Accountability in Discernment:  
Our Life and Death is in Our Neighbour

Introduction

‘Discernment’ is something of a buzz word. Reports of it abound in church circles accompanied by wry smiles: that someone has discerned ‘their’ call to study overseas, to offer new programs in inspiring locations. It has even become a lunchtime joke: ‘Have you discerned your sandwich options?’ While Christian tradition is clear that all of these choices, from diet to institutional investment to individual vocation, are indeed matters for discernment, applying the buzz word rightly is no laughing matter. Against a wide-spread assumption that discernment is an individual concern into which the Christian community should not intrude or even enquire too closely, the monastic tradition points to an accompanying vocabulary of other terms. Ancient catch-cries from the Christian tradition link ‘discernment’ powerfully to ‘humility’, ‘obedience’, ‘accountability’, and ‘the infinite horizon of God’s Reign’. Woven together these qualities and attitudes give a rich texture to the patterns of faithful discernment. These less marketable but deeply resonant terms offer checks and balances to the tendency to see discernment as a personal matter for an individual and God. Authentic discernment is a spiritual gift and fruit of humility, made possible by a loving community.

This article explores the monastic understanding of discernment and the role of accountability in ensuring good decisions. It identifies two paradoxes. Firstly, while individuals who seek God are called to ask above all ‘Who am I?’, they never discover their true selves alone, as self-authorising mavericks, but always in community and in the neighbour. Truthfully answering to who they are before God entails being open to the scrutiny of the collective tradition of scripture, the earlier teachers, and the elders. Paradoxically, the ‘radical self-honesty’ of the tradition is best guaranteed by accountability to wise structures beyond the self. Secondly, the wise judgement of the collective is ‘do not judge’. While the laser beam of good discernment cuts through the most carefully prepared delusion and names reality faithfully, the wise elders never condemn the sinner or present the individual with a judging God. Instead, steeped in humility and compunction for their own sins and weaknesses they invite the individual to move to new understanding, to move ‘towards God’. The uncompromising vision of the desert shows that good discernment occurs in humble accountability and through wise love.

The discussion that follows falls into three main sections: it draws on John Cassian’s account of the Egyptian teachers of the second and third centuries to establish a working definition of ‘discernment’, before considering the practices and processes the early monks used in order to become more discerning. The discussion then moves to look more closely at four brief case-studies of monastic discernment from the early tradition in which the dynamics of tension between the individual and collective authority, and between the judgement and compassion of discernment, were played out.
1. Discretion defined, as implying accountability outside the self

When the fourth century spiritual writer John Cassian offers his readers a definition of ‘discretion’ in *Conference 2* and the last sections of *Conference 1*, his medium is also his message. As in all the Conferences, the network of speakers and their interwoven heritage of discipleship makes it clear that spiritual wisdom, and therefore authority, is collective, not autonomous. Cassian’s teaching about the capacity to make good spiritual choices is not presented as original, but is itself part of a long tradition of discernment: Cassian writes in the voice of Abba Moses, Moses refers the questioners to earlier discussions in the desert, especially the teaching of Abba Antony, and Antony himself draws on Scripture, ‘thus implying that his view is not his own but comes from the source of all wisdom’. The process of identifying the working definition involves a collective experience of listening; the Conference is an occasion in which both the speakers and hearers mutually acknowledge the wisdom of Scripture and the tradition of the elders.

Accountability is at the core of decision-making in the Conferences. Like the monks who gathered with Antony to talk about perfection, Cassian and Germanus do not aim to innovate but to grasp and then defer to deeper understanding from the tradition. The tradition in and beyond the desert values the virtue of discretion as essential to holiness because it keeps a monk accountable, and prevents self-confident excess on the one hand and self-seeking excuses on the other. In response to suggestions that expertise in fasting and long prayer, or commitment to hospitality are the indicators of holiness, Antony points instead beyond particular practices to the deeper virtue of discretion, and further points out that it is learnt from the elders.

For although the works of the aforesaid virtues abounded in them, the lack of discretion by itself did not permit those works to endure to the end. Nor can another reason be found for their fall, except that they were less well-instructed by the elders and were utterly unable to grasp the meaning of discretion which avoids excess of any kind and teaches the monk to proceed along the royal road [of balance].

The good judgement of the truly holy monks is like the healthy light of the eye ‘that sees and casts light on all a person’s thoughts and actions and discerns everything that must be done’. Discretion illuminates and refracts all practices, and implies the same actions might have different spiritual value or meaning depending on how healthy or deluded the ‘light of the eye’ or the internal motivations of a monk might be.

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3 *Conference* 2.2.4-5
4 *Conference* 2.2.5.
5 *Conference* 2.2.5.
Antony refers explicitly to ‘the words of the Saviour’ in Scripture for his definition of discretion as the ‘eye and light of the body’ that enables clear vision and right judgement. This is an intriguing metaphor that suggests a strongly personal and interior focus for discretion (especially in view of ancient understandings of eyesight as a kind of built-in torch) and also connects with concerns about bodily health, the reality of often inexplicable disease, and the expectation that monks will safeguard and maintain ‘wholeness’ as best they can. Abba Moses has already noted that ‘the gift of discretion is no earthly or paltry matter but a very great bestowal of divine grace [to be sought] with utter attentiveness’, now Antony goes on to underline the value of the healthy internal eye and the dangers of spiritual sickness when discretion is hit by disease.

But if this discretion/eye is evil in a person – that is, if it has not been fortified by the true judgement and knowledge, or has been deceived by some error and presumption – it makes our whole body darkness that is, obscures all the clarity of our mind and also our actions wrapping them in the blindness of vice and the darkness of confusion... No one doubts that when the judgement of our heart goes astray and is seized by the night of ignorance, our thoughts and our deeds, which proceed from the deliberation of discretion, are involved in the greater darkness of sin.

Merely being discerned by someone is no guarantee that a spiritual choice is healthy. The Second Conference offers stunning examples from the Old Testament of worldly rulers making apparently saner or more merciful choices than those the prophets of God directed, only to be rebuked and punished for diseased mixed motives and directly ignoring God. The complex task of discernment, of training the inner eye of the soul, is made possible by paying attention to the external realities of who God is, including no doubt the inexplicability of God, and setting all the choices against the eschatological horizon of the kingdom of God that orients all Christian life. Both Cassian’s Conferences, on the inner life of monks and his Institutes, focussed on external disciplines, agree that the end of [monastic life]... is the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven. The central quality monks need to reach the kingdom is ‘purity of heart’, which he also names as ‘love of goodness itself’. All other spiritual disciplines and virtues are tools for attaining purity of heart, and Cassian warns against letting them dominate as ends in themselves. Discretion is the tool to be honed so as to evaluate all the rest. Its laser beam is focussed by the powerful

6 Conference 2.2.5, citing Mt 6:22.
7 Euclid’s Optics and Plato’s Timaeus both held that eyes emitted ‘rays’ of vision. See David Parker, The fire within the eye: a historical essay on the nature and meaning of light, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
8 Conference 2.1.4
9 Conference 2.2.6
10 Conference, 2.3.1-2
11 Conference 1.4.3.
12 Conference 1.4.3.
13 Institutes 4.39, 4.43.
lens of humility, concentrating attention outside the self and ensuring the monk is open to the direction of the tradition and the genuine promptings of the Spirit.

2. Learning discretion through humble accountability

If something can be taught, or if a capacity responds to training and discipline, it follows that it is not simply innate. While some early strands of the monastic tradition imply that discernment is a particular gift given only to some, after Athanasius’s *Life of Antony* and with the focus on inner dynamics promoted by Evagrius and then Cassian, discernment ‘gradually ceases to be treated as an exceptional gift or charisma and is treated as a virtue, even a necessary virtue’. Discretion might be like breathing as much as like sight; we breathe, and see, all the time, but by learning to be aware and focused we can learn to breathe more deeply, or see with a fuller field of vision, and with better effect. If discretion can be honed so that a monk’s capacity to faithfully ‘choose the good’ improves, it follows that without honing the decisions might not be so faithful.

John Cassian was concerned above all to establish that asceticism was a style of education, the equivalent of classical training in rhetoric or other professions. As Conrad Leyser’s study of the monastic teacher in the context of other ‘later Latin fathers’ shows, for Cassian the steps that would lead to ‘purity of heart’ could be taught as a ‘great moral science’ with its own authoritative tradition and apostolic succession. [A]scetics could not simply improvise their lives as they pleased. Spiritual discipline was an acquired technique, and Cassian named the places where it was best learned – Egypt and Syria, deriving in turn from the apostolic community of Christians at Jerusalem. Suspicious of the miracle-working monasticism of Martin of Tours and dismayed by the ‘Empire-branch’ clericalism flowing too easily from Lérin, Cassian called for his contemporaries to re-learn the desert’s strategies for holiness. His writings implied an evaluation of the spiritual practices around him, ‘exercising restraint on his intemperate peers; at the same time... to instil a decorous enthusiasm among them, that they might, after all, continue the Great Tradition.’ In this tradition, authorities were clear that the process of formation had external strategies and identifiable reference points that were signs of spiritual progress.

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15 Joseph Lienhard, ‘On “Discernment of Spirits” in the Early Church,’ *Theological Studies*, 41 (1980), 505-529 shows that it was a specialised gift in Corinth according to some, and confined to clergy for others, and outcome of advanced asceticism for still others.
16 Ibid., 528.
18 Ibid., 44.
19 Ibid., 58.
Pressed in the Second Conference to be clear about how discretion is learnt, Abba Moses says simply: ‘True discretion is not obtained except by true humility. The first proof of this humility will be if not only everything done but also everything that is thought of is offered to the inspection of the elders.’20 The most fundamental and fool-proof strategy for healthy spiritual choices was the expectation that the monk would submit his thoughts as well as his actions to the scrutiny of a trusted elder.

No matter how inexperienced and ignorant the young man, the cunning enemy cannot deceive him and has no means to lead him astray if [the novice] trusts in the discernment of the elders and will not be persuaded to conceal from the elder the suggestions which [the enemy] has introduced like fiery darts into his heart.21

There is room for manoeuvre here in that some elders are wiser than others, and sometimes ‘the clever enemy offers their grey hairs as a specious authority’,22 so that selecting an elder also involves discernment. Cassian himself has felt free to seek out the ‘wisest’ and most experienced counsel,23 but the emphasis on self-disclosure to an elder once wisely-chosen becomes a hallmark of humility and a sign of openness to grace.24 As Abba Moses observes, ‘no other vice does the devil draw and lead a monk to so sudden a death as when he persuades him to neglect the counsels of the elders and to trust in his own judgement and his own understanding,’25 and ‘whoever lives not by his own judgement but by the example of our forebears shall never be deceived’.26 Michael Casey summarises four qualities of spiritual progress that emerge in Cassian’s various treatments in the Conferences and in the Institutes as a journey overall from ‘fear to love’.

In a movement towards greater trust in God and clarity of vision about his own life, the monk moves firstly, to being open to direction, ready to trust the guidance of an elder, to be self-revealing and to relinquish self-will; then secondly, to being meek in the sense of having ‘strength under control’, implying obedience, patience, non-violence and not needing to endorse the self with gossip or alliances; thirdly, having a low profile and being easily content without personal attention or preferences; and finally, the monk making progress is quiet, serene, and restrained in speech.27 This ‘diagnostic tool’ is not calibrated to measure the monk’s merging into the elder, or even into a kind of selflessness, but rather to assess the ‘growing from

20 Conference, 2.10.1
22 Conference 2.13.3.
23 For Conference 17, where John and Germanus prefer the advice of the Egyptian monks over the Palestinian community they had left.
24 The emphasis on attending to movements of the Spirit from desolation to consolation in Ignatian traditions can sound more individual but it also involves ‘almost scrupulous’ attention usually with a director to whether the movement is of God. See William Barry, ‘Toward a Theology of Discernment,’ The Way Supplement, 64 (1989),129.
25 Conference 2.9.7.
26 Conference 2.10.2.
within toward likeness to Christ’. 28 From that place of freedom within, faithful decisions can be made and willingly offered for scrutiny.

That humility and openness to direction is the key to good spiritual judgement and progress becomes even clearer by teasing out the strange example Abba Moses gives of monks caught in excessive vigils and fasting who cannot reform. He remarks almost in passing that

excessive abstinence trips up a person more disastrously than does excessive satiety. From the latter one can mount to the proper measure of strictness with the help of a salutary compunction, but in the case of the former, no such thing is possible. 29

Puzzling about why in this case a cure for the spiritual ill is impossible, Kenneth Russell rejects the traditional answer that lacking discretion to take enough food they lacked sufficient energy. The problem with discretion is more fundamental than that, and Russell argues that these monks cannot reform because they have vaingloriously separated themselves from the practical wisdom of the desert traditions. They have assumed themselves to be unaccountable.

A solitary who goes his own way separates himself from the society of his fellows, past and present, and rejects the insights they have accumulated. He gives more weight to his personal idea of how asceticism should be lived than he does to the wisdom of those who have actually lived it. 30

While monks who overindulged could not fail to know that they were falling short and needed to improve, the overly zealous ran the risk of just congratulating themselves on their apparent virtue. They could ignore their faulty understanding of balance between body and spirit that the desert spirituality aimed so carefully to safeguard. The elders would have told them not to make relative things absolute, not to lose site of the wider horizon of purity of heart and the Kingdom, but vainglory blocked their way to the tradition and discretion.

[T]hey lacked the humility which would have made it possible for them to learn from the example of others. Without this readiness to see themselves as units in a larger social structure in which wisdom has accumulated, they could not acquire discretion. 31

The example brings home the paradoxical truth that however solitary the monastic discipline was, there was always a community of tradition and authority to which the monk needed to be answerable. Rowan Williams sums up the interconnectedness that was essential to the spiritual decision-making of Cassian’s early monks by pointing to Antony’s own conviction that: ‘Our life and death is with our neighbour.’ 32 The pithy saying goes on to make clear that the faithful solitaries were not above or outside their neighbours, they were as committed to them as they were to Christ: ‘If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if

28 Ibid., 195.
29 Conferences 2.17.2
we scandalise our brother, we have sinned against Christ.33 In the tough environment of the desert not only physical well-being, but also spiritual health and salvation depended on the respectful attention to the other.

3. Case studies of the dynamics of accountability in discernment

In the monastic tradition of decision-making then, there was a call to awareness of the inner-dynamics of behaviour, not just to outward signs; and an awareness of what outward behaviour revealed of the inner-dynamics. In being accountable to God and the wider community of faithful Christians for the decisions they made, monastics were taught first to know their own reality as sinners. Their humility was central to the openness to the wisdom of the Scriptures and others that would enable their growth in holiness, prevent death-dealing self-satisfaction, or despair. In a tradition with such an emphasis on scrutiny by others and so many examples of monks mislead and going mad, it is striking that the tone of the tradition is so respectful of others’ failings. Monks are to know themselves as sinners, and then, perhaps surprisingly, ‘not judge’.

Humility demands the honest response of a fellow-sinner. However, the judgement not to condemn does not amount to lack of awareness of the problems, to paying less attention and leaving the other stuck in sin. The humility that enables discretion and leads to good judgement has its natural conclusion in concern for the neighbour and commitment to offer a way forward ‘towards God’. In this final section, this essay will explore four brief examples of monastic dissent: two might be considered faithful and (by definition) open to accountability; and two are examples where there is a need to change, and a call to accountability from monastic authority.

The story of Scholastica’s last meeting with Benedict is one example of monastic discernment apparently flying in the face of abbatial authority, but being vindicated by the wider horizon of obedience to God. Introduced by Gregory in his Life of Benedict as an example of ‘one thing which the venerable father Benedict would have liked to do, but... could not’,34 the occasion was the annual meeting of the saintly twins, just outside Benedict’s monastery. After a day of holy conversation and a shared meal, Benedict indicated that the visit was over and it was time for him to return to the cloister. But Scholastica ‘entreated him to stay’35; when Benedict refused, she bowed her head to pray, and ‘poured forth such a flood of tears on the table, that she transformed the clear air to a watery sky’36. The sudden storm, ‘a tempest of lightning and thundering’,37 made it impossible for the abbot to leave. Benedict ‘began to be heavy and to complain’, implying his sister had somehow defied God and needed forgiveness.

33 Ibid.
34 Gregory the Great, Life of Benedict, ch 33.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
But Scholastica’s response claimed God’s authority as support for her actions, pitting her discernment of the Gospel choice against the abbot’s. She told her brother that whereas he, Benedict the abbot, ‘would not hear’ her, God had been listening. God had made it impossible for Benedict to keep the letter of his Rule, and compelled him to remain in conversation. Given no choice by the storm, but presumably acquiescing with good grace, the abbot let go of any stubborn legalism, and remained so that ‘they watched all night and with spiritual and heavenly talk mutually comforted one another.’ Significantly in summing up for his readers, Gregory made it clear that Scholastica’s request had been made out of love, not on a whim or from self-interest. Preceding her death in the next chapter, the miraculous answer to her prayers was because her awareness of God was greater on this occasion than her brother’s, and her concern for love outranked his concern for the Rule.

She realized, according to the saying of St John, ‘God is charity’ [1 John 4: 8]. Therefore, as is right, she who loved more, did more. Scholastica’s challenge to Benedict’s authority was supported by Scripture, endorsed by the heavenly storm, and vindicated not only by the eventual compliance of the abbot, but also by the community of conversation and movement ‘towards God’ that resulted.

Gregory’s legend of faithful dissent resonates with the examples of authority grounded in discipleship, and it is the same understanding of discipleship as the sole basis for authority, that pervades the letters of the ‘Old Men of Gaza’ Barsanuphius and John. Among many instances in which these monastic directors insist that authentic discernment comes only through obedience to the proper channels of spiritual authority, Jennifer Hevelone-Harper points to the letters to ‘John of Beersheba’ as particularly important. She speculates persuasively that these letters show Barsanuphius mentoring John himself from being a rebellious newcomer who struggled particularly against the abbot, Seridos, toward being ‘John the Prophet’, the trusted associate and a mature spiritual leader who ‘having challenged authority himself...could guide others to submission’. At each step on the way of this ‘system of authority under construction’ Barsanuphius balanced John’s previous experience in monasticism with the non-negotiable reality that spiritual authority could never be self-declared. He was particularly anxious (or scathing) when John presumed to give spiritual advice without permission, and told him roundly that he did not have the capacity to discern on behalf of another: ‘I often tell you ‘Let the dead bury their dead’ but you are not even disgusted by their foul smell.’ The danger of unguarded, undisciplined speech was a constant threat.

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
Barsanuphius urged his disciple: ‘When you see yourself almost theologising, remember that silence is more admirable and more glorious than that’.46 He asked in some frustration how John could expect to make spiritual progress if he ignored advice and persisted in rebellious talk: ‘Where did you cast my words spoken to you day and night? ...Where do I want you to be, and where are you on account of your uncontrolled tongue which you release at random?’.47 Importantly, John apologised for his presumption and emerged in the letters as keen to heed the advice Barsanuphius offered, and obedient to his instruction. Gradually Barsanuphius expanded John’s authority. The final letter in the series endorsed John’s status as ‘abba’, as it acknowledged John’s capacity, and willingness, to read Barsanuphius’s own thoughts (or that he ‘questioned this thought with the same Great Old Man’) when in doubt.48

The movement of John of Beersheba from self-referencing resistance to the co-operative and consistently humble leadership he exercised as John the Prophet, is in contrast to other examples in which other real monks avoided the discipline that might have made for growth and the capacity for authentic discernment. Hevelone-Harper points to a ‘difficult deacon’ with characteristics similar to the early John: he is opposed to the authority structure of the monastery, and suspicious of Seridos the abbot. Barsanuphius accommodated his weaknesses up to a point, arranging, for example, that Seridos would read a letter of advice aloud so that Barsanuphius could hear at the same time as the ‘difficult deacon’ who would then be assured the advice was authentic. It was a limited arrangement to ‘either convict or shame him, delivering him from his stubbornness’,49 but the letters show on-going difficulties rather than the change of heart Barsanuphius hoped for. In contrast to John of Beersheba, this disciple continued to ignore his need for spiritual authority, and presumed unwisely to teach others. Barsanuphius and John attributed the deacon’s unwillingness to be accountable to spiritual authority directly to the temptation of demons, and warned him ‘Pay attention to how they [the demons] offer you the right to teach, in order that you may receive the reprimand of the Apostle, who says: “You then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself?”’.50 It was not just foolhardy to take on a disciple, but dangerous for the spiritual well-being of both parties. Again and again the letters made clear that genuine accountability to the elders was the foundation for spiritual authority. Like the laymen who worried the community at Gaza by taking on the external practices of a monastic life without committing themselves to the obedience and accountability that would guarantee its holiness, risking scandal and confusion, the deacon lacked humility and discretion.51 As he took on the unwarranted role of teacher, Barsanuphius put it to him: ‘How can one who does not construct his own cell, construct that of another person?’52 The letters show the elders’ concern for the ‘stuck’ deacon, and their

46 Barsanuphius and John, letter 36, 53.
47 Barsanuphius and John, letter 48, 62.
48 Barsanuphius and John, letter 54, 67.
50 Barsanuphius and John, letter 233, 237.
51 Hevelone-Harper, Disciples of the Desert, 78, 101
52 Barsanuphius and John, letter 233, 237.
conviction that resistance to the authority of tradition was sinful, perhaps most precisely because it denied the deacon freedom to grow.

The final example is one of sinful resistance and failed monastic decision-making from the Sayings attributed to Abba Poeman. The complex story began with a sin. An abbot went to consult a hermit about a sinful brother and was advised to expel him. The brother was expelled and despairing, but, hearing about him from others, Abba Poeman sent for him. The monk went and was received with hospitality and love. Poeman then sent for the hermit who had advised the expulsion, who also came to visit. As they engaged in conversation together Poeman praised him for leaving his cell and the good work he was doing to come and assist Poeman. Prompted to remember the times he had not gone out of his way, but on the contrary had been stuck in his cell, the hermit praised Poeman for his superior insight. The punch line presents the riddle of discernment without judgement:

Abba Poeman said to him: ‘Two men dwelt in one place and someone belonging to each of them died; the first one, leaving his own dead, went to weep over the other’s.’ Hearing these words, the anchorite was filled with compunction and he remembered what he had done and said, ‘Poeman, you have gone up to heaven and I have gone down to the earth.’

In an article that takes as central the commitment to neighbour among the desert monks, and their conviction that judgement is for God only, Andrew Hamilton reads this story of accountability in light of its allusions to the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. He reports that when he puts this story to students they regularly conclude that Poeman first reproaches the hermit, who then sees his fault. But Hamilton suggests that the conversion parables in Scripture provide the pattern in which staying put, or on the same road, is less of God than being willing to move. He points out that those who do best in this Saying are those who first move and invite others to move too: the abbot for consulting the hermit, the monk for finally getting out of the cave, Poeman for receiving him, the hermit for responding to Poeman and Poeman for the praise that complements the hermit, and has the pastoral consequence that the hermit remembers his earlier ‘staying in place’ and is moved to compunction for not going out to the sinful monk. Accountability and the need for good judgement pervade the encounters, and as a result Poeman is focussed on taking his neighbours on a journey forward to God.

[Poeman’s] strategy is to encourage the monk and the hermit to move, to go out of the place in which they have become locked, and so to be in the position to be drawn again by God to a better way of living. He makes room for them to move from a place in which by judging and being judged they had ...separated from the winning God. Returning to God and to the reality of their own lives, they are freed.

Poeman’s absence of judgement freed them, offering new life to the neighbours.

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53 Poeman 6, in Sayings, 166.
Conclusion: Waging Care and Cure

The care and the cure that Poeman exercised, that Barsanuphius and John insisted upon, and that Scholastica demonstrated for Benedict, typify the monastic tradition of discernment, and the humility and accountability that are its guarantors. In the Latin of Benedict’s Rule, both the care for the individual against the infinite horizon of the Reign of God, and the cure of spiritual ills that threatened the soul and the collective of its neighbours are implied together in the one word ‘cura’. This ‘cura’ was to be waged (‘gerere’) by the spiritual elders as battle was waged. To ‘wage care and cure’ in the cause of discernment is a fundamental task of spiritual authority in the Rule of Benedict and the tradition Benedict reflected. Discernment was part of the loving service of authority, shaped by the understanding that ‘life and death’ in God was irrevocably connected with the neighbour, making each monk accountable to and for the neighbour before God. Trained by the elders, the monks learnt a practice of humble self-awareness in the context of a community and tradition that told them clearly who they were and loved them ‘towards God’ in the midst of the reality of human weakness. The community, implied or actual was all around. ‘The good of all concerned,’ Benedict summed up in the prologue to his Rule, required honing the capacity to ‘choose the good’ in Antony’s definition, to ‘amend faults and safeguard love’ so as to increase the capacity of all to ‘run on the path of Gods commands’. Polished to a fine edge by the Scriptures, discernment was a tool with which they chiselled away all that was not of God in their lives. No sophisticated buzz-word for ‘choice’, discernment was part of a battle ‘towards God’ for whom they would risk everything.

Works Cited

Primary Sources


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