

STRUCTURES IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Austin G. Murphy, O.S.B.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the spiritual-but-not-religious view has become widespread in the religious landscape in the United States. We find the view among the often-mentioned “Nones,” given that many of them think it important to have spiritual values even while they belong to no religious system.¹ The spiritual-but-not-religious view is also found in Christians who profess faith in Jesus but disavow belonging to any religion with its rules and other structures. This is seen, for example, in the title of the viral YouTube video, “Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus.”² I would describe the spiritual-but-not-religious outlook, whether in its non-Christian or Christian form, as being wary of structures in the spiritual life. This view therefore challenges us to answer the question, “What value, if any, do structures have in the spiritual life?”

In fact, we can see this challenge coming from the wider culture and not only from persons who identify as spiritual but not religious. Our culture tends to look at structures with suspicion and the spiritual-but-not-religious outlook is simply a recent instance of this in the area of religion. One source of the suspicion is the cultural upheaval of the 1960s that rejected many old structures as outdated and confining. Also, many in the Catholic Church who lived before the Second Vatican Council testify to an overreliance on structures in the Church during that period and the memory of this has understandably caused a wariness toward religious structures to the present day. More will be said about these instances below, but the simple point to be made now is that within our culture many people—sometimes for understandable reasons—view structures negatively. This makes it even more important to answer the question, “What value do structures have in the spiritual life?” By answering it positively we

Austin G. Murphy, O.S.B., is the Abbot of St. Procopius Abbey in Lisle, Illinois. He holds a doctorate in Theology from the University of Notre Dame, having specialized in Patristics.

¹ See Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, “More Americans Now Say They’re Spiritual But Not Religious,” on the Pew Research Center website (September 6, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

² <https://christianembassy.ca/project/hate-religion-love-jesus/>.

can offer a counterbalance to the culture's predominantly negative view of structures. Also, in answering the question we can formulate an understanding of structures that helps in employing them rightly. This article, therefore, tries to explain the value of structures in the spiritual life. It argues that, while structures are certainly not the end-all of the spiritual life, and while there are dangers to be avoided when observing them, still they are a practical necessity for sustained spiritual growth. This is because they provide indispensable support for cultivating authentic virtues.

To make this argument, the article draws especially, although not exclusively, on monastic teachings. After defining how the term "structure" is being used here, the article explores the monastic teaching of St. John Cassian alongside the non-monastic, patristic teaching of Clement of Alexandria.³ After that, the article turns to the 1969 document *Renew and Create*, published by the American-Cassinese Congregation of Benedictine Monasteries, since this document helps us to formulate a correct way of viewing the value of structures. Finally, the article identifies two dangers to avoid when following structures and four ways in which structures foster spiritual growth by cultivating the virtues.

HOW THE TERM "STRUCTURE" IS BEING USED

When we talk of structures, we are entering into the broader and perennial discussion of externals in the spiritual life. Like the topic of structures, the topic of externals can be controversial, for if one were to offer an appreciative view of externals in the spiritual life, one is likely to be met with questions such as, "Is not true spirituality an interior matter?" "Were not the Pharisees guilty of focusing on externals, while neglecting what is within?" and, "Does not God look at the heart of a person, while humans often err because they judge by external appearances?" To answer such questions about externals in the spiritual life, one needs to look more closely at what is meant by the term "externals." But here lies a problem: the term "externals" is useful as a general way of speaking, but not as a precise term that can be closely examined. To solve this problem, we may speak of

³ There has been controversy over whether Clement and Cassian are to be called saints. Here I simply follow the latest Roman Martyrology in using the title "Saint" for John Cassian but not for Clement of Alexandria (see *Martyrologium Romanum*, editio altera [Civitate Vaticana: Typis Vaticanis, 2004]; the listing of John Cassian is on p. 407).

structures in place of externals, since structures are a particular kind of externals that can be more closely examined.

Structures as defined here are simply *directives whose observance can be verified by external observation*. Structures are thus observable in two senses. First, they can be observed as directives—that is, as prescribed ways of acting. One can thus observe them in the sense of *keeping* or *following* them. A schedule is an example of this, as is a recipe, for one can follow what a schedule or a recipe says to do. The second way in which structures can be observed is in the sense of *noticing* whether or not one has followed them. Indeed, the definition specifies that this can be noticed “by external observation.” A schedule and a recipe are again examples. With a schedule, one’s actions and when they were done can be externally observed, so as to know whether one followed the schedule. Likewise, one can see such things as whether one used the specified ingredients and their proper amounts, to verify whether a recipe was followed. From this we see how structures are a particular kind of externals. As with all externals they are observable by means of the external senses in that their execution can be observed by such means. But since not all externals are directives, structures are a particular kind of externals.

Moreover, the external character of structures distinguishes them from other directives. Consider the command to forgive those who injure you. This directive is not a structure, because it directs a person to do an interior act whose completion is not always verifiable by external observation. It is possible, that is, to forgive someone without there being an external manifestation of this. Yes, sometimes directives to do internal acts do have outward effects. The directive to love your neighbor, for example, may have the outward effect of donating to a charity. But notice that such outward effects are not infallible signs that interior acts have been done. Hence, instead of stemming from the love of neighbor, the outward act of donating may stem from a vainglorious self-admiration. This means that the directive to exercise charity is not a structure, although donating once a month to a charitable organization is a structure. One can verify the latter by external observation but not the former. To exercise charity is, to be sure, the most important of directives and it often leads to, and even demands, outward actions. But it is not a structure as defined here. This is not to deny that by honest self-examination, and with God’s grace, one can know whether one is exercising charity or other interior acts. Still, one does not know this by external observation. Structures,

on the other hand, can be externally verified. This makes them easier to track and manage and, as a result, what they lose in importance to charity, forgiveness, and other interior acts, they gain in the ability to be managed.

While our definition of structures narrows down the broader category of externals, it still remains broad in scope. This can be seen in the following list of things that count as structures: a trackable action plan, fasting on Fridays during Lent, a food diet, a musical melody, a workout regimen, a spiritual practice such as saying a daily Rosary, a decision-making process (sometimes called a “governance structure”), and a law such as a speed limit or a tax. Within the wide variety of structures, further distinctions can be drawn. For instance, some structures are more flexible than others, such as a melody which permits a variety of interpretations, even as it demands a sequence of notes in relative durations. Another distinction is between structures that are imposed on a group, such as a tax, and those that are privately chosen, such as saying the Divine Mercy Chaplet every Sunday. The former kind can be especially controversial.

Obviously there is no way that this article can address all the issues that can be raised about structures. Rather, the aim is to use the preceding definition of structures to draw general observations about how structures can contribute to the spiritual life. Besides being helpful in their own right, these observations can also contribute to future discussions of those issues about structures that are beyond the scope of the present article.

RENUNCIATION AS A STRUCTURE

We may gain insights into structures from the monastic tradition by considering what it says about renunciation. Notice that monastic renunciation is a set of structures, for it consists of directives to renounce one’s goods and the prospect of marriage and family. This renunciation is not a denunciation, for it does not entail believing that what you forsake is evil. Still, renunciation is necessary as a first step for entering the monastic way of life. Given the importance of renunciation for the monastic vocation, what does the monastic tradition say about this kind of structure? Perhaps surprisingly, the monastic tradition—at least the important strain of that tradition represented by

the teachings of St. John Cassian⁴—says that these structures are not valuable in themselves. Rather, they are only valuable if they help one to overcome vices in the heart. So, on the one hand, the structures of renunciation are necessary, but on the other, they are only valuable if they help one to purify the heart of vices.

Cassian’s teaching builds on the non-monastic teaching of Clement of Alexandria, for it adopts Clement’s teaching that the renunciation of outward things has no intrinsic value. The continuity with Clement is ironic in a couple of ways. For one, when Clement argues against the intrinsic value of giving up external things, he is clearly not advocating monastic renunciation and may even seem to oppose it. Further adding to the irony, Clement builds his argument on a reading of the gospel story of the rich young man (Matt 19:16–30, Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30), a biblical text that has been an inspiration for the monastic life.⁵ But despite the apparent incongruities, Cassian adopts Clement’s teaching, finding in it a crucial element for clarifying the way in which monastic renunciation is spiritually beneficial.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE RICH MAN

Clement (ca. 150–215) was not a monk and he lived decades before the dramatic growth of monastic life that was led by St. Antony of the Desert.⁶ Like Antony, he lived in Egypt, but whereas Antony lived in the remote regions of central Egypt, Clement lived in the north, in the great city of Alexandria at the delta of the Nile River. In keeping with that city’s reputation for learning, Clement was a very learned man who seems to have run a Christian school in Alexandria.

⁴ That Cassian was consciously transmitting the ways and teachings of those that went before him is apparent throughout his *Institutes* and *Conferences*. As Columba Stewart notes, it was his “intention to help monks base their lives on the great traditions of the East” (*Cassian the Monk* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 24). It is commonly recognized, moreover, that Cassian’s synthesis especially represents “Origenist” monasticism, most notably the thought of Evagrius.

⁵ E.g., this gospel text is among the biblical texts that inspire Antony to renounce his property (see Athanasius, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and The Greek Life*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003], 59; the relevant passage is standardly marked as belonging to paragraph 2).

⁶ Antony began his monastic life around the year 270. Around 360, St. Athanasius would write his famous *Life of Antony*, which did much to promote the monastic vocation.

Clement wrote a treatise on the gospel story of the rich young man called *Who is the Rich Man That Can Be Saved?*⁷ The work was not written for monks, but rather for wealthy Christians who were troubled by the gospel story. Recall that, after the rich young man refuses to follow Jesus, Jesus says: “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24). Rich Christians were therefore wondering: Must I become poor in order to be a disciple of Jesus and to enter heaven? Or we may put the question this way: Must everyone be like a monk and renounce all his possessions in order to be a true follower of Christ and enter heaven? Clement indicates that some rich Christians were thinking that the answer is yes, and yet, being unable to part with their possessions, they were despairing of their salvation. Clement writes his work to address this pastoral problem, and he assures his audience that the rich can be saved. He does so by interpreting the story of the rich young man not as an exhortation to give up one’s possessions, but as having a deeper, somewhat hidden meaning about how salvation is attained.

According to Clement, when Jesus tells the rich young man to sell what he has, Jesus is not telling him to give up *earthly* possessions. Rather, he is telling the man to give up another kind of possession, namely, *inward* possessions. In particular, those inward possessions are the vices that he possesses in his heart. For Clement, that is, there are two kinds of possessions: outward possessions, such as money, land, buildings, and other property, and inward possessions, such as the vices that cling detrimentally to our souls. Why does Clement say that Jesus is not calling the rich young man to give up his outward possessions? His reasoning is as follows.⁸ First, he notes that Jesus is instructing the rich young man on how to be perfect. Clement then asks: Giving up which of these two kinds of possessions—outward possessions or inward vices—will bring about perfection? Surely, if you give up outward possessions, that is, earthly goods, you can still be filled with vices and, therefore, you will not be perfect. It would therefore be wrong to think that giving up earthly possessions makes you perfect and we know that Christ cannot be telling the rich young man what is wrong. Instead, Christ wants the rich young man to give up the wealth of vices that he possesses within. Only by *that* renunciation

⁷ For an English translation of this work, I recommend “The Rich Man’s Salvation” in Clement of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks, The Rich Man’s Salvation, To the Newly Baptized*, trans. G.W. Butterworth, Loeb Classical Library 92 (London: William Heinemann, 1919), 265–367, <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL092/1919/volume.xml>.

⁸ See Clement, 299–302.

will he grow in virtue and become perfect. So, according to Clement, Jesus is telling the rich young man to give up the inward possessions of his vices. Moreover, when the gospel subsequently narrates that the rich young man “went away sad, for he had many possessions” (Matt 19:22), it means that he had many vices which he was not willing to give up. The young man was rich in vices and he was not able to renounce those vices.

Practically all Christians today would agree with Clement’s conclusion that a Christian does not need to give up all things, in order to be saved. Still, many would find his interpretation of the story of the rich young man odd. They may even think that his interpretation is a sort of cop-out that robs the story of its challenge. But if one reads Clement’s treatise, one sees that he still challenges the rich to use their outward possessions for the good of others, especially the poor. Also, unless you want to say that all Christians must be like religious, and give up all their possessions, then you are forced to argue something that, in the end, is similar to what Clement says—namely, that what is in our hearts and how we act are more important for salvation than whether or not we own outward possessions.

Nonetheless, I think that Clement’s treatment overlooks something. It does not acknowledge the influence outward things have upon us. Since it was not within the aim of his work to make this point, the omission is understandable. But for our purposes, it is important to note that, while what is in the heart and the actions that flow from the heart are more important for salvation than outward things, still outward things influence us—sometimes for the worse. I offer the following example, which I have experienced when departing the Fiumicino airport in Rome. The traveler who leaves from this airport is forced to walk through a path that winds through boutique shops. Therefore, in order to get to the gate of your departing flight, you have to pass by shops selling jewelry, perfumes, chocolates, alcoholic beverages, clothing, and other things. There are nice smells, elegantly wrapped boxes, and images of beautiful people with beautiful bodies. Now, does anyone think that this path going by all these shops was put there by accident? Did the designers of the airport just forget to make room for such shops and as an afterthought say to themselves, “Oh well, I guess we just have to put all these shops in this passageway that all the departing travelers must go through?” Of course not. The designers of the airport knew that being exposed to all these things creates enticements and temptations. We can say to ourselves, “Well,

they are just outward things.” But being exposed to these outward things puts thoughts within people’s minds and those thoughts stir desires, which prompt actions.⁹ Yes, we still have free will, so that we can reject such promptings, but the exposure to these outward things makes that more challenging to do.

With regard to structures, notice what Clement has done. He has interpreted the story of the rich young man in such a way that the renunciation which Jesus counsels is no longer a structure. For Clement, Jesus’ call to renunciation is not a directive to give up outward possessions, but a directive to do the interior work of eradicating vices in the heart. The observance of this directive cannot be verified by external observation and, therefore, it is not a structure.

ST. JOHN CASSIAN’S TEACHING ON RENUNCIATION

Whereas Clement was born about a century before St. Antony, St. John Cassian was born about a century after. Cassian does not offer a treatise on the gospel story of the rich young man; still, in the third conference of *The Conferences*, which was written for monks, he presents a teaching on renunciation that can be fruitfully read in conversation with Clement’s treatise. In Conference 3, Cassian largely agrees with Clement, but unlike Clement, he sees a value in renouncing outward things since this can help in the eradication of vices.

Cassian agrees with Clement that there are inward possessions and not only outward ones. Vices are our inward possessions as we begin our lives of conversion. In turn, Cassian, like Clement, teaches that renouncing the vices in our hearts is more important than renouncing outward things. Cassian uses the biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt to illustrate this. When the Hebrews followed Moses into the desert, they left behind their former life in Egypt. But as the Bible notes, the Hebrews sometimes wanted to return to Egypt, especially when the going got tough in the desert. The Hebrew people wanted their former food and other comforts. So, for Cassian, the leaving of Egypt was a physical removal that entails giving up outward things. But there was something inward that the Hebrews did not give up: their attachments to their former life in Egypt. They still had within themselves various vices. In a way, then, the Hebrews renounced outward things when they left Egypt, but they did not renounce their

⁹ The scheme of thoughts leading to desires and then actions is well known in Evagrius (e.g., see *Praktikos*, chaps. 4–14); an earlier treatment of it is in the third book of Origen’s *On First Things*.

inward vices. The renunciation of outward things is not enough, says Cassian, but rather it must lead to the inward renunciation of the vices in the heart. He writes: “Bodily renunciation and removal from Egypt, as it were, will be of no value to us, therefore, if we have been unable to obtain at the same time the renunciation of heart which is more sublime and more beneficial.”¹⁰ The renunciation of heart is more important than the outward, bodily renunciation. We see here the agreement with Clement.

But Cassian thinks that the outward renunciation is a first step toward the inward renunciation of heart. It was right that the Hebrews first left Egypt, so that in turn they might purify their hearts of vices through inward renunciation. Seeing the renunciation of outward things as a first step, Cassian accordingly calls it the *first* renunciation. But he also insists that it must lead to a *second* renunciation, which is the renunciation of the vices in the heart. Therefore, the first renunciation is of outward things, such as property, family, and one’s native land, while the second renunciation is of the vices within, such as gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and so on.¹¹ Writing for monks, Cassian sees the first renunciation as necessary. Monks must first give up their outward possessions as well as their native lands and other things. But this is not an end in itself. Its value lies in helping us on to the second renunciation, whereby we give up the vices inside of us. Cassian writes: “Therefore it will not be of much value for us to have embraced the first renunciation with a very devout faith if we do not seize upon the second with the same zeal and the same fervor.”¹²

This point plays into the main theme of Conference 3, namely, perseverance in conversion. Cassian notes that it is not how you begin your monastic life but how you end it that matters. You may begin the monastic life ablaze with fervor, but then become lukewarm and complacent. You may stop working on conversion, but think you are holy. When this happens, a monk has not moved on, or has stopped moving on, to the second renunciation after doing the first. The monk has stopped doing the hard work of renouncing the vices in his heart. So, while he may still be living the first renunciation—having no property, being celibate, and so forth—still this is of no avail. The first

¹⁰ John Cassian, *The Conferences*, 3.7.7, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers series (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1997), 126.

¹¹ In fact, there is a third renunciation, according to Cassian, that entails denying that any creaturely representation of God is perfect. We do not treat this third renunciation here and neither does Conference 3 spend much time on it.

¹² Cassian, 3.7.1 (trans. Ramsey, 124).

renunciation is for the sake of the second, and so, if one does not purify the heart by way of the second renunciation, the first renunciation is worthless. In fact, the first renunciation can become a trap: by giving up all things, the monk *looks* holy and thus he may *think* that he is holy; however, if he does not work on renouncing the vices in his heart, he is deceived. Indeed, such a monk has falsified the outward renunciation, doing it for self-admiration and perhaps also for praise from others.

To summarize, Clement and Cassian are alike in seeing the renunciation of vices as the true measure of spiritual progress and in seeing the renunciation of outward things as having no value in itself. But unlike Clement, Cassian sees the renunciation of outward things (the first renunciation) as helpful for the renunciation of vices (the second renunciation). To be sure, the outward renunciation does not automatically lead to the inward renunciation, the first to the second, but when the first renunciation is used correctly it helps towards the second. In this way, Cassian acknowledges what Clement did not, namely, that our engagement with outward things bears an influence on our interior, spiritual progress. In particular, by arranging how the monk interacts with the external world, the structures of renunciation can positively affect his spiritual life. Hence, for Cassian, outward renunciation is necessary for the monk, but at the same time it is for the sake of purifying the heart of vices and it lacks value if it does not help in this way.

THE 1969 DOCUMENT, *RENEW AND CREATE*

Now we jump more than fifteen centuries into the future, to the late 1960s. As already noted in the article's introduction, the '60s were a time of great cultural upheaval. For the United States the decade witnessed the sexual revolution, an increasing involvement in the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement. As for the Catholic Church, she was experiencing upheavals of her own in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and, at the end of the decade, there was also the controversy over *Humanae Vitae*. Amid it all, various kinds of structures—legal, religious, social, moral—were being questioned, if not rejected. Of course, some of this was welcome, as was the case in the civil rights movement. Also, many in the Catholic Church experienced a healthy freedom as previous structures were lifted due to the reforms following the Council.

In 1969, at the start of an eventful summer that would see among other things a man on the moon and the Woodstock music festival, the American-Cassinense Congregation of Benedictine Monasteries held a general chapter that issued the document *Renew and Create*.¹³ Other institutes of religious life produced similar documents around the time, given the perceived need to respond to the cultural and religious commotion taking place.¹⁴ The times, they were a-changin', and many were wondering what the future of religious life would be. Some were even asking whether there was a future for religious life.¹⁵ In keeping with *Perfectae Caritatis* of the Second Vatican Council, *Renew and Create* responded to the times by retrieving principles drawn from the Benedictine charism to chart a way forward. The document therefore identified fifteen elements of Benedictine monastic life in "an endeavor to describe the heritage from which any movement toward the future must proceed."¹⁶

In doing this, *Renew and Create* formulated a way of understanding the Benedictine life that is helpful for our discussion of structures. It said that three factors must be present in order to live the Benedictine way authentically.¹⁷ If even only one is missing, then the Benedictine life is not present in an authentic form. The first factor is God's *inspiration*. The Benedictine life is due, in the first place, to God inspiring men and women to live this way of life. Without God calling (and thus inspiring) a person to be a Benedictine, a person cannot authentically live as a Benedictine monastic. The second factor is *spirituality*. The authentic Benedictine life necessarily entails a spirituality that is proper to it and that arises from God's inspiration.¹⁸ The third factor that *Renew and Create* says must be present is *structures*. If Benedictine life is to be authentic, it must have structures—structures that constitute a concrete way of living. *Renew and Create* never defines precisely what it means

¹³ Thirty-Sixth General Chapter of the American-Cassinense Congregation of Benedictine Monasteries, *Renew and Create: A Statement on the American-Cassinense Benedictine Monastic Life* (Lowell, MA: Sullivan Bros., 1969). The document is also available online at <http://amcass.org/documents/renew-and-create/>.

¹⁴ The authors of *Renew and Create* understood themselves to be writing "in an era of revolutionary changes" (p. 9 [para. 5]).

¹⁵ In its conclusion, *Renew and Create* speaks of "those who suggest that our monasteries cannot and will not survive the critical period of history in which we now find ourselves," and warns that unless certain problems are addressed, these suggestions might prove true (p. 76 [para. 104]; see also p. 74 [para. 100]).

¹⁶ *Renew and Create*, 48 (para. 55); see also 7–9, 75 (para. 3–5, 102). For the essential elements of Benedictine life with descriptions, see *Renew and Create*, 53–74 (para. 63–99).

¹⁷ See *Renew and Create*, 49–53 (para. 57–62).

¹⁸ In particular, *Renew and Create*, 49–50 (para. 58) says that the spirituality is produced by and serves the inspiration to live the monastic life.

by “structures,” but I believe that the definition of structures used in this article is consistent with the basic idea of structures in the document.¹⁹

While all three factors have their roots in the monastic tradition, the two factors of spirituality and structures are of particular interest here because they can be understood in continuity with St. John Cassian’s teaching on renunciation.²⁰ Recall that for Cassian the first renunciation must serve the second and the first is a necessary step toward doing the second. This can be put in terms of structures and spirituality by speaking of the first renunciation in terms of structures and the second in terms of spirituality. As for the first renunciation, we have noted that it is itself a set of structures, but these structures are not the only ones that a monk adopts when entering the monastic way of life. Besides the directives to give up outward things, he adopts other structures, such as directives to be present for common prayer, meals, and other exercises of community life. When a monk undertakes the first renunciation, therefore, it is implied that he is also adopting all the other structures of monastic life. To speak of the first renunciation, then, is to speak implicitly of all monastic structures and, when we speak of them all, we are also speaking of those that make up the first renunciation. Thus, the two—the first renunciation in particular and all the monastic structures in general—can be talked about interchangeably. As for the second renunciation, we have seen that it is the renunciation of vices in the heart. But here, too, more is happening than simply giving up things. When the monk forsakes the vices in his heart, he is in turn planting virtues there. The uprooting of vices and the planting of virtues go together. Both activities, moreover, concern the spiritual life, for at the heart of any authentic spirituality is the inner work of renouncing vices and replacing them with the virtues that conform us to Christ. For this reason, doing the second renunciation is doing the work of spirituality and we can speak of the second renunciation in terms of spirituality.

¹⁹ Some hints at what is meant are present in the descriptions of the elements of Benedictine life (pp. 53–74 [para. 63–99]), for the document says that in setting forth these elements, it is “set[ting] forth those areas of spiritual doctrine and structure which have been traditionally associated with Benedictine life” (p. 48 [para. 55]). Another hint is evident when *Renew and Create* says that, although the Benedictine life cannot be defined simply by “juridical literalness,” neither can it be defined simply by pointing to “a broad spirituality embodied in the Rule which can be detached from the Rule itself,” where external oblates would exemplify this broad spirituality that is detached from the concrete way of life in a monastery (p. 49 [para. 57]).

²⁰ The continuity between the factor of inspiration and the monastic tradition is not discussed here, but one point of contact can be found in Cassian’s third conference (namely 3.10.5–3.22.4). Here Cassian emphasizes that we rely on the Lord for any good that we accomplish; this is consistent with saying that God’s inspiration is needed throughout one’s monastic vocation.

By translating the first renunciation into structures and the second into spirituality, we can restate Cassian's teaching on renunciation in terms of these two factors. We may start with Cassian's teaching that the first renunciation must serve the second. Accordingly, we may say that structures must serve spirituality. Just as renouncing outward things should foster the eradication of vices and the growth in the virtues, so should structures do this. Cassian also says that the first renunciation is useless if it does not lead to the second. The same goes for structures: they are useless if they do not foster genuine spiritual growth. *Structures must serve spirituality*. Or if we speak of spirituality in terms of the virtues, it may be put this way: *structures must cultivate the virtues*. When applied rightly, they do just that. Finally, Cassian indicates that the first renunciation is necessary for undertaking the second renunciation. The first renunciation is not an option, but a necessity for one undertaking the monastic life. It provides the monk with indispensable assistance in the interior work of eradicating the vices. In the same way, structures are practically necessary. One's spiritual growth in the virtues cannot be sustained without their help.

These points about structures and spirituality may be applied to every Christian vocation, not only the monastic one. The warrant for doing so is that every vocation has the three factors named by *Renew and Create*—inspiration, spirituality, and structures—and not only the Benedictine monastic vocation. Now, saying that a vocation must be inspired by God and have a spirituality is not difficult to accept. But the negative view of structures in our culture can make it difficult to accept that every authentic vocation has structures. Yet this is the case. Granted, it is easier to see that there are structures in a vocation to the religious life. These structures include the constitutions of one's religious institute as well as the schedule (or *horarium*) that a religious community keeps, with set times for Mass, common prayer, and meals. But structures can also be found in vocations that are not to the religious life. These structures are often more flexible than those in the religious life, but they are still there. Examples include a family's practice of eating together as well as a married couple's agreement to have a date night once a month. A couple once shared with me a rather interesting structure that they kept. At the end of each day, before the couple went to sleep, each would touch the other. This might be satisfied by kissing each other good night or it might be fulfilled by simply touching the other's arm with one's index finger. That might not seem like much, but when a spouse is really mad at the other, that

person does not want even to look at the other, let alone touch the other. This couple's rule of touching each other before going to sleep was, therefore, a practice that countered the urge to pull away from each other when angry. It was a structure for them to follow for the benefit of their vocation as a married couple. Other structures span all vocations. For example, all Catholics, regardless of their vocations, are required to go to Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, to go to confession at least once a year, and to receive Communion at least once during the Easter season. Indeed, the sacramental practice of the Church is a set of structures (albeit with special properties of its own). Canon law, too, is a collection of structures.

In fact, not only does every authentic vocation have structures, but each has its own version of a first renunciation. Given that every vocation has structures which are meant to support the spirituality of that vocation, it follows that when one takes up a new vocation, one takes up the structures that belong to that vocation. But this in turn requires leaving behind former structures. That is, in accepting a vocation one changes one's way of life and both the old way and the new way have their structures. Each has its routines, rules, commitments, customs, practices, and so on. The structures in one's old way of life were perhaps less intentional than those in the new way, but they were still present. Thus, when renouncing an old way of life, in order to adopt a new vocation, one renounces the structures that go with the old way, for the sake of the structures that belong to the new vocation. To give an example, imagine a man before marriage living in his "bachelor pad" and structuring his life in a certain way. On weekdays, he goes to work from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.; during his lunch hour, he does some exercise; on Friday nights, he hangs out with friends at the local bar; on Saturday mornings, he sleeps in. But upon joining himself to a wife in matrimony, he leaves his bachelor ways behind and must change many of his structures. Now he eats supper with his wife and not alone; on Saturdays, there is a list of chores from his wife, the so-called "honey-do" list, that he tackles; and when he goes out, he makes sure to tell his wife where he is going. He has *renounced* former structures so as to adopt new ones. Such is the general experience, no matter what vocation a person has: to accept a vocation is to renounce former structures and to adopt new ones. This renunciation of former structures within a non-monastic vocation parallels the first renunciation for monks.

Therefore, what we have said about structures and spirituality in the monastic life may be applied more generally to every vocation. Structures are for the sake of spirituality, particularly for spiritual growth in the virtues. If they do not serve the cultivation of virtue, they are in vain. But at the same time, structures are practically necessary in any vocation, in order to sustain spiritual growth in the virtues. Thus, the value of structures in the spiritual life is their indispensable ability to cultivate virtue. Applying this teaching to every vocation even points out an interpretation of the story of the rich young man that applies to everyone. When Christ issued his call for the rich young man to give up his possessions, he was calling the young man to a new way of life, and thus to new structures. He had to give up his former structures, by which he owned many outward things, and to adopt new ones, by which he would follow Christ in voluntary poverty. He could not do this and, so, he went away sad. Now, Jesus' call for the rich young man to renounce his possessions can be understood *specifically* as a call to voluntary poverty, but it can also be read *more generally* as a call to leave behind former structures so as to adopt new ones. It thus applies to all vocations, since every vocation requires renouncing some structures and adopting others. Furthermore, recall that Jesus says that such a renunciation is done for the sake of becoming perfect. Accordingly, the renunciation of former structures for new ones is not an end in itself, but is ordered toward perfection, which is a matter of growing in the virtues, especially charity. In sum, the story of the rich young man may be understood in general terms as a call by Christ to adopt a new way of life by renouncing former structures and adopting new ones, with the understanding that this is done for the sake of becoming perfect by growing in virtue.

Even if one does not accept this interpretation of the gospel story, still the fact is that Jesus counsels renunciation as important for the work of becoming perfect. Unless we adopt Clement's interpretation whereby this renunciation is only an interior renunciation of vices, we are left to see Christ as suggesting that the renunciation of *outward* things is valuable for spiritual growth. That is, our interactions with external things are not spiritually irrelevant. And if so, then it makes sense to arrange some of these interactions for our spiritual profit, as structures do.

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF STRUCTURES

There are dangers to avoid when observing structures. At the root of each danger is the same potential mistake—that of withdrawing our focus from the virtues and putting it on the structures in and of themselves. To do so is to treat structures as if they had value in themselves. But what Clement and in turn Cassian taught about acts of outward renunciation is also true of structures, namely, that they have no value in themselves. Instead, the right way of employing structures is to use them in such a way that the focus extends beyond them to the virtues they are meant to serve. In fact, even our focus on the virtues is to stretch on to God, since the virtues are for the sake of attaining God.²¹ But our structures will not serve the virtues, let alone the virtues conform us to God, if we focus on structures apart from the virtues. The monastic tradition identified at least two reasons why we are tempted to make this mistake.

The first reason is that we want to look holy. When one follows a structure, such as going to church on Sundays or volunteering at a food pantry every month, the person appears holy or virtuous. In turn, one can form a picture of oneself as holy that makes one complacent in the work of conversion, or even makes one arrogant. Cassian spoke to this danger, as noted above, by saying that the first renunciation, when it does not lead to the second, can be a trap in that the outward appearance of holiness deceives you into thinking that you have attained holiness before you have. Likewise, St. Benedict warns, “Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so” (RB 4.62).²² Whether we want to look holy in our own eyes or in the eyes of others, if not both, the focus is not on the actual degree of virtue we have, but on the appearance of being virtuous. Of course, one should keep going to church on Sunday, volunteering, and following other good structures, but we must be careful not to follow structures in order to appear holy. The peril of this wrong motive is brought home when we remember how often and how strongly Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for keeping religious observances in order to appear holy in their own minds (e.g.,

²¹ The teaching that the virtues lead us to God may be seen in Cassian’s pithy summation: “For just as the kingdom of the devil is gained by conniving at the vices, so the kingdom of God is possessed in purity of heart and spiritual knowledge by practicing the virtues” (Cassian, 1.14.1).

²² Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 185.

Luke 18:11) or in the minds of others (e.g., Matt. 6:1–18). Indeed, this can breed hypocrisy and a holier-than-thou attitude. If we use structures to keep up a lie that we are holier than we truly are, then we are not honestly addressing the vices in our hearts, so as to do the real work of conversion. We are not, in other words, focusing on our progress in virtue, but on the structures as ways to look good.

The second reason for being tempted to focus on structures apart from the virtues is an attachment to structures. That is, we can inordinately cling to structures because we associate them with some comfort or consolation. A famous, or infamous, line in monasteries is, “We’ve always done it that way.” There is a comfort provided by stable structures and this has its value. But if one is attached to this comfort, then when a change is needed, that attachment impedes what virtue demands. Another example is a young man for whom a rigorous program of fasting has produced an interior freedom and delight. He might cling inordinately to his program of fasting, in order to secure this spiritual delight. The mistake is understandable and even to be expected in the initial efforts at the spiritual life when God often encourages a person with various interior consolations. Still, the attachment is wrong, for it keeps the focus from being on virtue. When an attachment thus diverts one’s attention from the virtues, it especially diverts one’s attention from the virtue of prudence. Thus, if the young man just mentioned becomes ill and the prudent thing would be to excuse himself from his fasting, he might not do so because of his attachment to fasting. Most structures, after all, admit of situations in which they should be dispensed from, such as not going to Sunday Mass when you are running a fever. It is by the virtue of prudence that we recognize when a dispensation is in order. The following story from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is a good example of how the monastic tradition spoke of this: “A brother came to a hermit: and as he was taking his leave, he said, ‘Forgive me, abba, for preventing you from keeping your rule.’ The hermit answered, ‘My rule is to welcome you with hospitality, and to send you on your way in peace.’”²³ The hermit showed prudence (or discretion, as the monastic tradition called it) by dispensing from the structures of his rule of life, so as to offer hospitality. If the hermit had been attached to the structures of his rule of life, it would have been an obstacle to practicing such prudence.

²³ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 136.

It is important to keep in mind that the virtues, not structures *per se*, will get us to God. Therefore, when keeping structures, the focus needs to remain on the virtues. This is also important for giving an effective witness to the value of structures. If we follow structures in order to look holy or due to an attachment to them or for any other reason besides the genuine cultivation of virtue, this will only make our culture more suspicious of them.

HOW STRUCTURES ARE ABLE TO CULTIVATE VIRTUES

We now need to show how structures can help us to grow in virtue. They help in acquiring virtues in the same way that they help in other areas of life: by helping us to accomplish goals. Thus, if I want to lose weight, I put in place the structures of a diet regimen; or if an organization wants to achieve important goals, it puts in place the structures that make up a strategic plan. Likewise, in the spiritual life, if we want to accomplish the work of conversion, structures help us to attain this goal. The following explains four ways in which structures are able to help us to grow in virtue. They are by practicing, protecting, probing, and pointing. Other ways may be identified, but these four enable us to see how important structures are for *sustained* growth in the virtues. They are a practical necessity.

To describe these ways, we need a working definition of what a virtue is. First of all, a virtue is an ability—namely, an ability to act in a way that is truly fulfilling, and note that a truly fulfilling act is one that brings you closer to God. Further, a virtue is a heightened ability rather than a basic, or baseline, one. Let me illustrate the distinction. A person who decides to run a marathon discerns that he or she has the ability to run a marathon; otherwise the person would not even bother to start training for it. But this initial ability is different from the ability that the person comes to acquire after training. A virtue is not the initial kind of ability (a baseline ability) that one has before training, but the latter kind of ability (a heightened ability) that one has after training. We may call it a *ready* ability. A further characteristic of a virtue is that this ability is *steady*. If I have the ready ability to act generously only when I am in a good mood, that is not the virtue of generosity. To have this virtue I must be readily able to act generously not only when I am in a good mood but even when it is somewhat difficult to be generous. We may thus define a virtue as a steadily ready ability to act in a way

that is fulfilling. With this understanding in mind, we can better see how the following four ways are capable of fostering virtues.

The first way in which structures are able to help us to grow in virtue is by being occasions to develop these abilities. That is, some structures are occasions for *practicing* the virtues. As with other abilities, the virtues become stronger when one practices their corresponding acts. For example, one's ability to make a jump shot in basketball increases the more one successfully practices making jump shots. Likewise, one grows in the virtue of prayer the more time one spends in sincere prayer. Therefore, if a person sets a structure for spending time in prayer, this structure cultivates the virtue of prayer by being an occasion for practicing that virtue. Other structures likewise foster growth in the virtues by being occasions for doing virtuous acts. Recall, moreover, what was said earlier; namely, that prudence is needed to know when a structure should be applied and when it should be omitted. Thus, any structure, inasmuch as one applies it prudently, is an occasion to practice prudence and, in turn, an opportunity to grow in prudence.

Second, some structures cultivate virtues by *protecting* them. Just as abilities grow with practice, so they can be diminished by contrary actions and attitudes. Some structures protect the virtues from this diminishment. Consider how certain kinds of movies and shows can undermine virtue. That is, watching programs that arouse lust, covetousness, anger, or some other vice can erode our virtues. Accordingly, structures that limit what is watched can help us to cultivate virtue by guarding us from what diminishes it. Another case regards the company that we keep. As St. Paul notes, "Bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor 15:33) and, just so, we might know of people whose company is not good for our morals. Making it a rule not to hang out with such people is therefore a structure that protects virtue. One priest I know has thus made it a rule for himself not to spend time with a group of priests whose gossip and negativity are spiritually harmful for him. One case of structures protecting virtue is especially interesting; it has to do with idleness. Those fighting habitual sins or addictions sometimes find idle moments dangerous, for during them they are tempted to return to bad behaviors, such as pornography, drinking, or drug use. For example, a college student once told me that, while on break, he was falling back into bad habits. He no longer had, as he did on campus, various structures to occupy his time, such as going to class, attending daily Mass at the

campus ministry center, and studying with a group of friends. Without realizing it, these structures kept him from spiritually harmful things by keeping him busy with good or harmless things. It is interesting, in this context, that St. Benedict wants his monks to keep busy with periods for work and *lectio divina*, since “idleness is the enemy of the soul” (RB 48.1). Structures that occupy people in good or harmless activities can cultivate virtue by protecting them from vice.

A third way in which structures help foster virtue is by *probing* our hearts. Structures can expose what is really going on within us in terms of virtues and vices. For example, a monk can think that he is patient, but by observing the structures of community life—structures such as attending prayers and meals in common—he finds that he is not as patient as he thought. By following such structures, the monk learns that he still needs to grow in patience. Also consider the use of a smartphone; a structure that limits one’s use of a smartphone can show how attached one is to it. Fasting can also do this, showing us how much we depend on the comforts of eating in order to be in a pleasant mood. We sometimes overestimate the progress we have made in being detached, temperate, or virtuous in some other way. But certain structures can keep us honest in this regard, for they test our hearts. Having a more accurate view of our spiritual progress, we can then more effectively apply ourselves to the interior work that still needs to be done.

A fourth way in which structures help in the cultivation of virtue is by making us mindful of certain things. That is, some structures *point* to things that are worth remembering. For example, wearing a wedding ring serves to remind the married person of his or her vocation, and this reminder can help the person to live out the virtues of that vocation. Wearing a religious habit likewise reminds the religious of his or her consecration to God through the profession of vows. Dietary practices are sometimes structures that point to important things that we should keep in mind. For example, when a family observes the practice of eating together, this reminds them of their bond as a family. When we abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent, this points to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Friday abstinence during Lent also makes us mindful of our identity as Catholics, since this practice is especially associated with Catholicism. Indeed, the structures that make people mindful of important things are sometimes social markers or identity markers for a group. These structures often operate subtly or subconsciously, but still their power to remind us of our identity or of other important things should not be overlooked. While we have

various reminders put before us on pieces of paper, digital screens, and public signs, these structures write reminders into the very actions of our bodies. When we observe these structures, then, our very bodies are pointing out things that are important for living out the virtues within our particular vocations.

This last point speaks to the incarnational character of structures. As outward practices, structures engage our bodies as well as our souls. If we try to be spiritual without these outward practices, do we not end up with a spirituality that is less incarnational and therefore less Christian? Is not such an effort at spiritual development something like shadowboxing (cf. 1 Cor 9:24–27) and does it not lessen the role of the body in our spiritual worship (cf. Rom 12:1)? Spirituality is more important than structures, to be sure, but our humble, embodied condition still needs structures.

CONCLUSION

St. Antony is credited with saying that the virtue of discretion, or prudence, is the most important virtue for ensuring that we stay on the path that leads to God.²⁴ In his second conference, Cassian attributes this teaching to Antony and then provides examples of monks who lacked prudence and therefore went astray.²⁵ One was the monk Heron, who was known for the strict structures that he kept for decades with regard to food and solitude. He was fooled into thinking that he was so virtuous that he would be preserved from injury even if he cast himself down a well. He therefore cast himself down a well and died later of the injuries.²⁶ The monastic tradition preserved this example not to argue against structures but to note that prudence is needed to make use of them correctly. And knowing the risks that accompany the keeping of structures is a part of being able to practice them prudently. But another part of being able to observe structures prudently is to appreciate their worth in the spiritual life. Without this, one is not likely even to use religious structures, let alone use them prudently. This neglect of religious structures is especially the risk today, given how negatively they are viewed in our culture. Against this I have argued that, while one walks the path that leads to God by

²⁴ See Cassian, 2.2.1–2.4.4, in which discretion is seen not only as a virtue but also as a gift from God; cf. *The Life of Antony* (Athanasius, 22–44, 88) in which Antony teaches about and is credited with having the discernment of spirits.

²⁵ Cassian, 2.5.1–2.8.2.

²⁶ Cassian, 2.5.3–4. The similarity with the temptation of Christ (see Matt. 4:5–7) is clear.

the virtues and especially by that of charity, one's sustained growth in the virtues relies on the support of structures. The prudent employment of structures belongs, therefore, in any vocation as part of one's efforts to make progress on the path that leads to God.