31). It forms part of the process of continuous prayer or to put it into Brother Lawrence’s

(1982:68) well-known phrase it is to “practice the presence of God.” The discipline of *lectio divina* is based on human nature and described by the Hindu masters and practiced among the Tibetan Buddhists. Guigo the Cartesian formulated it anew in the Middle Ages. It can be compared (De Dreuille 2003:12-13) with the way a cow chews the cud. It starts with a careful reading, paying close attention to the passages that speaks to the heart, as a cow selects the tasty or sweet grass to eat. The selected text goes to the stomach of the memory and is later ruminated, reflected upon, for example by repeating it silently in order to apply and deeper understand it. The fruit of the rumination is to experience the spiritual taste of the text, beyond words and images. The taste of this experience is kept in the heart, contemplated and integrated in the soul, as a cow swallows and ruminating afterwards the grass.

The following principles of *lectio divina* came to the fore (Casey 1994:4-8; cf interviews with monks):

- It breaks into the subjective worlds of people by giving God carte blanche in their lives,
- it is a long-term activity that provides provision for life not a quick trip to the fridge for junk food,
- it is connected to a person’s personal sense of vocation and hearing the call of God in the present,
- it applies revelation in the life-situation,
- it is surrounded by an atmosphere of peace and leisure and quiet rather than work and bible study,
- it is not merely an inner experience but a whole body exercise for example posture, relaxation, reading aloud, and
- when something that really speaks to the heart during *lectio divina* is encountered, the idea is to retain it in memory making it part of one’s being.

Lectio Divina: *Lectio* (reading), *meditatio*, (reflecting) *oratio* (responding) and *contemplatio* (resting) for example sacred reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation have introduced me many years back (positive feedback regarding sacred reading from retreatants during the research journey) to a new way of experiencing God and way of relating to a Bible text. Within my own church tradition, I learned exceptionally well at seminary how to analyse a bible passage and to come to grips with it in a modernistic rational way (exegesis, depth analysis etc.). The effect of this cognitive-instrumental rationality (cf Habermas 1982) was that everything that was not rationally justified or manageable was excluded from discourse. However, the practical and expressive dimensions of *Lectio divina* have the potential to open the eyes/ears of the heart for another horizon and to direct to a more intimate, relational, holistic way to become immersed in the text and in God whilst reading and reflecting on it. It opens a window to spiritual nourishment on different levels of being for example senses, feelings, reasoning, and the heart uniting them in the search for Gods' presence. It was for many pilgrims on retreat a way to move more and more into his loving presence beyond words and thoughts what the mystics refer to as *union with God*. *Lectio divina* was one of the fundamental elements that I incorporated in my own spiritual journey as well as on the retreats I led. I found Corene Wares' (see 1995:100-113) exercises that draws on the strengths of the four spirituality types and the Maier-Briggs temperament-personality preference profile a helpful "tool" applying it to *lectio divina* during retreat, to experience sacred reading in the different modes of sensing, thinking, feeling and intuition.

3.4.3.1 *Lectio*

The concept *lectio* refers to a thoughtful, reflective reading and an immersion in the lessons/stories of scripture and within the Benedictine tradition also other holy books. It can be described as the monastic

practice of reading small passages daily, reading it aloud more than once, listening, using the senses and milking for meaning any word or phrase or situation that stands out, provokes, interests you (Chittester n.d.:75).

Useful questions that may be asked are: “what do I know about the passage, what is the context, for whom was it written, how am I mirrored in it, where is God leading me, is it to reflect, to continue reading, or to pray for someone?” I realised doing the research and talking to the brothers in the monasteries that day after day, year after year they and other contemplatives go down into the scriptures, back through the holy wisdom of the ages, into the truth of the time, and in each moment learn and experience something new about the struggle within, about divinity, about life. Contemplatives like Abba Joseph stressed that they never really know what anything means, but only come to know better in every sentence they read every day of their lives that divinity is at the depth of them, calling them on (Feiss 2000:22-24; cf Chittester n.d.:77). Monastic reading (additional to studying of the bible) is more like a prayer than studying (rationalistic/analytical). It is not so much an intellectual exercise in order to gather information or doing research or achieving theoretical personal synthesis, but a full voluntary immersion in the word of God. In *lectio* the idea then and goal is to allow the scripture passage or word to touch awareness, to flame desire, to direct understanding and eventually to serve as guide or incentive to a life worth living for example the Gospel life. I introduced and used *lectio* on the retreats I conducted instead of the usual more analytical Bible *studies*, characteristic of many church camps of my church denomination. The feedback from the co-researchers during and after the retreats, point towards a need for more exposure to this way of reading/listening experience to the bible narrative.

3.4.3.2 *Meditatio*

Monastic mindfulness (living constantly consciously in the presence of God) and meditation stress the importance of *nepsis*, which means

sobriety, a watchfulness, and spiritual attentiveness directed to God (Nouwen 1990:31, 72-77; see Ware 1966:110). The concentration onto one point in order to control thought processes deeper into the spiritual dimension is a principle also in the Buddhist Theravada School. It refers in Christianity to a spiritual attentiveness as loving attention to the presence of God in pure faith that Keating (2003:147) describes as “characterized either by an undifferentiated sense of unity or by a more personal attention to one or other of the Divine Persons.” The tonality of consciousness for example brainwave changes during meditation is viewed as a fourth state of consciousness besides being awake, sleep and dreams. The silence of meditation is more than mere silence but a silence of heart and mind in order to become more open to Gods’ presence (Muller 1997:34-45). In *mysticism* (Keating 2003:90-97) the tendency is to focus on meditation as a way of going deeper into yourself where God is waiting in order to reach a form of contemplation that is in essence a becoming one with God or reaching a higher state of consciousness

Meditation in *lectio divina* focuses on becoming silent, quiet, moving inwards with the goal to become open or receptive to Gods’ voice and touch while meditating on the bible or “sacred” texts. This type of meditation (not necessarily the same as *mystical union* with God) is also characteristic of Protestant theology, for example practiced by Luther, Bonhoeffer, Calvin, Voetius, a Brakel, Kuyper, and Geesink. After 1931 it seemed to vanish from the Dutch Reformed theology until only recently since 1990. Devotional masters have viewed the *meditatio scripturarum* as a central reference point to keep all other forms of meditation in proper perspective (Nicol 1991:17-20; see Foster 1992:153). Meditation invites retreatants to welcome the word of God into their hearts, to remain open to the Holy Spirit, to reflect, think, use the imagination and memory, to enter into the text or passage, to identify with the scene and characters, internalizing and personalizing the message with humble hearts. I have

suggested to retreatants for example during the Divine Office in the chapel to take a single word, or sentence or event or parable after reading or listening to it more than once and to really spend time with it seeing, hearing, touching, experiencing the story as active participant with mind and heart (imagination and emotions). Rather than dissecting and analysing concepts, the invitation is to enter the story, atmosphere, or phenomenon and to become absorbed and enveloped in it. We do not usually try to analyse each word of a lover, but accept it and treasure and ponder it in our hearts. As spiritual leader of a retreat, the thought pattern of Whyte (n.d.:250), proved helpful, saying for example the following: “you open your New Testament.....and, by your imagination, you become one of Christ’s disciples on the spot, and sitting at his feet...with your imagination anointed with holy oil...at one time you are the publican; at another time the you are the prodigal...at another time, Peter in the porch”. During meditation on bible passages or reflecting on different devotional writings throughout the ages, the mind descends into the heart drawn into the goodness and love of God. Merton (1960:98) reminds us: “anyone who imagines he/she can simply begin meditating, without praying for the desire and the grace to do so, will soon give up. But the desire to meditate, and the grace to start meditating, should be taken as an implicit promise of further graces.” Retreatants were reminded before *meditatio* began at certain times during retreat that nothing needs to be forced during meditation, or to actively seek new experiences. Pilgrims were invited to wait patiently on God, relax in his presence because it is he who reveals and touches, and take us deeper into his presence (Nicol 1991:22-24). Nouwen (1989:136) puts it as follows: “God should be sought, but we cannot find God. We can only be found by him.”

3.4.3.3 Oratio

Life, cherished in monastic spirituality, and viewed as being human in an atmosphere of Gods’ active presence and having constant communion

with him. Spiritual disciplines are mere instruments or vehicles to sensitize such monastic mindfulness of lifting up of the heart in the midst of life, opening it to Gods' presence and revelation for example during the daily Divine Offices, *lectio divina*, and silence (Casey 1994:71). In mystic traditions, life is not an endurance-exercise or to rush through, but a mystery waiting to be unfolded. Gods' presence is not a faraway cloud somewhere but the very Energy that animates everything. Prayer or *oratio* is the response of the heart during *lectio divina* to the cosmic God, cosmic Energy, Source of Life, and the personal and inner, enkindling God. "God is life, not a vending machine full of trifles to fit the whims of the human race. God is the end of life, the fulfilment of life, the essence of life, the coming of life" (Chittester n.d.:93). The emphasis in *oratio* then is not on personal satisfaction or problem-solving or to reshape the world to your own lesser ideas, but prayer as being open and responsive to the One that is everywhere and in everyone and is love. Foster (1992:141) says that *ontologically*, Jesus' relationship with God, may be perceived unique, but *experientially* pilgrims are invited into the same intimacy with God. *Oratio* is a response to Gods' presence crawling into the Father's (Mother's) lap to receive love, comfort, healing, and strength, to laugh or weep, freely and openly, to be hugged finding comfort in his (her) arms.

I became since a child hood accustomed to a modernistic and disassociate way of viewing and practicing prayer. The Dutch Reformed tradition for years and especially during my seminary years emphasised intellectual capacities and activities regarding prayer. *Let us pray* within such a paradigm, for many meant *let us start talking*. Many books and courses I studies on prayer accentuated the intercession and *wordiness* side of prayer. Many of the retreatants interviewed practiced prayer as mainly talking to God about what I deemed important or experienced as way to solve problems. Thinking about God as a mental dissecting process in order to understand him and his mysteries much better was the

focal point for many years of my prayer life. This type of attitude towards and action of prayer was part of a modernistic paradigm, which placed high value on mastering everything via intellect with the dominating conviction that everything could be analysed and understood and when understood could be controlled and even manipulated. The era of intellectualism, dominant in mainstream churches during the modernistic era was symbolised for many years in the academic gown that was the official garb of Dutch Reformed ministers. There came a realisation in pilgrims with the postmodern turn revealing the limits of intellectualism, doctrine, and formulas that could also be experiences in other ways. Prayer clothed in monologues of *disassociate* intellectual verbal self-indulgence or liturgy not much more than verbal actions and clinical sermons, turned into a need for *experiencing* the mystery and the source of life differently. This could explain the “popularity” of monasteries for pilgrims from Protestant traditions. The popularity of eastern religions prayer practices, yoga and Zen Buddhism practices of prayer and meditation may be indicative of the new desire expressed by co-researchers on retreat to relate to God the Ultimate mystery and probably a way of people that ask *teach us to pray* differently.

Oratio is prayer of the heart, a personal dialogue using the heart, feelings, and emotions, primarily listening to Gods’ voice and touch, then responding to him in an *associative* way. It is as if in the presence of a lover or intimate friend responding with love, honesty, and transparency. Feelings of love, desire, enthusiasm, repentance, sorrow, gratitude, anger, joy could flow forth during this type of prayer. The cycle of *lectio divina* develops in a spiral pattern from *lectio, meditatio, oratio, lectio*. During the process, prayer may become less busy or wordy, simpler, sincerely, responding to new or deeper insights, feelings. *Heart* within Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies. Macarius the Great a Desert

Father (in Hausherr 1978:314) said: “The chief task of the athlete [the monk] is to enter into his *heart* and pray.” No formulas, long sentences, or doctrine or complex concepts are necessary in such a prayer. In the beginning of my journey into monastic spirituality, this way of prayer to me was very different from the focus of prayer in my own tradition.

Retreatants from the Dutch Reformed tradition usually needed time to get out of a mode of prayer more characterised by wordiness, activity, petitions, and prescribed sub-divisions into *oratio* and then spiralling even further towards *contemplatio*. Pointers helpful on the way to *oratio* as part of *lectio divina* are the choice of a love name or metaphor for God uttering or breathing it while kneeling or sitting in a meditative posture. Uttering phrases of love and intimacy or dependence to God and constantly inviting him to kindle a fire of love for him within or to evoke a hunger or thirst for his presence are part of the atmosphere in *oratio*. Gibbard (see 1976:39-42) reminds those who pray that words are inadequate and that pilgrims need analogies and images as part of prayer language in the presence of the One who is perfect beauty and love and being (not merely a *Being*).

3.4.3.4 *Contemplatio*

Tomas Keating (1982:4) describes contemplation as way of communion with God “as a process of interior transformation, a conversion initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union. One’s way of seeing reality changes in the process. A restructuring of consciousness takes place which empowers one to perceive, relate, and respond with increasing sensitivity to the divine presence in, through, and beyond everything that exists.” Later on Keating defines contemplative prayer (2003:145) as “the development of one’s relationship with Christ to the point of communing beyond words, thoughts, and feelings; a process moving from the simplified activity of waiting upon God to the ever-increasing predominance of the Spirit as the source of one’s prayer.” The

transformation or “transforming union” (Keating 2003:148) he refers to is more a stable sharing of all dimensions of a person’s life in the loving presence of God than a particular experience or set of experiences. The divine reality is present in oneself and in all that is. Contemplative prayer is not to meditate on a specific content or to focus on an object but is rather an experiential state not accessible to the faculties dominating everyday consciousness. Bourguignon (1979:236) defined *alter states of consciousness* as “conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions altered. They are characterised by changes in sensing, perceiving, thinking, and feeling. They modify the relation of the individual to self, body, sense of identity, and the environment of time, space, or other people.”

Contemplatio derived from the Latin verb *contemplari*, means *to gaze*. Jäger (1987:3) states that the

goal of contemplation is to gaze into one’s own self, to gaze upon the divine inside oneself and in creation by means of an awareness or experience that transcends the intellectual capabilities in order to reach enlightenment or union with God and an act of God, where eventually in such “pure” relationship nothing is seen, heard or felt anymore.

The active life as an authentic form of spirituality, faith, moral virtues, and charity is also taking place in the presence of God and being aware of it. However, the contemplative life according to Phillippe (1981:50-52) seeks the most direct interiorized contact with God or aims higher in that a more intimate and actual presence is sought. Contemplation is not a technique taught for example on retreat nor is it a running after mystical phenomena like ecstasies, prophecies, miraculous powers, and visions. It is rather the

way of pure receptive faith to union with God, which transcends every human experience and accesses God just as God is. Not God as joy or as charismatic manifestation but God also as fundamentally a *ray of darkness* knowing him also in the darkness of faith through the night of sense into the night of the Spirit (see Keating 2003:90, 116-117).

Contemplatives describe the stages of contemplative prayer in different ways, for example, Jäger (see 1987:19-66) sees it:

- Starting as a prayer by means of breathing exercises and posture, making use of a prayer word, silencing of everyday consciousness and the surrendering of self,
- then follows an awareness of one's own being and the prayer of quiet,
- the next stage is a growing awareness of the Ultimate Reality moving towards divine union and enlightenment,
- finally, the process completes itself in the personalization of the experience integrated into personality as a whole, with no more distinction between sacred (enlightenment) and profane (everyday consciousness).

Foster (1992:170-175) calls:

- The first step recollection or centring prayer where all competing distractions are let go of until seating or kneeling in the present moment with God and God alone, with Gods' silence stilling the noisy heart,
- then follows a listening with one's whole being and because of divine grace; adoration and love wash over oneself with a growing inward attentiveness to divine motions at the centre of being with

- the final step into contemplative prayer is spiritual ecstasy where no words or thoughts are needed in the silent deep communion with God.

The model described by Teresa of Avila (see 1979: 20-55):

- Starts with a mysterious awakening at the culmination of the night of the sense, a entering of a breath of fresh air into the spirit like divine perfume that penetrates the inmost centre of being (infused recollection) as spiritual consolation for the former dryness,
- then follows the prayer of quiet in which the will is absorbed in God. Still the faculties of memory and imagination are free to roam around to which one need not pay any attention or cling to as the will is attending more and more to the presence of God,
- with the final stage the prayer of union in which the prayer of quiet moves to yet a deeper level, with the suspension of the memory and imagination as God calls these to himself. The mind and memory hears Gods' voice and respond by gathering around God in stillness and listening, quietly enjoying his presence.

During all the stages, God is present and one is aware of God not as image, concept, form, analogy, and word but as a luminous cloud, wave, or fountain from above or below or within overtaking, enveloping being. This sparkle, deep moment, or experience is realisation of an Arab proverb that says, "Come to me with your heart and I will give you my eyes" (Gibbard 1976:103). Keating (2003:92) refers to it as a "sense of deep quiet, with no self-reflection, no imagination, and memory and just resting in God." Nicol (2002:110-111) illustrates the process of moving down, deeper into God as a moving downwards to the sharp point of an upside triangle. A movement from *lectio, meditatio, oratio* into *contemplation*, is a movement from a broad spectrum of thoughts and

images to less or later to only one word or image and finally beyond words and thoughts and images, just adoring God as invisible and beyond comprehension. St. John of the Cross (in Slattery 1994:144) states:

When in this way the soul voids itself of all things and achieves emptiness and surrender of all, it is impossible; if the soul does as much as in it lies that God should fail to perform his part by communicating himself to the soul, at least secretly and in silence. It is more impossible than that the sun should fail to shine in a serene and unclouded sky; for as the sun, when it rises in the morning, will enter your house if you open the shutter, even so will God, who sleeps not in keeping Israel, still less slumbers, enter the soul that is empty and fill it with divine blessing.

In the contemplative state of wordless communication, beyond thoughts, in the sphere of serenity the soul is surrounded by the blue colour of the heavens and the mind itself hidden in a cloud of crystal light where any awareness of self is annihilated (Cowan 2002:120). Hinduism has Yoga as its pathway into deeper experience; Buddhism has Zen, or Vipassana. The corresponding path within the Christian tradition could be contemplative prayer as part of the whole concept of *lectio divina*.

One can try to find one's way between all the mystical "word-descriptions" of what the *contemplatio* experience in essence is. However, how does a person describe the wordless intimacy between two lovers? To contemplate is to be in love, intuition and instinct are prominent and with time human activity ceases and God takes over. Contemplation makes

ample use of the language of silence. It is a for many a new or different way of being in Gods' presence by entrusting oneself to him in order to let God be the centre of everything, not only during stage of contemplation. From my observation and experience, the goal of contemplation is a *contemplative way of life* in which the *Centre of being* filters and saturates everything else that is encountered and experienced. I have been on retreats in South Africa during the research journey with ample time provided to "practice" contemplative prayer and with specific guidelines to "get hold of it." Most Dutch Reformed retreatants I have interviewed afterwards about this aspect seem to find contemplation much too *mystical*, abstract, and complicated to grasp or implement. I have tried to put more emphasis during the retreats I conducted on the idea that prayer is also more than words and to let go and let God touch and speak as and when he wishes to during the times of contemplation in the chapel. I invited pilgrims just to rest and be in his presence in a sense of being with a loved one holding hands and saying nothing, not trying to hard or experimenting with techniques to achieve a mystical union with God. It would probably be "easier" with groups that have been on many a silent or contemplative retreat to go through the stages described above on the way to enlightenment. When *contemplatio* is a specific element of a conducted retreat, it is commendable that some form of teaching or orientation on it be provided as well as regarding its mystical roots. In the monasteries I visited, the monks did not make a great issue of *contemplatio* as part of the pilgrimage. They lived it. They reminded me constantly through their humility, using words sparingly but speaking wisely and their contemplative demeanour (*monastic mindfulness*) and awareness of God of the *mystery of God* and the adventure of being with him on the journey to the inner mountain ever deeper into his presence.

There need not be a "final formula" for a retreat, or to conduct only one type of retreat, nor is it necessary for a so-called one "ideal setting" as

venue for a retreat. Creative varieties of different ways of retreat at various venues are possible that may be meaningful for retreatants of which monastic retreat is but one approach. Within the monastic approach of conducting a retreat, there are again a variety of possibilities and a combination of different elements that may form part of such a retreat. This aspect is discussed in Chapter 4.

3.5 The Way of the Mystics

Early Christians took the word “mystic” from the Greek word *myo* meaning to close the eyes in reacting to religious experience. The root is the basis for the Greek word *mysterion*, mystery as encounter with the divine mystery. The term *mystikos* could also describe the encounter with God in the sacraments (Cunningham & Egan 1996:125). Christian mystical tradition can be a resource in the search for or experience of God in a postmodern context also within the Dutch Reformed tradition. Karl Rahner (1971:15) wrote the following: “the devout Christian of the future will either be a *mystic*, one who has experienced something, or he (she) will cease to be anything at all.” Common to most mystical writers is the notion that what they have to say is actually impossible to describe in words the ineffable mystical encounters with God. The Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross said (in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:469) regarding his own mystical poetry: “It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding, like these stanzas, are fully explainable”. The encounter with the Ultimate Mystery who is God, is a God who is revealed in the bible but definitely also hidden in the depths of unspeakable mystery. Therefore mystics resort to numerous symbols and analogies and poems in their effort to pierce if ever so slightly, the veil of mystery and the experience of God. The early experience of mysticism was embedded in the ecclesial context with sacramental roots and always as incarnation rather than some individualized mystical encounter. Scripture and sacraments kept the mystical life under the influence of the

Holy Spirit as architect of the mystical life (Cunningham & Egan 1996:126-131; see Nicol 2002:44-51). It is clear that mystics were viewed as persons whose single-minded love of God leads them to a deeper awareness and experience of the presence of God. Mystics realised that Christianity was more than the sum of dogma, its theology, or a dependence on virtues.

There is tendency to distinguish mystics as apophatic or kataphatic. Eastern Christian mysticism stresses (*apophatic*) the experience of darkness or incomprehensibility of the God-encounter that eludes all description. It is experienced as a personal encounter with the triune God in darkness. Western mysticism (*kataphatic*) focuses on the experience of God that can be known, said, or symbolised and on what has been revealed and manifested in creation, sacraments, and scripture. It could have been mystical experience that made the nearly blind St. Francis (in Habig 1973:130) see Gods' beauty in creation in the following way:

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that
you have made/And first my lord brother
Sun/Who brings the day; and light you give to
us through him/How beautiful he is, how
radiant in all his splendour!/Of you Most High,
he bears the likeness./All praise be yours, my
Lord, through Sister moon and Stars; in the
Heavens you have made them, bright/And
precious and fair".

The unknown mystic of the west, and author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (trans. Robert Backhouse 1985) who composed in the fourteenth century a handbook for contemplative prayer, described knowing as a *kind of*

unknowing. The totality of our experience of God contains in my view both the apophatic and kataphatic dialectic to be kept in a creative tension.

Waaijmans' (2000:467-468, 675-680) view on spiritual pilgrimage is that it is embedded in mysticism, for example, he quotes mostly mystics and emphasises contemplation as the way towards a higher mysticism. He combines veiling and revealing, covering and disclosure in a dialogical way in his description of the spiritual journey. The more one enters into God, the more you stay yourself with the ultimate union with God not dissolving into him. Mysticism speaks of two aspects of the God-life or the living in the presence of God for example ego consciousness (temporal) and enlightenment (eternal). The goal of the contemplative is to transcend ego-consciousness to enlightenment (alter states of consciousness), becoming one with eternal life. I agree with Jäger (1987:71) that the issue is not only to discover the life of God as indwelling but also to discover human beings as expressions of divine life. God manifests himself in human beings writes Jäger (1987:71): "living transcendence in immanence, God who lives us." For the mystical writer Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) everything is God as the totality of experience although God can be in dialectic way also personal. Nicol (2002:52) concludes that Eckhart went too far in letting the border between man and God fade and warns against mysticism with an impersonal non-relational view of God. However, the distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" is a Western culturally determined concept, not useful in understanding early monastic and mystic metaphysical concepts (Van Aarde 2001:1165; see Saler 1977:46, 51).

The Christian mysticism of the first eleven centuries was inseparable from the history of monasticism and according to McGinn (1991:131) monasticism had a decisive role in the history of the earliest layer of Western mysticism for example Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great.

When the Benedictine rule was composed in the middle of the sixth century until 1153, nuns and monks gave a distinctive monastic profile to Christian mysticism. Francis of Assisi wrote little on mysticism but lived a type of mysticism that so identified him with the naked and crucified Christ, that he bore the *stigmata* on his body. Bonaventure as minister general of the Franciscans developed mysticism as *The Journey of the Soul into God* (1978) that St. Francis lyrically lived. Franciscan mysticism, profoundly Christological and intensely affective, has touched all subsequent Christian mysticism in an extensive and profound way.

In my view, Martin Luther's rejection of the mystical tradition was unfortunate for Protestantism as it deprived this tradition of creative input from Protestant mystics. Luther probably reacted more against a late medieval piety and mysticism that was not "biblical" to him anymore. According to Jones & Wainwright (see 1986:342-356, 431-480) Luther had something of the *mystic* in him and received much wisdom from the mystical tradition. Stricter Reformed thinking tends to condemn mysticism and one of the reasons could be their emphasis on faith as primarily knowledge of the clarity of revelation through the bible. The idea of faith and the dark night of the soul or apophatic mystical encounters could make Protestant fellow-pilgrims on the journey within a theology focusing on kerugma, dogma, revelation, and rationality very uncomfortable and for others even very unacceptable. However, Christianity needs both the *rational (logos)* element (dogma, ritual, sacraments) and the element of *experience (mythos)* moving deeper into the presence of God. Without experience that focuses also on the mystery of God for example mysticism and contemplative prayer, religion could become stagnant, not much more than empty concepts or dead ritual. During a monastic retreat the Eucharist, Bible reading, listening prayer, meditation, silence, and other ritual elements of the liturgy of the Divine Office in the chapel became points of departure for the retreatants moving deeper into the presence of

God. Forms and rituals are there to contain the life, as a bowl is shaped to contain the liquid. “An authentic experience of enlightenment leads Christians beyond the scriptures to that which the scriptures attest. It is like a match that can be thrown away after it was used to light the fire” (Jäger 1987:73). Sacred texts, rites, recitations, ascetics, solitude and the practice of *lectio divina* prepared retreatants during a monastic retreat for an awakening to the reality of the Infinite. However not the spiritual director nor anyone else can brought it about, and no one knows when and where it will happen. That is Gods’ initiative and prerogative only.

3.6 Monastic Rule or Way of Life

A rule of life or guidelines for a specific way of life is common in the Benedictine, Franciscan, and Taizé monastic traditions. Many Christians worldwide outside monasteries follow the basic principles or monastic rhythm for life of example either that of St. Benedict, St. Francis, or the Source of Taize by Brother Roger. Pilgrims that pilgrimage to Taize for retreat, receive a monthly prayer letter including bible readings as well as dates and venues where group meetings in cities all over the world will be taking place.

Carefully prescribed rituals, gestures, words, elaborate ceremonies and liturgy, surround life in monasteries. The monks dedicate themselves to a life of prayer and constant communion with God. There is strict discipline in such a way of life for example a monk in the La Pierre Qui Vire monastery lives his life, day and night, in obedience to St. Benedict’s rule, the holy rule, which is safe guarded and interpreted with utmost discretion and consideration by the spiritual father of the community, the abbot. The holy rule is for the prayer life or devotional life of the monk like the golden setting for a precious diamond. The function of the rule is to reveal the real beauty of prayer and contemplation and to allow it to be fully practiced, and experienced with authentic peace and joy.

The monk and the community who wish to make his whole life, whatever he does a continuing prayer or drenched with monastic mindfulness, can only do so in the context of a very concrete daily schedule that supports the realization of this goal. Therefore, for example at the La Pierre Qui Vire Benedictine monastery, the celebration of the Eucharist, the communal psalmody, individual meditation, study, manual work, eating in silence, sleeping and the seven communal prayer offices (Divine Office) every twenty four hours are all subject to careful regulation and conscientious observance.

While participating in the life of the monastic discipline, I sensed and experienced together with the other retreatants the great mystery of God prayerfully becoming more aware of his presence, hidden and veiled as well as at times more visible, in the deep daily rhythm of their contemplative day. I also realised there is no way that I could seriously live a life of prayer and more conscious of Gods' presence, growing and persevering in such a life of monastic mindfulness without a very concrete way or rhythm for my daily life in the ministry. Regarding the relevance of the monastic way of life for the Dutch Reformed tradition, changes in spiritual direction will be commendable based on the exploration of insights gained from the Benedictine, Franciscan, and Taizé ways of life.

3.6.1 A Benedictine Way of Life

The Holy Rule, The Rule of St. Benedict as a Book of Wisdom is not so much a set of spiritual exercises, prescriptions, devotions or mere disciplines but a plan for or way of life, a look at the world and everyday life through interior eyes. It is more a set of principles to guide as in the Latin meaning of the word *regula* as a law (Chittester 1990:3, 7). It functions as a guidepost or railing to hang onto in the dark. It leads pilgrims into a given direction and functions as a piece of wisdom literature

designed to deal with the great questions in life for monastic and lay people. Four elements in Benedictine spirituality are what make the Rule a living rule and not a historical document or law: the bible, the *text of the Rule*, wise *Leaders* and the insight, life experience and circumstances of the *Community* (Chittester 1990:10). Broadly speaking the divisions deal with: Persons, Officials of the monastery, Monastic Virtues, The Divine Office and Disciplinary Regulations (see Maynard 1954:74). The rule comments further on the following themes: Listening, Prayer and *Lectio Divinia*, Community, Humility, Monastic Mindfulness, Work, Holy Leisure, Giftedness, Hospitality, Obedience, Stability, Monastic Practices, Peace and The Monastic Vision. The spiritual principles and values in the Rule are inextricably intertwined with the concrete regulations of lifestyle (Kardong in Skudlarek (ed) 1982:268-275). Even though chapters one to seven are more of a spiritual and ascetical nature with the remaining sixty six chapters the practical implementation of principles, many of the finest spiritual insights of the Rule are embedded in very “mundane” chapters.

In aim and in language, the rule is set apart from other similar ancient monastic rules. Benedict was content to take what was good from the existing monastic heritage at that stage, to make it his own and colour it with his own experience. He drew the different strands together for example life of solitude and individual development as well as the value of corporate life in a settled community. As a practical person, he wrote the Rule in the dialect spoken in daily life and not in the classical Latin vein. He draws freely from Cassian, St. Basil, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, Leo the Great, the Fathers and most of all the Scriptures. His frequent epigrams prove the Rule to be the composition of an artist, carrying the reader deep into the heart of the author (see Maynard 1954:72-73; cf de Waal 1984:18-20). He selected and blended elements from the sources as a person who lived out in practice what he was writing about on the cliffs of Subiaco and at Monte Cassino.

The long hours spent in solitude and contemplation especially the three years in the cave, the few years spent as leader of twelve smaller monasteries, the time spent at the monastery at Vicovaro and finally at Monte Cassino, all served as preparation for the final composing of the Rule. It was produced not over a few weeks but as a slow distillation, spread over several years after probably careful consideration and frequent revision. According to Maynard (1954:70), it was written in five hundred and thirty four. It was the first real monastic rule, previous ones being not much more than admonitions from which the individual abbot could obtain some guidance or useful hints. In addition, for almost six hundred years over the whole of civilized Europe outside the Balkans, to be religious and a monk was to be a Benedictine monk.

The importance of and emphasis in the Rule on the Divine Office as well as my own experience at the monastery of La Pierre Qui Vire, is that Benedictine spirituality promotes contemplation as way of life. It makes ample provision for it in the Divine Office, private prayer, study, silence, and work. The goal seems to be then, to seek God and union with God, and to be in the perfect love of God.

The Benedictine, though he may engage in various forms of active work, is not commanded by the Rule to any kind of work at all, except what he performs in the monastery. It was clear from interviews, enquiring how monks view work, what their attitude towards it entailed based on the rule of St. Benedict. Monks are truly monks when they live by the labour of their hands like the desert fathers and the apostles. The superiors in the distributing of the work will see to it that it is discreet and moderate so that the strong may have something to strive for and the weak may not be frighten away. The idea is that all should have enough freedom of heart to praise God while working and to fulfil their task in his presence with joy.

Since the beginning monks have worked, by charity to help the poor. However, monastic work has also a rich spiritual background where the desert fathers saw it as a means to help them pray. During their long hours of solitary meditation, a simple work like plaiting baskets or making ropes helped to avoid distraction and the work became an anchor for thoughts. With time, monks began to divide their time between reading, prayer and work and this alteration seems to make the concentration on God easier. The zeal to work hard, so important in Benedictine spirituality may also develop some special virtues like humility, generosity, obedience, detachment and purity of heart. Monks find work a useful means for fighting against some temptations like despondency and sadness. It may also be a penance, the most humble and simple way to master oneself (desires), and make atonement for our sins and others. It enables them to offer all human suffering to God in remission for the sins of the world. Furthermore, the monk finds in sharing with his fellow monks the hard burden of working to earn a daily living one of the best means of communion with each other. Monastic work can be manual as well as intellectual depending on the necessities of the monastery or the abilities of the brothers. Usually as part of the program for the retreats, I conducted in South Africa there was time for studying or reading and an element called “group sweat,” which entailed some form of labour or long brisk walk as a group.

However, all work implies respect and even love for the things used, from the simplest tools and kitchenware to the highest forms of art, theology, and philosophy. Everything used by a monk is not only treated well for its own sake only but for the sake of God to whom everything belongs. Through the careful way, in which everything is handled, and the concern for beauty, the glory of God is sung. Everything in the monastery is ordained to produce an atmosphere conducive for a life of prayer in the presence of God. Monks are engaged in a variety of works, striving to be

self-supporting and to help others. They have also to do their reading, their studies, choir office, and the Divine Office. The aim of all these activities are to make the monastery what it is meant to be: the house of God, a place where God is found and known, adored and in a certain way, seen and experienced in the bliss of contemplation. St. Thomas (in Maynard 1954:77) expressed the religious tradition of the sixth century onwards by stating that the religious life of monks is instituted primarily for the promotion of the contemplative life.

With regard to ascetics, Benedictine spirituality seeks a moderation that would prevent all extravagance (extremism) and singularity for example as were the case with the Desert Fathers and St. Francis.

The Rule of St. Benedict put emphasises the relationships between members of the community. The monastic ideal preceding Benedict was that of a novice finding a holy man and asking to learn from him and the monastery had been a group of individuals gathered around the feet of a sage. One of the earlier monastic rules, the Rule of the Master had given enormous powers to the Abbot. Benedict came and changed this exclusively vertical authority structure by focusing on the interpersonal relationships of the community of monks. They are there to learn and to seek God but they are also brothers bound in love to each other. He devotes three chapters (69-71) to this topic. In Chapter 72 of the rule 5-8, he states the following: “the monks are to bear with patience the weakness of others, whether of body or behaviour. Let them strive with each other in obedience to each other. Let them not follow their own good, but the good of others. Let them be charitable towards their brothers with pure affection” (de Waal 1984:19). The monks interviewed emphasized the importance of, value and experience of the fraternal life in Community (common life) in the La Pierre Quie Vire monastery. Common life is perceived as a means leading to union with God (Matt 25:40. Jn 15:12),

an idea developed especially in Christianity. (Buddhists attach value to the community as depository of the law and some Hindus recognise the presence of the Absolute in all human beings). Moreover, it was the very first Christian monastic community (that of Pachomius) that called this idea of communion leading to God *koinonia* as peaceful and supernatural mutual love. The main lesson the Desert Fathers for example St. Anthony learned from the visit to the Egyptian solitary monks, was devotion to Christ and mutual love. Although the neighbour was seldom met in the desert, he was often present in the mind and heart. The solitary monk had to keep charity in his heart, avoid judging others, and always ready to give the unexpected guest everything he needed. You also find *charity* one of the most frequent topics in the writings of the desert hermits. Pachomius applied the doctrine to community life and stressed the importance of charity, carrying each other's burdens, peace with one another as peace with God and love for others that make us friends of Christ. St Benedict's rule makes a synthesis of the vertical ascent of the soul to God and the horizontal recognition of Gods' presence in each individual where the monastery becomes the meeting point of these two currents. God is the common goal here in the monastery and it is His presence and the seeking of God that welds the individual members of the community together. Monks are linked together by this mutual seeking of union with God and by pure charity as the common search and practice of the love of God. The abbot's role is to preserve peace, to foster harmony and consensus in the community. The monk's individual transformation happens through the incorporation into a given Benedictine community. As monks, they strive not only to be obedient but also to one another as a road to God. The needs of the other are very important to them and to carry one another's infirmities with great patience in unselfish love is to see Christ in the brother. It is Christ's presence in others that brings an atmosphere of peace and love in their community. The monks reflected a respectful love towards Christ, which enfolds the abbot and brethren, as

together they focus on God. They share all day long in Christ's love and have to give it to one another. They also feel responsible for each other's spiritual improvement. The Benedictine community find expression in the common prayer (Divine Office) where they believe they unite with the heavenly choirs to praise God, participating in Christ's life giving sacrifice, bonded in a common love to embrace the whole world and offering it to God in prayer.

The monasteries of the sixth century were essentially small and simple with the daily activities characteristic of a large family at work. The monastery was a single storey building with offices, outhouses and farm sheds. Most were simple men and few were priests or scholars. The pattern of the day was to do the work of God with the monks gathering seven times a day in the oratory. The rest of the time was spent on domestic or agricultural work, study and reading, two meals and sleep. They were men living together to serve God and save their souls, glad to care for those who came there but content to remain essentially ignorant of the world outside their walls.

The Families of St. Benedict founded in Kentucky in the United States of America in nineteen seventy two by Carl Mitcham a social psychologist, is an example of a *contemporary adaptation of monastic community life* following the principles of the Rule of St. Benedict (see Mitcham in Skularek (ed):1982:257-267). It started as an attempt to use and adapt monastic principles for renewal of family life. They followed the liturgical or Divine Office of Benedict three times a day and strived to be contemplative living a quiet life of simplicity on a farm as small community. *Lectio divina* was practiced in quiet times, no television or newspapers were allowed and everyone visiting was asked to respect the monastic mindfulness and monastic rhythm of the community. Discretion and moderation so prominent in the Rule were cherished and they made

ample use of the spiritual mentoring and direction of monks from a nearby Benedictine monastery. The “experiment” to “reproduce” in a sense Benedictine monastic community life in a modern context was temporarily disbanded after ten years due to internal difficulties.

From the first moment of arrival at the monastery, the welcome at the door by one of the brothers was warm, special, and very hospitable. Moreover, although we could not understand each other because of language constraints, he tried his best to make me feel at home. The monks elaborated later on this aspect when asked whether this was the way everyone was welcomed: In the Hindu monastic tradition the guest is considered as God himself and the visit by guests as a religious experience in which God himself is received. Abraham received a visit from God in welcoming unknown strangers and Jesus considers the welcome done to the guest as done to him (Matt 25:30). The desert fathers shared the little they had with their visitors for example in the Pachomian monasteries had a guesthouse where people were received in an appropriate place according to their rank, lay people were going to St Basil monastery for spiritual counselling and St. John Chrysostom invited people of his diocese to go frequently to monasteries for retreats. Poor people and monks or clergy were all welcome. St. Benedict honoured these external forms of hospitality given by the monastic tradition but also gave it a new character for example in the variety of persons coming to Benedictine monasteries through the years for example relatives and friends, clergy and monks, poor and sick people and sometimes even hostile heretics! Another new aspect that the rule of St. Benedict introduced is that it leaves out the detailed prescriptions of earlier rules regarding the doorkeeper’s function. More important to St. Benedict was the attitude of the doorkeeper’s heart, which should guide his behaviour that it is Christ, which is received in the guest. For the monks the guests

are always welcome in the monastery and are welcomed as members of the community.

After his death within a century or two St. Benedict became the patriarch of western monasticism and his Rule the most influential in the Latin Church. From the seventh century onwards, the Benedictines brought both Christianity and civilization to much of Europe with cross, book, and plough. In the earliest days, monks went to the desert leaving behind a comparatively sophisticated life, now the pattern has been reversed. In a world in which barbaric invasions, political instability, wars, simple parishes of peasants the many monasteries came to stand out as centres of light and learning. Here pilgrims found a rich liturgical life, informed devotion, and love of learning and intelligent companionship. The communities became much larger with bigger complexes accommodating hundred or more monks. Pilgrims and visitors from every rank of society came in search of prayer, alms, protection, or hospitality. St. Benedict did not foresee this mingling of the enclosed life with the life outside the walls but it became part of the way of life. During the middle Ages in Europe, the black monks as they were called established themselves as landowners, administrators, bishops, writers, and artists. Half the cathedrals in England were under Benedictine rule (de Waal 1984:19-21). New foundations were appearing all the time especially under the monastic renewals during the tenth century. First, the Cluniacs put the emphasis on good order and administration and magnificent worship. Then the Cistercians recovered the role of austerity and hard manual work, which they felt, was neglected. At the beginning of the thirteenth century in England and Wales, the monasteries grew from fifty, in thousand and sixty six, to three hundred in the year twelve hundred. Today many thousands of Anglican and Roman Catholic people are following the monastic life according to the rule of St. Benedict in many different forms. Benedict though never thought of himself as the founder of a holy Order. His vision was that each monastery

or abbey ought to be completely autonomous although following the principles of the Rule (Maynard 1954:81). Therefore, it is possible to look upon each separate Benedictine abbey today as constituting a religious order in itself. Benedictine generals, provincials, or councils do not “govern,” only the abbot as the spiritual father of a monastery. It is into the individual monastery; the monk enters and usually stays there for his whole life except if transference is granted for compelling reasons.

The role of the Benedictine spirit on the Church of England since the Reformation is apparent in the traditional monastic offices condensed into the two Prayer Book offices of Matins and Evensong. According to de Waal (1984:22), the root of the Anglican way of prayer is the daily recitation of the psalms and regular scripture readings from the Benedictine tradition (see *An Anglican prayer book* 1989:37-70). The Book of Common Prayer was created because of a vision of Cranmer, after Henry the eighth dissolved the monasteries that the work of the monasteries should continue in the local churches. The key services to be prayed daily by the clergy and the people are the Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer that builds on the Divine Office practiced in Benedictine monasteries:

Morning Prayer:

- Canticle (Ps 95-100),
- confession,
- the Psalms for the day,
- a reading from the Bible (OT),
- canticle (Song of Zechariah),
- another reading from the bible (NT),
- canticle (*Te Deum*),
- the Apostle’s Creed,

- the Lord's Prayer,
- and more prayers (including the Collect).

Evening Prayer

- Canticle (Ps 134),
- confession,
- the Psalms of the day,
- a reading from the bible(OT),
- canticle (*Magnificat*),
- another reading from the bible (NT),
- canticle (*Te Deum*),
- the Apostles Creed,
- the Lord's Prayer,
- and further prayers (including the Collect).

3.6.2 A Franciscan Way of Life

Francis had a simple and more naïve perception regarding the fraternity of brothers in that anyone who simple heartedly accepted the *rule of poverty* in their following of Christ should be admitted to the *Fratres Minores* or Minor Brothers, and thereafter, be left free to the *guidance of the Holy Spirit* (Reynolds 1983:77). It is probable that Francis knew something about other monastic Rules, but it is unlikely that he wanted to attempt anything on such a large scale for example like the rule of Benedict, for him and his disciples. He wrote in his Testament (in Moorman 1968:15): “after the Lord gave me some brethren no one showed me what I ought to do, but the Almighty himself revealed to me that we were to live according to the manner of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words, and the lord Pope confirmed it for me.” The original (first) Rule has long since disappeared but probably contained words on the selling of all possessions and giving everything to the poor, very little on

worship and prayer offices because they didn't have services or a church, monastery or priest in the beginning years, something on work and manual labour and also preaching.

It was probably at cardinal Ugolini's request that Francis revised the first rule in order for it to receive canonical recognition by the Holy See in Rome. One of the purposes of the Fourth Lateran Council was to regularize the situation of so many different groups who wished to live a more radical form of Christian life in order to reform their own lives and those of the church. It forbade the approval of any new Rules for religious groups all were to accept one of the approved Rules, for example that of the Benedictines, Cistercians or Augustine canons. Francis and his brothers were allowed living their form of life because of the verbal approval by the Pope six years before the Council (see Short 1989:12-13). Pope Honorius solemnly approved the new rule on the twenty ninth of March twelve hundred and twenty three after the Cardinal and Pope modified some of the provisions for example the strict rule of travelling with neither purse nor staff was omitted (Reynolds 1983:78). Also anxious that the movement should cease to be a lay movement, the Pope arranged that the twelve brothers all receive the tonsure before leaving Rome (Moorman 1968:19).

The Franciscan rule is essentially Christ-centric, Christ at the centre of devotion, ministry, community life, authority, and charity. It portrays a radical Christ centricism where he is perceived and experienced in everything (see Short 1989:112-120). Central themes in the Franciscan Rule or Way of Life are: Following the Footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ, The humility of the Incarnation, The poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus, The Divine Office and Fasting, Living among the poorest of the Poor, The Active and Contemplative life (Hermitage and Workplace and in Praise to God for all his Creatures), Penance regarding Friars who sin,

Admonition and Correction of Friars. This way or form of life translates the Franciscan spirit and vision into a lived experience. It is essentially a framework for the evangelical life or Gospel life.

Francis also composed for Clare and the Poor Sisters a way of life but in twelve nineteen, Pope Honorius III gave Clare and her community the Rule of St. Benedict as the foundation of their sisterhood! For the next forty years, she would struggle to gain papal approval for her form of life and a Rule for her sisters, which would show them clearly as Franciscan and not Benedictine. The rule she wrote was approved shortly before her death.

The Rule or Way of Life of St. Francis sketches only in broad outlines the essence of the Franciscan vocation to be followed by his disciples for all time. He interpreted the Gospel in its most literal sense but he left in his Rule comparatively few concrete applications of the Gospel to the Friars life. For example under no circumstances should they receive coin or money. They ought to wear coarse garments and go unshod and not ride unless compelled by necessity. However, in the great issues of poverty, humility, obedience, preaching, and the foreign missions concrete applications are few (see MacVicar 1986:7). Therefore the letter of the rule is often open to more than one interpretation, lending itself to a degree of adaptation to circumstances unforeseen or not provided for by the St. Francis. This led according to one of the brothers and Abbot at the Basilica in Assisi to three traditions of Franciscan observance through history:

- The *Conventuals*, with a more adaptive, relaxed approach, focusing more on the spirit of the rule as the letter, believing that the Providence has ordained one thing for Francis and first brothers and ordained otherwise for the full grown fraternity through the years.

- The *Spirituals* or Capuchin tradition, opted for a more primitive observance and the revival of the primitive Franciscan life where observance of the entire Gospel under vow, lived in caves and huts and begging from door to door, high standard of poverty and humility, observance of the Rule to the letter, observance of the Testament of St. Francis and all it implies and as norm all words, intentions, deeds and writings of St. Francis (Moorman 1968:111-118; see MacVicar 1986:10-19).

- The *Observants*, whose desire it was to recreate the conditions in which the very early friars lived and to observe the Rule, both in letter and spirit, as dictated by St. Francis (see Moorman 1968:372-377). These traditions remain though one noble tree of which St. Francis is still the root.

I interviewed some of the brothers about Franciscan spirituality and the different ways of experiencing and walking with God. They compared the Gospel to music of God to which not all pilgrims listen to or experience in the same way. Not even all Franciscans hear it the same way for example the different traditions in Franciscan Spirituality. One of the friars describes it as an invitation to respond to and to start dancing. The challenge being to do it in much the same way as St. Francis did which essentially according to the friar means to live in peace with God, you and others. The challenge for him is to dance now, in the present because yesterday is history and tomorrow remains a mystery. St. Francis focus was to be in the moment, living with God and within His divine will. To him this is the heart of Franciscan spirituality and the freedom to interpret the music and dance of the saint creatively in the modern context of today. He also warned against too much of a focus on the Saint himself instead of what Francis danced on namely the heart of the Gospel.

Another friar shared with me the following on how the virtues of St. Francis as way of life may drive out vice today in the hearts of people and from society:

“Where there is Charity and Wisdom – there is neither fear nor ignorance

Where there is Patience and Humility – there is neither anger nor disturbance

Where there is Poverty with Joy – there is no covetousness or avarice

Where there is Inner Peace and Meditation – there is neither anxiousness nor dissipation

Where there is Reverence of the Lord to guard the house – there the enemy cannot enter

Where there is Mercy and Discernment – there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.”

The relationship between Francis and Clare is fascinating in a way and many an icon portrays the two together. Their love was a spiritual love with God as source, a form of spiritual romance without the erotic or physical flavours. In my view, their relationship brought a feminine, motherly, intuitive, or softer spirit into Franciscan Spirituality. G.K Chesterton (1923:126) said in this regard, “a heavenly love can be as real as an earthly love.” Francis helped Clare elope into Franciscan life, defying her parents as he had defied his father. It was much like a romantic elopement for she escaped through the coffin door of her house, fled through the woods, and a procession of torches led her to the place where she made her vows at midnight. Through the long years of her vocation and as Abbess later of the Poor Sisters, she revealed herself as a woman in love with God. However, she might also have been in love with Francis without consciously making a distinction between the two and surrendered her soul to the man who gave her God. (Brother Ramon 1994:79, 80). The *feminine* element in Franciscan spirituality is reflected in

tenderness when Francis (in Doyle 1980:22) gives instructions on religious life in the hermitages: “not more than three or at most four friars should go together to a hermitage to lead a religious life there. Two of these should act as mothers, with the other two, or the other one, as their children. The mothers are to lead the life of Martha, the other two, the life of Mary Magdalene.” Sister Teresa (in Ramon 1994:85) summed up their relationship as follows: “they were brother and sister to everything and everyone, and as they lived this out in daily life, Clare and Francis worshipped the God who is Father and Mother of all that is.” According to Short (1989:137-140) the community of St. Clare (The Poor Clares) have served the other members of the Franciscan Family as constant reminders of the primacy of the search for God in Franciscan life. Their lives have remained unchanged in the basic elements since the days of Clare. The Divine Office, the Eucharist, ample time together in community, silence, personal solitude, hard work, joy and seldom leaving the walls of their monasteries. Visitors to a poor Clare community are received with smiling courtesy that both Francis and Clare would have expected from their followers.

The fraternity that I observed and experienced at the Sacro Convento, has an Abbot and Vicar who together with the Abbots and Vicar of two other fraternities in the area form a council. Every four years a big Council meeting is held in Rome. In Assisi, the Abbot and Vicar make most of the decisions but in important matters, for example the budget the whole fraternity will vote on. There is a hermitage (where Francis also spent much of his time) five kilometres from the convent higher up in Mt. Subiaco where the friars retreat to on occasion for solitude and meditation. One of the friars explained the Franciscan habit he wore. It consists of a simple tunic, shoulder cape and a rope. Three knots are made around the waste as symbol of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The word habit comes from the Latin *habitus* and it means to put on a way of life. The

external garment represents an interior change; the armour of salvation, the mouth of justice and is a sign of unity and visible link between the brothers. He also referred to the five pillars of wisdom that give structure to the Rule of the Friars Minor in the monastery:

- Poverty: the Incarnation as poverty of God,
- obedience: the Passion as self-sacrificial love of God,
- chastity: the Eucharist as the chastity of Christ in the bread and wine,
- the Gospel: the Scriptures as the risen Lord made present through the sacred memory of scripture and
- discipleship: Mary at the feet of Jesus is a symbol of perfect discipleship and answering the vocation from God.

The Franciscan Cross (San Damiano Cross), a central icon in the monastery provides further insight into Franciscan Spirituality and the portrayal of Christ. A friar from India explained the colourful and rich symbolism of the Icon:

- Sea shells surrounding it: eternity, beauty, endurance, the already and the not yet.
- Black cross beams: evil and death.
- Red: dominating colour, the blood of Christ and outpouring of His love.
- Blood flowing from wounds: foul stains flowing from compassion.
- Loincloth with golden rope: vestment of a priest, the gold ephod, the High Priest and the Lamb being slaughtered.
- Face darker veiled in shadow: the Ark of the Covenant in the temple of Jerusalem, but here depicted as God seen not through the veil/screen of incense and glory in the Holy of Holies but God cloaked in humanity.

- Oversized neck: word of God made flesh, which is the message that breathes new life into creation.
- Everything underneath his arms: the tree of life, the new Adam that shelters the fruit of new obedience under his arms.
- Five main characters, three on the left and three on the right, the same faces, eyes, mouths: they resemble the single family of God united in him.
- Two bigger figures at the left hand side of the icon:
Mary mother of Jesus with a white veil: as spotless bride of Holy Spirit, violet garment represents the colour of the Temple veil and she is the Ark of the new covenant.
- John standing next to her wearing a white garment: pure and red mantle for wisdom, both pointing to Christ as their source of life and unity.
- The right side of icon: closest is Mary Magdalene, a sinner who trusted in Jesus, and his mercy that transformed her life.
- Next to her is the wife of Cleopas, the “other Mary” and cousin of Virgin Mary.
- The Centurion who asked Jesus to cure his sick son:
His right hand is upwards as confirmation of his newfound faith and three fingers upward depicting the Trinity and the two fingers inwards resembling the two natures of Jesus, with the small face on his left shoulder as the face of his cured son.
- The upper part of icon with a smaller figure of Christ ascending into heaven, breaking out of a circle tomb, death with a cross in hand as a sceptre: he transformed the cross from instrument of torture and curse to a sign of hope and victory, the royal crest of the Kingdom of God.
- The hand in the middle top part of icon: the blessings of God the Father, his plan is unfolding in Salvation history within the great mystery of passion and death, good will triumph over evil.

It was before the Cross of San Damiano that I prayed with St. Francis at the beginning of his new vocation in life: “Most high and Glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me Lord, a correct faith, a perfect charity, wisdom and knowledge so I may do your most holy and true will”.

The Franciscan form or way of life then is the evangelical life, the Gospel life in all of its radical consequences. The way of life that St. Francis inaugurated was not contemplative nor active but both. This characteristic explains how the Franciscan family include full-time contemplatives as well as full-time missionaries. It centres around the frail figure of their founder focusing on his spirit, character, and way of life. Three aspects are central in this regard namely the union with God as foundation of Franciscan life, the value of hard work and life with the poor and the importance of community.

3.6.3 A Taizé Way of Life

In nineteen fifty two until nineteen fifty three, Brother Roger wrote a short rule for the life of the brothers, the Rule of Taizé that later became known as the Sources of Taizé. The Little Source of Taizé expresses for the Taizé community the essentials, which make a common life possible. Central themes are: You are no longer alone, Prayer, Come follow me, Yes for an entire lifetime, the Prior, the Council, Meals, New brothers, brothers on Mission, Welcoming, the Mystery of faith, Peace of heart, Joy, Simplicity, Mercy and Trust (Schutz 2000:48-75). It is nothing like the more traditional monastic rules for example: it does not lay down the exact hours of prayer or details or rules about clothing but is more the fruit of and inspiration of the experiment of living a parable of community for ten years. The Sources of Taizé or Rule suggests more a spirit, a way of life to inspire and to motivate the community to the essentials of common life

(cf Brico 1978:21). The focus is on a sober life in simplicity of heart; joy and love living daily the essentials of faith in community. New brothers are welcomed into the community during evening prayers and receive the white garment that the brothers wear during common prayers in the church of Reconciliation. The brothers in preparation time before commitment are called “younger brothers” and not novices. When a new brother wants to join the community, there are no strict rules or regulations for him. He is invited to experience and to learn for himself what life in community entails. He follows the same routine than the other brothers but will spent more time on study of the sources of faith, the bible, and the church fathers. Then when the younger brother is ready (time will depend on person in question) on a Sunday Morning usually during Easter in the church of Reconciliation in the presence of the brothers and all the pilgrims there, a few questions are asked and the vow made (see Spink 1986:15-20).

The role of the leader (not called “the Abbot”) is a shepherding function and the one responsible to build the community as a servant. He is not so much head of the community but the centre and heart of the responsibility is to verbalise what the community strives to experience and live out in practice. He is also the listener and the one to identify the gifts of every brother. Together as one, the brothers are on their way to the miracle of togetherness as an adventure with God; living a monastic parable of community in a postmodern world.

The brothers emphasised the principles of self-giving as suffering with others, which according to them bring the perfection of joy in Jesus Christ, mercy leads to forgiveness, reconciliation and the absence of petty disagreements or dislikes and simplicity allows to flee from the devious paths through which the tempter tempts the community of God. The brothers commit themselves to renounce all individual belongings and to

live in a community of goods. Everything is held in common and no capital is put away for future. They are not supposed to fear poverty and to trust in the generosity of God. The community live a life in simplicity in order to avoid greatness and depend totally on God. They do exceptionally well with the selling of art and books and music and give generously to the needy worldwide. The brothers see a life of celibacy as a means to worship and serve God and neighbour even more intense and focused. (Schutz 1953:25; cf Hicks 1992:209).

Central in the Rule is the unity of prayer and action. Everything starts and ends within community prayer during the Divine Office twice daily. However, it is combined with loving service to others and reaching out to the poorest of the poor worldwide. They conduct many youth conferences throughout the year in various cities of the world. It not only mobilizes those who have been on retreat to live the Gospel of Christ but also serves as a reminder and source for a way of life. During the nineteen sixties when the youth influx to Taizé started, some of the brothers said they felt that the masses of pilgrims and seekers were impeding on the life of the community. Surely, a monastery was no place to receive hundreds and sometimes thousands on a weekend or weeklong retreat! A suggestion was made to provide camping facilities two kilometres away from the church of Reconciliation and monastery. Eventually under commendation of Br. Roger Schutz the community decided to accept this flocking of young people to Taizé as the task and challenge of the community and to reach out to these seekers. In true monastic fashion, each guest is viewed as Christ himself who is to be received. The welcoming of seekers and pilgrims are therefore important and offered the free time of the community of brothers. Emphasis is put on hospitality to be generous and discerning. Br. Roger (Schutz 1972:3) asserted that *struggle (action)* and *contemplation* could not be separated just as contemplation could not overlook struggle as: “a struggle for the voice of

the voiceless to be heard, for the liberation of every person, the Christian finds his place – in the very front line. And at the same time the Christian, even though he be plunged in God's silence, senses an underlying truth: this struggle for and with others finds its source in another struggle that is more and more etched in his deepest self, at that point in which no two people are quite alike. There he touches the gates of contemplation." Struggle then reflects and unites inward dimensions of prayer and contemplation with such outward dimensions as aiding the poor and oppressed.

Pilgrims returning home after a weeklong or weekend retreat at the Taizé monastery may register to receive the Letter from Taizé as well as information on annual Pilgrimage of Trust international meetings and other conferences in different cities of the world. Families and parishes of the region around the city where these meetings take place welcome the participants who attend it. The aim of these meetings outside Taizé is part of the process to seek how to become bearers of trust and reconciliation in daily life (as a way of life). The Letter from Taizé can help pilgrims to continue their searching at home. Many of the retreatants interviewed make use of it as well as the newsletter. The Letter from Taizé is published every two months in thirteen languages. It contains news from different countries, topics for reflection, and Bible readings for each day. The website of Taizé is available in twenty-six languages. It provides information about meetings, articles, local contacts, material for preparing prayers, details of books, videos, compact discs and other publications etc. A newsletter twice a month available in eight languages is available twice monthly by email. These provide a link with Taizé after retreat and support the Taizé experience becoming a way of life.

Some of the comments of a group of College students during a group interview regarding going back home after the retreat were: "Back home

church and life on campus are very noisy and busy, cluttered most of the time, everything is so much more loud there than here at Taizé. Things change all the time, and society incredible consumer orientated in the United States with so much focus on a variety of programs also in church. Life on the Taizé hill is more simple, quiet, spiritually deep, and meaningful. The power and the presence of God here is more tangible and profound. We would like to have rhythm that is more spiritual in our lives on campus. We are taking some Taizé music, and the Sources of Taizé (book) with us back home to remind us of how we focused on God whilst being here. The Taizé type worship services in some of the churches could be helpful in living out the principles we have learned and experienced here. Still we do not know how to become more quiet and peaceful in our busy rat race type environments. Maybe the little book The Source of Taizé by Br. Roger could be helpful in directing our spiritual journey towards the more essential and meaningful aspects of the Gospel in everyday life. We would also appreciate similar types of retreat to go to in the States.”

On the question put to another group of pilgrims if the monastic tradition as it is lived out at Taizé has something to offer in modern day church environments at home, the response was: “Yes, for instance the rhythm or discipline of prayer, tasks, solitude, silence, Bible discussion. In addition, the simplicity of the Gospel lived out here. Churches are too cluttered with dogma, theology, and rational arguments. Maybe we should be more focused on God and his loving presence and his mystery and make more of symbols or icons and just being in his presence. Taizé type conducted worship services and retreats that are less loud and camp like providing more elements of reflection, silence, and music to help us going deeper into ourselves.”

Retreatants have the opportunity to spend reflection time in the quiet serene park of St. Stephens or elsewhere on the monastery grounds. One of the questions discussed during a group interview was the following: to take the *essence of the Gospel* revealed in a special way at Taizé back to everyday life, continuing the inner journey, and making some of the key principles of monastic life part of everyday life. Some of the themes mentioned were: the mystery of Christ, the simplicity of the Gospel narrative, the awesomeness of God, the mystery of life, the trust in and rest in God, the calling to become part of the plight of the poorest of the poor, the unity (catholicity) of the church, life in simplicity, the essence of the Jesus narrative, the Passover mystery, a deeper more meaningful experience of God, the immensity and power of Gods' love, the energy and sustenance of the Eucharist, and the healing power of silence experienced during the Taize retreat. The group felt challenged to respond to these aspects and to make the *monastic way* part of the leaven of the Gospel in modern day non-monastic communities. A decision was made to go back home and be symbols that show a way to Gods' love and the Gospel within their consumer-ridden and materialistic societies and church communities. A simple prayer by Br. Roger given out in thirteen languages during the retreat, invited retreatants pondering this challenge to pray: "Jesus our Hope, make of us the humble of the Gospel. Our deepest desire is to understand that in us the best is built up through a quite simple trusting, and even a child can achieve it."

3.7 A Monastic Way of Life after Retreat

The research journey identified a need amongst retreatants or pilgrims for further guidance after or between retreats especially to practice the presence of God and a life of prayer when returning back home to the *market place* or rat race syndrome. Retreatants who experienced the presence of God in a deep meaningful and profound way discovering and experiencing silence, solitude, contemplation and Divine Office, indicated

the need to grow further into monastic spirituality making it a way of life. There is a need for guidelines how to apply this way of retreat in everyday life. The research journey show that such a rule or practical framework would be an asset or tool to live the monastic way. I did manage to formulate many years ago whilst on a private retreat a code of conduct for my life containing for example certain values, a mission for life called “My utmost for the Most High.” This document (“Rule”) provided some sort of guidance for the walk with God since then. This is still very different from the monastic rules that were formed over the years that had great impact on the lives of people. Without a way the pilgrimage through life could become too non-directional, not focused enough on God, the Ultimate Mystery and source of Life. A spiritual rule or way of life could function as an ark of human and eternal values bring people safe to land on the stormy seas of modernity.

The Gospel lived out within a monastic context, spirituality or mindset was identified as a real need amongst the Dutch Reformed and other traditions retreatants interviewed and surveyed. What such a Rule could consist of or its detail-development and implementation within the Dutch Reformed tradition, is something that could merit further research. The research narrative shows the relevance of the monastic way of life in monastic traditions for Christians within the Dutch Reformed tradition:

- The Gospel challenges people to a disciplined commitment in many different ways. The way of retreat as setting aside, quality and quantity time and entering the island situation of the *desert* (quiet secluded place) whether in the form of a monastery, retreat centre, cathedral, and nature drew many retreatants closer to God becoming more open to his presence and voice. The research shows that many retreatants, including the researcher, became aware of their own depths and the touch of God and promptings of the Holy Spirit during retreat. Some

experienced healing, regeneration, for others it was a life-changing experience and for others a recommitment to God or the Gospel and a decision to live more consciously in the presence of God as experienced during retreat when returning home. The challenge and vocation and the moving deeper into God; experienced via silence, solitude, prayer of the heart etc. brought many to the point of a decision to respond by making this type of experience also a way of life. The challenge for retreatants is how to translate the *burning bush* experiences and new vision into sustainable courageous action.

- One of the basic responses of believers during a regeneration or recommitment phase for example after retreat is to embrace the Gospel or Gospel values as one's *rule of life*. St. Francis's did not want to follow the prevalent monastic patterns of that era, but simply to follow the Gospel. His first rule was the linking together of Gospel-texts which were to guide the lives of the friars in a disciplined and charismatic way. Later on because of the growing popularity of this way of life, the Third order or Tertiary order of Franciscans was formed and received canonical status in the year twelve hundred and twenty one in Florence. For the purpose a rule of life was provided which are followed today by many Christians all over the world consisting of men and women, married and single living out the Franciscan life outside monasteries. The society of St. Francis is a body of Christians within the Anglican tradition who seek to live out the Gospel of Christ in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. The rule provides a framework and disciplines enabling Christians to focus on humility, love, and joy as well as the disciplines of prayer, study, and work. Aspirants to this Tertiary Order, if accepted, would undergo a postulancy of at least six months, keeping an experimental rule before being admitted to the noviciate. The noviciate lasts two years and leads to profession at which Tertiaries commit themselves to Christ within the order with

lifelong intention (see Ramon 1987:175-178). The Spiritual Director or counsellor gives guidance in this process also assisting in drawing up a personal rule of life that gives expression within their own specific circumstances. Prominent in such a rule of life will be ways of service – prayer, study and work and the values of poverty (simplicity), chastity and obedience adapted for a life in the world outside a monastery and directing the follower towards the Franciscan principles of humility, love and joy. All postulants and novices meet quarterly under the care of a novice counsellor and to have spiritual fellowship and development reflected in the rule. Members of the Third Order will pledge to keep the rule for one year that can be renewed annually at a Tertiary gathering. Conversations with members of the third order, show enough flexibility and adaptability in the way the rule is lived out in practice and a dynamic sense of change and movement within the stability of rule and renewal.

- In the Benedictine tradition, although not on such a worldwide scale or organized way like the Franciscans, many Christians are also following the basic principles of The Rule of St. Benedict. Writers and scholars like Esther de Waal (1984) and Joan Chittester (1980) have written about, interpreting and applying the rule. It provides guidance on how to make the monastic rule or way of life practical in everyday life outside monasteries. The Anglican cloister, Order of the Holy Paraclete, welcomes retreatants at Rosettenville and give direction to those who want to be affiliated as associates or tertiaries living the Rule in everyday life when returning home after retreat or between retreats. Many refer to it as the *Benedictine Experience* or the attempt to follow the monastic pattern, which St. Benedict established for his community of monks in the sixth century. It continues today to speak to the needs of men and women who are trying to live out their Christian life in the modern world. Some of the retreatants I met at the

Benedictine monastery of La Pierre Quiévre echoed the words of de Waal (1989:13) who says:

The Rule is like a tapestry or to use another analogy, like some spring source to which it is possible to return time and again, that I come back to it, making fresh demands on it, asking new questions of it, and finding that at each stage of my life and with each new step forward St Benedict points me onward and illuminates the way to God.

Many retreatants during the research project view the Rule of Benedict as a guide, a mentor, and inspiration on their spiritual journey. I personally found inspiration and practical guidance from the rule over the years in the process of growing into wholeness and finding more balance in every aspect of my being; body, mind and spirit. The Rule of Benedict is ancient wisdom and yet it is new, as new as the Gospel, for it is towards Christ himself that St Benedict continually points. Families and individuals outside monasteries discovered wisdom and practical insights from the Rule. It deals with questions on personal relationships, authority and freedom; it recognizes the need for stability and the need for change; establishes a pattern for a balanced life; shows a huge sense of respect and reverence for people and material things; listening, hospitality, holy leisure, giftedness, work, community, *lectio divina*, prayer, obedience and the attitude towards material possessions are dealt with in a practical way. Esther de Waal's book *Seeking God, the Way of St Benedict* (1996) has provided many Christians over the years a practical interpretation and application of the Rule as a way of life.

- The Rule of Taizé or *The Sources of Taizé* instructs the brothers of the community and invites all others living outside the community or

monastery to live in the spirit of the beatitudes for example in joy, mercy and simplicity. Pilgrims who have visited Taizé for retreat can receive a monthly newsletter as well as the yearly scripture readings and prayer letter. The yearly letter translated in more than sixty languages is available to be meditated on throughout the year at the meetings at Taizé, other meetings in other parts of the world and individually by pilgrims at home. The sources of Taizé and the yearly letter provide a framework for a way of life that strives for joy by self-giving and suffering with others, for mercy or compassionate love that leads to forgiveness, for reconciliation and the absence of petty disagreements and dislikes and finally for a life of simplicity which allows one to flee from the devious paths of the world that can be very tempting (see Hicks 1992:209-212). Prayer is an essential part of this way of life as a re-centring of the person and of its action in respect to its image, a re-situating of all actions in the context of loving God and neighbour. Prayer at Taize is viewed as the only refuge through which human rebellion, bitterness, and hardness can become soft again and a necessity that compliments other aspects of a whole life. Although many of the thousands of young people who have visited Taize over the years have attempted to form a Taize movement, but the brothers of the community emphasizes that they feel pilgrims ought to become part of and involved in and improving local church communities. The rule of Taize emphasizes that its community is firmly rooted within the worldwide body of Christ (Schutz 1952:11). The Taizé experience as a way of life is stimulated and supported by the worldwide *Pilgrimage of Trust*, which was launched in nineteen seventy four at a worldwide council of youth meeting. The idea was to encourage retreatants after their pilgrimage to Taizé to become peacemakers, bearers of reconciliation in the Church and of trust on earth, by becoming involved in their own neighbourhoods, towns and villages, and in their parishes (see Schutz 2000:85). At the end of every year, Taizé prepares a five-

day *European Meeting* which brings together up to one hundred thousand young people (who has been to Taize once or more) in one of the mayor cities of Eastern or Western Europe. Similar meetings have been held in Madras, India. Manila, Phillipines and in Johannesburg. The liturgy of Taize has been applied (not copied) in many churches worldwide and in South Africa. The *Adoramus* Wednesday evening services at Lynnwood Dutch Reformed church and *Magnificat* once a month Sunday evening service at Florandia and Murray Dutch Reformed churches are examples of how the music, atmosphere and prayers experienced at Taize become a way of worship for many in the researcher's own church tradition. The ecumenical focus and emphasis on reconciliation in Taize and in the Rule of Taize are being lived out by pilgrims in their communities through prayer and action reaching out to others especially the poorest of the poor. The goal is to make personal life a parable of sharing and reconciliation through concrete acts of mercy and love. The Tsunami disaster in Asia prompted the spiritual leader or abbot of Taize to call upon all pilgrims who have been to Taize to become involved in the healing process through prayers and action.

The data from the research journey show that a way of living out the Gospel in a monastic sense after retreat or between retreats will be helpful as a guidance or framework for Christians in the Dutch Reformed church. When developing such a Rule it will be within the context of each pilgrim's own unique spirituality, needs, environment, and abilities. The following guidelines to assist in this direction could provide a starting point for an individual or a group of Christians wanting to practice Gods' presence more consciously after retreat:

- The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Psalms to provide the basis within the worshipping church, small group, and family (cell) community,
- a spiritual director (spiritual companion) or soul mate that can give guidance or support during the process of drawing up a Rule of life and to whom one will be accountable regarding progress and living the rule,
- the basic framework for the drawing up of the rule may well begin during a retreat (a directed or personal retreat),
- the resolve to have such a rule of life could be linked to a community of believers in a variety of ways for example Taize type of worship services, centring prayer groups, centre of spirituality of South Africa, or any of the monastic orders,
- some Christians may feel drawn to a specific order to become a novice, companion or associate following the Benedictine, Franciscan or Taize rules,
- others may choose to plan and write out their own personal commitment or way of life individually or as 'n group under guidance of a spiritual director or even following the seven habit principles and practical guidelines (Steven Covey 1989), regarding the write of a personal mission statement for personal or family life,
- such plan, statement or rule may then be shared with a spiritual director for input, affirmation, and accountability,
- the commitment could be sealed within a cell group or during a retreat with communion and renewing it annually, and
- regular retreats may provide the atmosphere to expand the rule or to meditate on it.

The following elements could be part of such a Rule of Life:

- Weekly Holy Communion,

- prayer and meditation for example three times a day,
- penitence or self-examination and seeking spiritual direction (confession, guidance),
- lifestyle including work, study, spiritual awareness or monastic mindfulness, diet, works of mercy etc,
- retreat, annually a weekend or three day directed retreat and shorter retreats (directed or non-directed) or a quiet day for reflection once in a while,
- *lectio divina*, group discussions, reading the classical spiritual disciplines and monastic spirituality,
- making simplicity, charity, mercy, hospitality, downshifting or living at a slower pace and less focus on materialistic things core goals,
- practicing Gods' presence continually, being more alert and attentive to his presence even during busy schedules, deadlines or routine- and mundane tasks,
- a sense of accountability or obedience, humility, trust, discipline, humour, responsibility and peace in the living out of the rule and consulting someone on a regular basis for reflection and self-evaluation, and
- a being part of a community of Christians, worshipping with others, participating in meditative or silent type of meetings, and maintaining contact and open communication with those sharing in the monastic way of living.

Further Guidelines from the research are the following:

- A contemplative reading of the bible for example *lectio divina* complementary to bible study and analysis,
- quiet time alone with God in his presence, specific planned periods, just being there, doing nothing but silent alone with the *Alone* in order to hear the language of the Spirit born in silence,

- a spiritual director or counsellor to help distinguish between the voice and vocation of God and many other voices and vocations, someone to confide in, to be accountable to, to be encouraged and directed on the monastic pilgrimage, and
- learning from the spiritual wisdom of other Christians for example the Desert Fathers, St. Benedict, St. Francis, Br. Roger, Francois Fenelon, Blaise Pascal, Madame Guyon, Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Henri Nouwen and many others who in the course of history, have dedicated their lives to the monastic way. They offer by their own lives and wisdom and the lives of their disciples and faithful students, a frame of reference and a point of orientation in an attempt to live an authentic spiritual life of monastic prayer.

The adopting of a rule of life or commitment should not be anything more than explicating, elucidating, and applying Gospel principles in one's personal and communal life. The monastic rule of Taizé, Benedictine, and Franciscan is nothing more than this and did not aim to add to the Gospel or to be kept in a legalistic way. The research narrative showed that a rule of life for Christians in the Dutch Reformed tradition may fill a need for those who wish to live Gods' presence daily in a more disciplined and monastic way. A rule could facilitate a way of life where spontaneity, spiritual discipline, commitment, joy and simplicity are channelled to greater good, adding more value not only to one personally but especially to the lives of others.