

Massimo Lapponi

The irradiation of monastic life in the Church and in the world

Presentation

With a few words and many images we want to send a message to the monastic communities and families. The whole of human life has been enlivened by the mystery of Christ, but how can this mystery penetrate into our daily reality? Monastic communities have for centuries guarded the answer to this question, but today they must become increasingly aware of it, and they must radiate this secret on the daily life of the faithful, and above all on that humble and hidden life that takes place between the home walls and the central role of which for all human existence the painful recent circumstances may have made us rediscover.

The mystery of the temple and the priesthood

Human life was overwhelmed by the daily worries of procuring food and defending itself from so many hostilities. Only in the temple of Jerusalem could the pious Israelite open his soul to a different light, which illuminated his existence with divine light. And in the temple were the priests, who were not engaged in the affairs of the world, but in prayer and worship due to God.



The faithful Israelites went on pilgrimage to the temple and exclaimed:

How lovable are your dwellings,
Lord of hosts!
My soul is languishing

and coveteth the courts of the Lord.
My heart and my flesh
exult in the living God (...)
Blessed is he who dwells in your house:
Always sing your praises!

(Psalm 83)

And they also desired to acquire something of the mystery of the temple.

Blessed is he whom thou hast chosen and called by name,
will live in your halls.
We will be satisfied with the goods of your house,
of the sanctity of your temple.

(Psalm 64)

«Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up» (Jn 2:19)

But the temple had to be deeply renewed by Christ. Already when he was first brought to the temple in Jerusalem for the presentation the presence of the holy family within the sacred walls overshadowed what would have been the temple of the new Jerusalem. In it the Saint of Saints would have been Jesus himself, always accompanied by his Most Holy Mother.



Human life renewed by the temple radiates in the life of the world

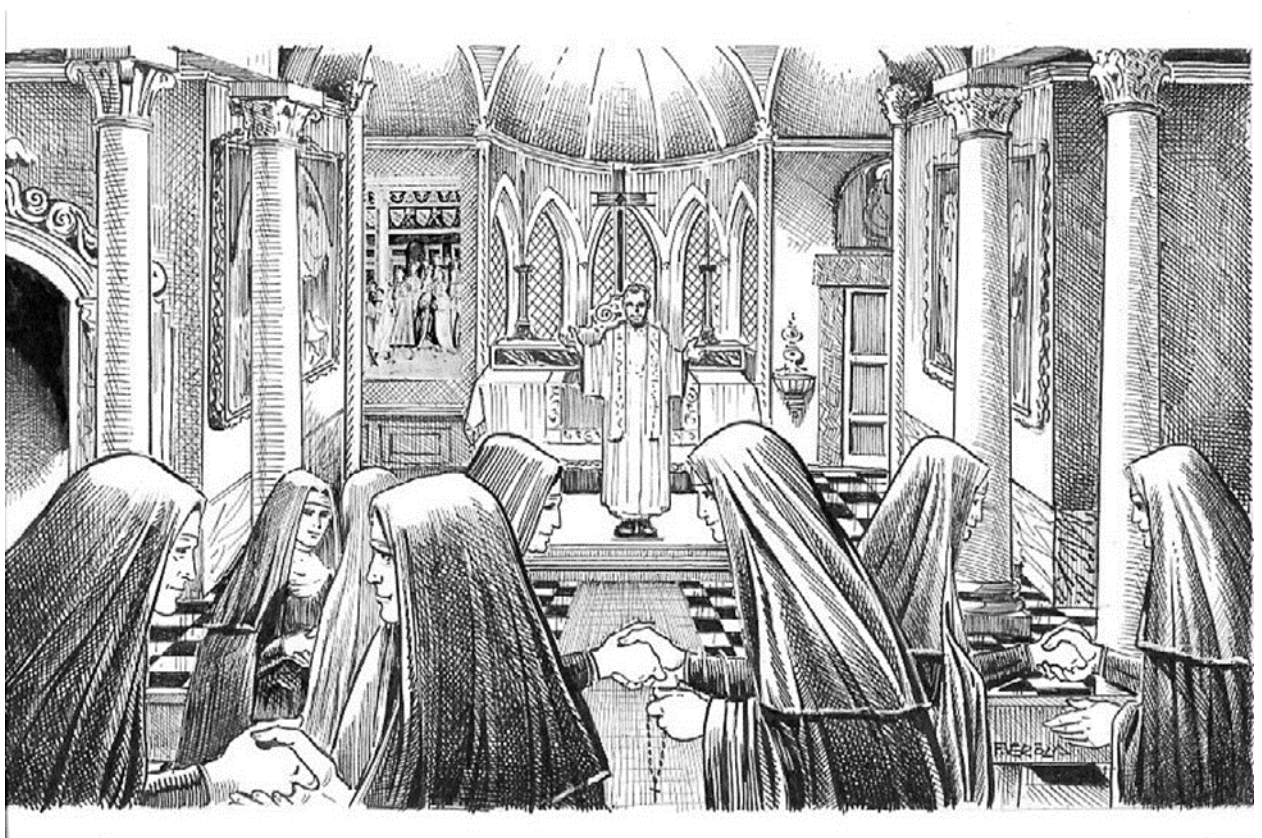
Now the lords of the temple, together with the heavenly Father, are the new man, Jesus Christ, and the new woman, Mary. They do not live to procure food and clothing, but to spread the kingdom of God's love on earth. Should not the faithful imitate them in their lives, and thus cause the light of the temple to shine in their homes and in their streets?

But, alas, how easily «the concern of the world and the deception of wealth stifle the word and it does not bear fruit» (Mt 13, 22)!



She never left the temple, serving night and day with fasting and prayer (Lk 2:37)

The widow Anne, of whom the Gospel speaks, was a lay woman, but she immersed her whole life in the light of the temple. She is the image and model of consecrated souls, who are not priests - even if sometimes some of them become priests - but baptized who do not want the good seed of the word of God to be stifled by thorns, and therefore build together a community life different from that of the world, in which the greatest gifts of God - love, possession and freedom - which are also the greatest temptations to man, are not at all denied, but are brought back to their divine source, and are thus purified from all pollution of sin, through the vows of chastity - or rather of virginal love - of poverty and obedience.



**All guests who come to the monastery are received as Christ
(Rule of Saint Benedict, ch. 53)**

The community life that flows from this consecration is a model of human life no longer aimed primarily at procuring food and clothing, but at living the love of God and spreading it on earth. The communities that embody this model bring the light of the temple into everyday life, and is this not the true "priesthood of the faithful", that is, the life radiated by the example of Christ and Mary, and not by the examples of the men and women of the world?

But can two spouses and their children imitate this model, bring the light of the temple into their homes and exercise the "priesthood of the faithful"? Can the bridegroom be like Christ and the bride like Mary? Can children receive from them more the life of the soul, radiated by divine love, than the life of the body?

Of course, they can imitate this model to the extent that they have it in front of their eyes. This is why cloistered communities must offer the most perfect example of consecrated life and enable human families to share it, through well-directed hospitality, teaching and example.





The priesthood of man and woman

The priesthood of the faithful is expressed in different ways in men and women. Christ is the model of the priesthood of man, who sacrifices male pride and his greed for power to put himself at the service of life, in communion of love with his bride, and Mary is the model of the priesthood of woman, who, renouncing vanity and ambition, purifies her own love to make it an instrument of the Holy Spirit and to bring into the world, in deep and sincere union with her spouse, the light of love for all men, in whom she recognizes the image of her own children.

And where is this priesthood primarily exercised if not within the home? Should not the home of the family become, thanks to this priesthood, as Saint Benedict of the monastery says, «the house of God, in which no one should be disturbed and grieved» (Rule of Saint Benedict, ch. 31)?

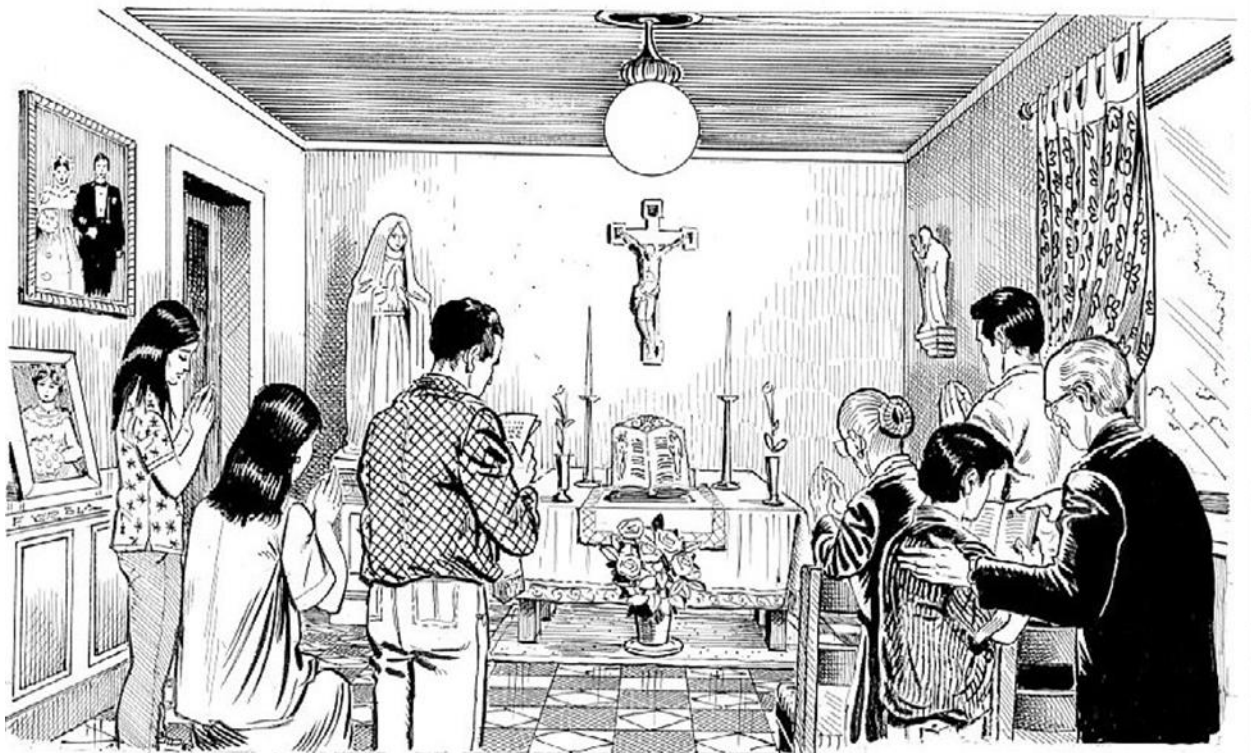
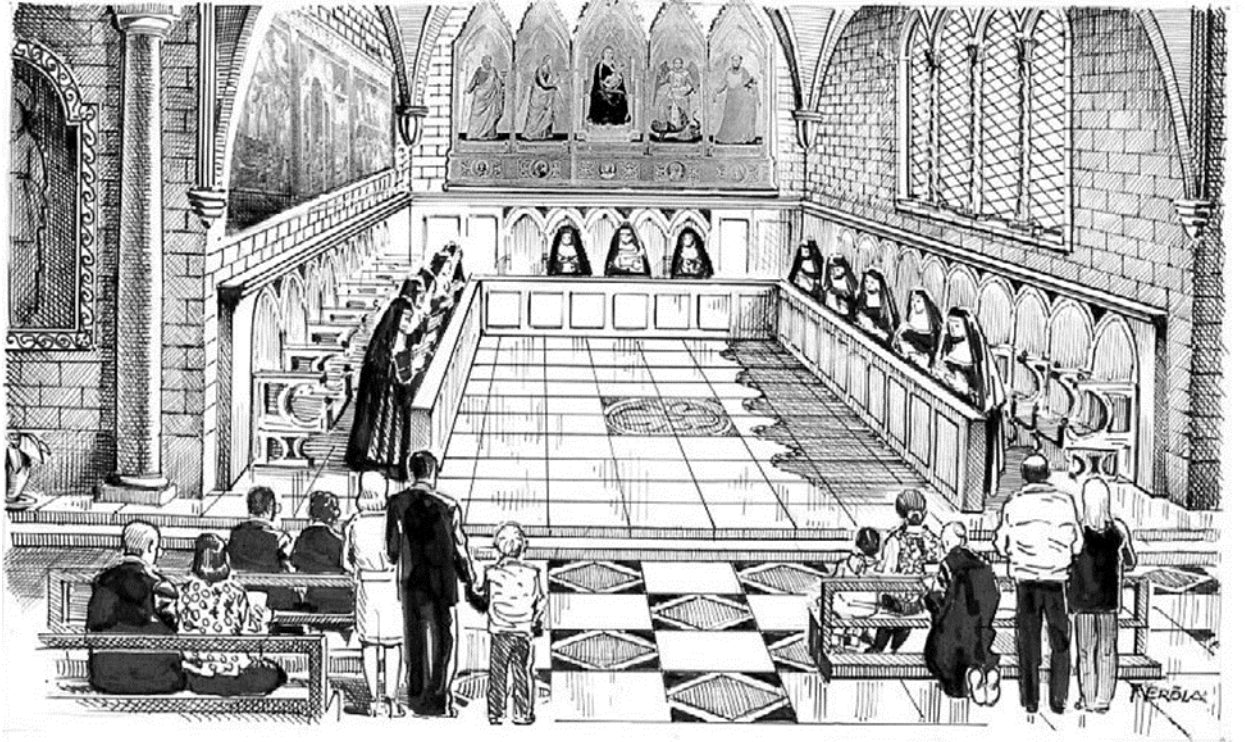
This means that the work that takes place inside the house is the most precious work and that everyone is called to it, the groom as the bride, the sons as the daughters. Saint Benedict, who writes for a male community, warns that the workshop in which the virtues of his children must be mainly exercised consists of «the cloisters of the monastery and the stability in their own monastic family» (Rule of Saint Benedict, ch. 4).

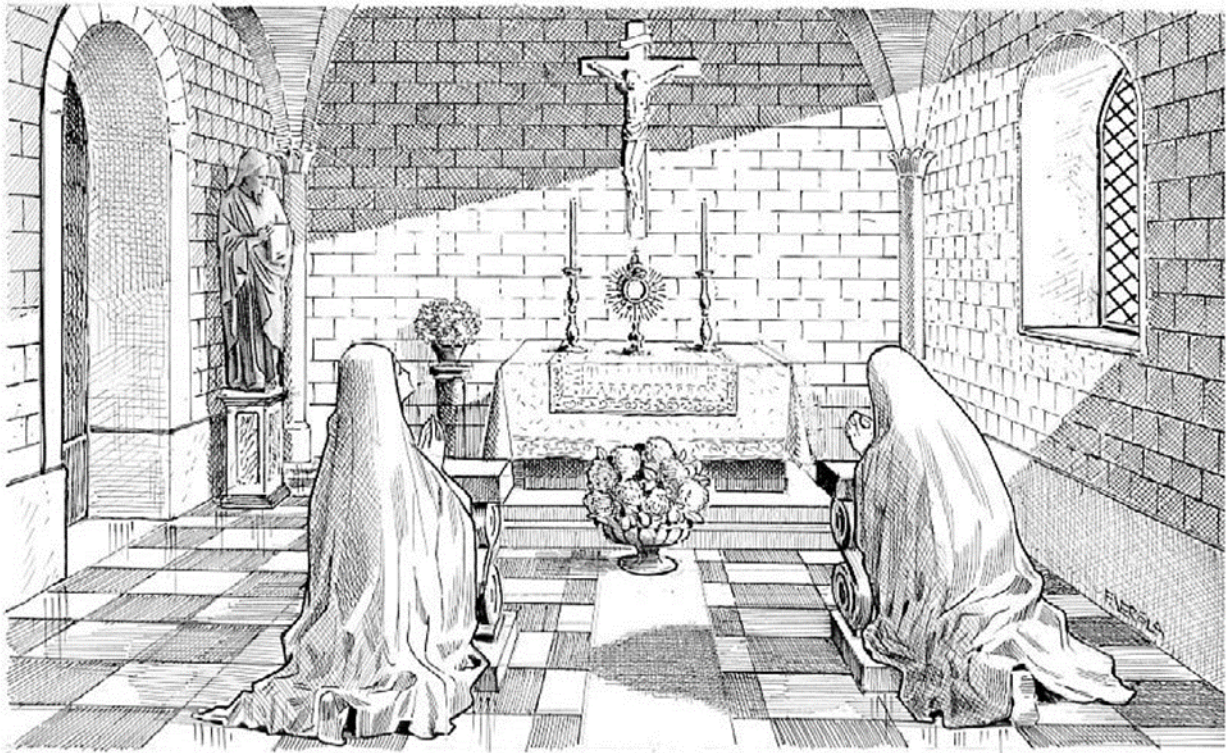
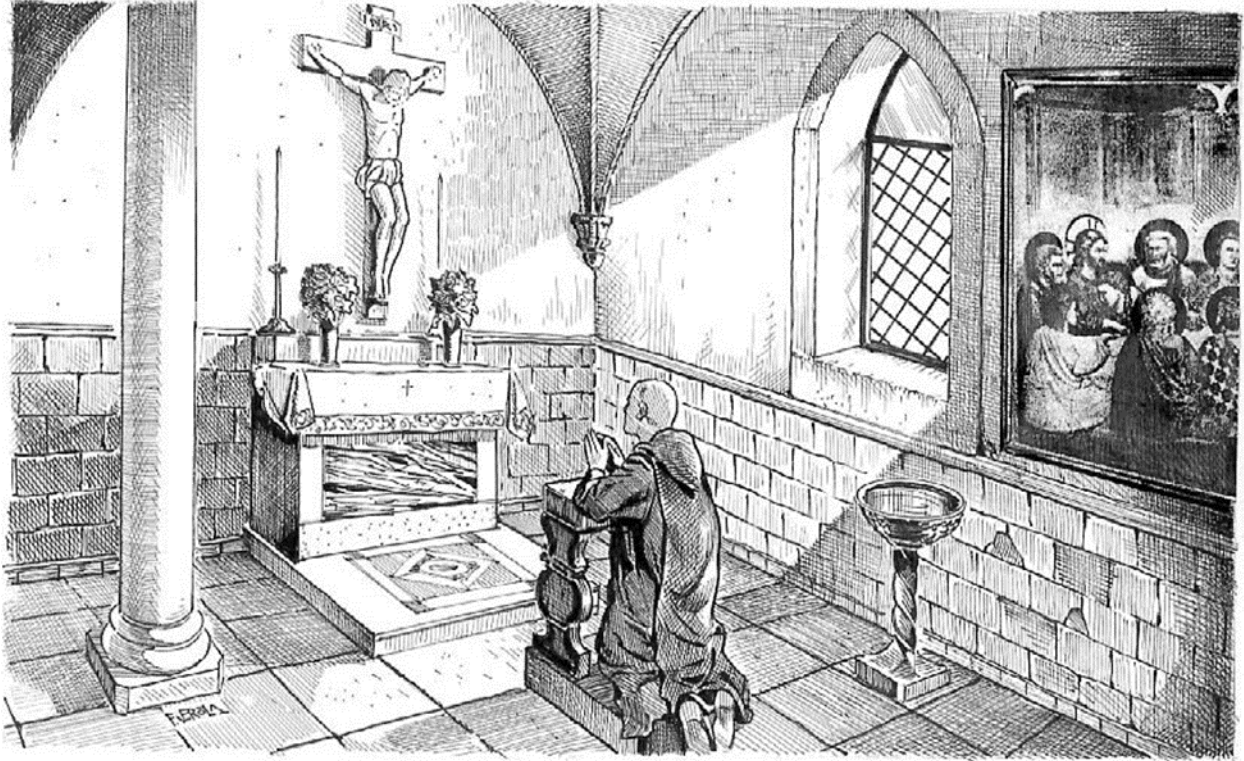
Perhaps the recent emergency will help us to rediscover the great value of the commitment that is exercised between the home walls to make our home a «house of God» while the example of the monastic communities shows us how this commitment can have a great influence on the whole of society. Not for nothing the original meaning of the word "economy" is none other than OIKOS NOMIA, that is OIKOS = house (domus), NOMIA = rule. So economy means primarily: good regulation of the life of the domus (domestic). Neglect this, and everything else does not hold.

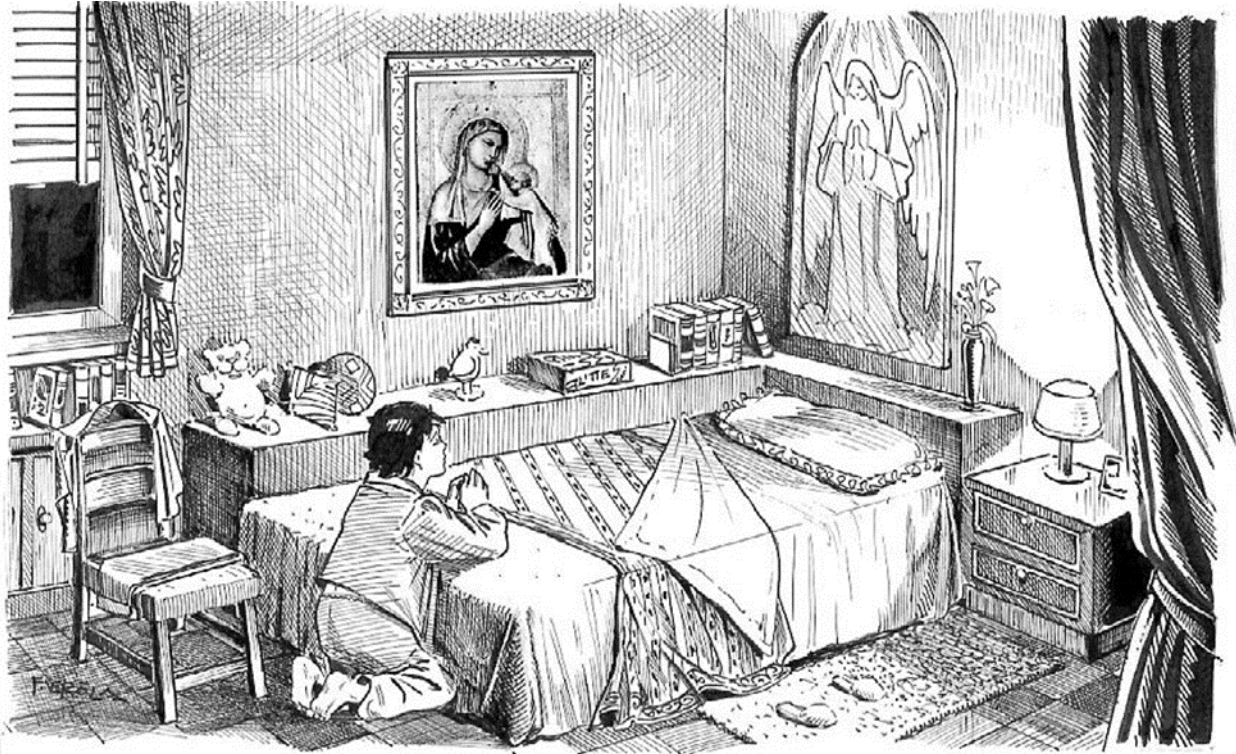
And if you think well, you will see that the good regulation of the life of the domus does not limit the activity of woman and man to dark and humiliating works. First of all, the work of greater commitment and physical effort is not at all humiliating, but on the contrary, it has an irreplaceable educational and self-educational value, because it accustoms us to be masters of ourselves, of our body, of our feelings, of our selfish tendencies, and if we carry it out in a spirit of self-denial, it associates us with the redeeming sacrifice of Christ. Moreover, the care of the house certainly needs the most humble and material base – which in fact really is not material, as has been said - but to then rise to the higher realities. And the first of them is prayer.

The place that prayer, common and private, has in religious communities must be a model for prayer in families. Unfortunately this is a point where many families need to make a substantial change, because in their lives not only the place of prayer is very small, but there is no commitment to enrich prayer with study, the search for the appropriate texts, the care of expression and song, the decoration of the corner of the cult. In this, religious communities must be the first to commit themselves, more than they too often do, in order to give the example and the appropriate teaching to the families who attend them.

Precisely from a well-kept and well-made prayer, in the common and personal context, will flow the light that will make father, mother and children sharers in the priesthood of the faithful and make their home a true "house of God", an extension of the temple of the Lord.







Blessed is he who dwells in your house: always sing your praises!

A not secondary but substantial part of prayer is singing. Saint Paul writes:

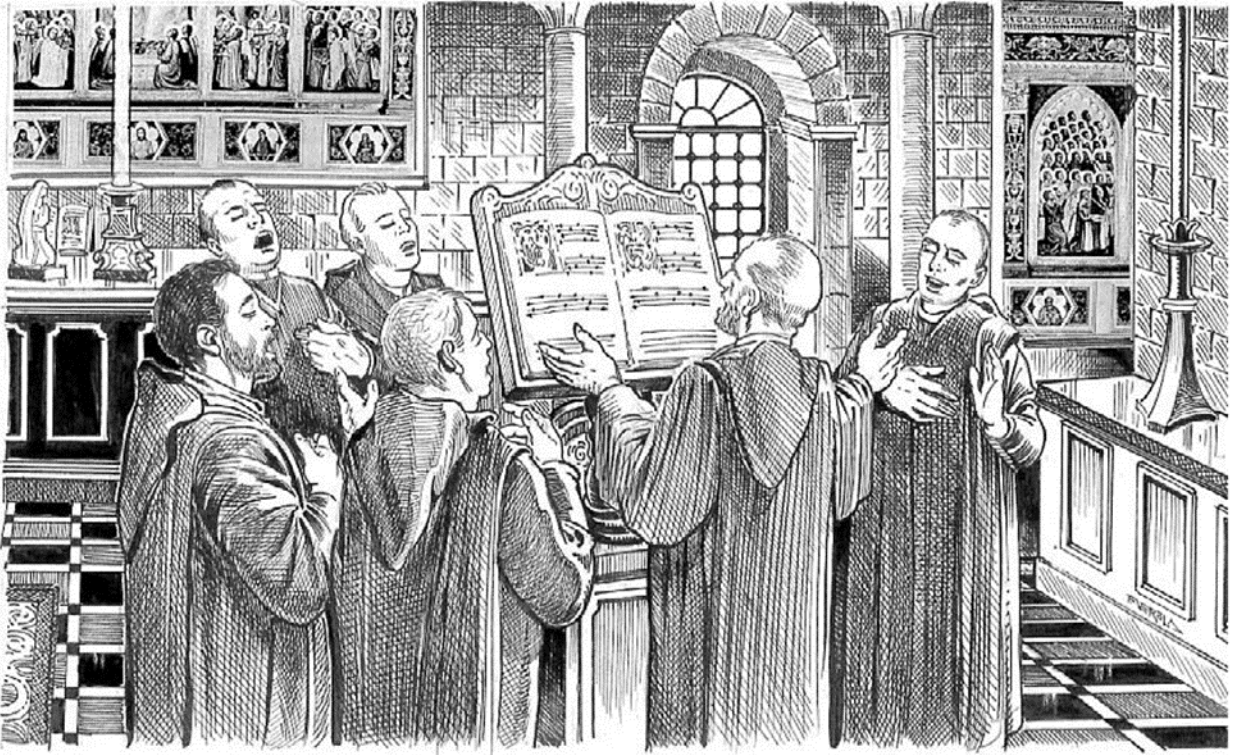
«May the word of Christ dwell among you abundantly; teach and admonish yourselves with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God with heart and gratitude» (Col 3:16).

How many put into practice this exhortation of the apostle? In this, religious communities must commit themselves seriously, and then give the example and the necessary instructions to the families.

We observe that Saint Paul does not say to sing at best or at worst. Obviously, if the song must move the souls, it must be done well. And that means spending time and effort on it.

And music and singing in family life are not only for prayer, but should brighten up moments of family intimacy much more than is commonly the case today. This, of course, is also due to the current decadence of music, sacred and profane. But all the more should it encourage commitment to this very important aspect of human life.

So, it turns out domestic commitment isn't all that sordid and trivial!

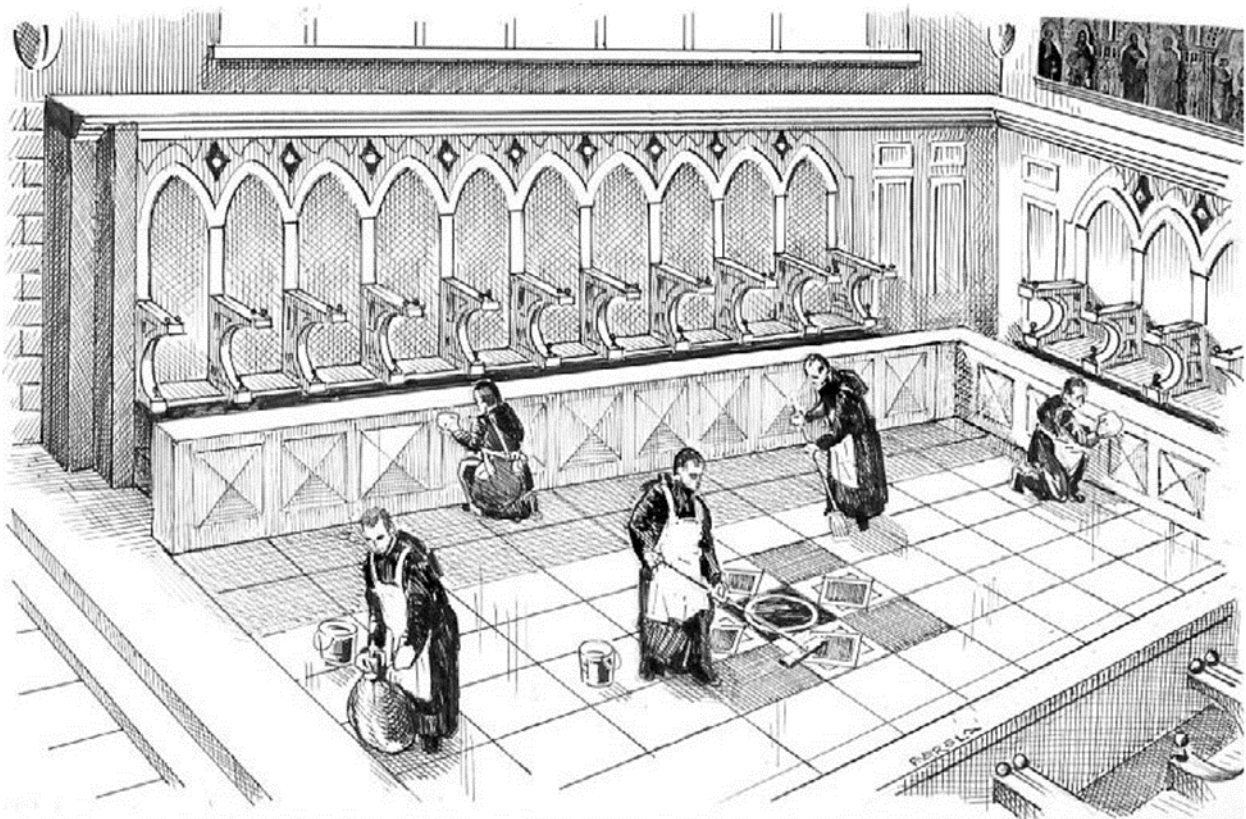


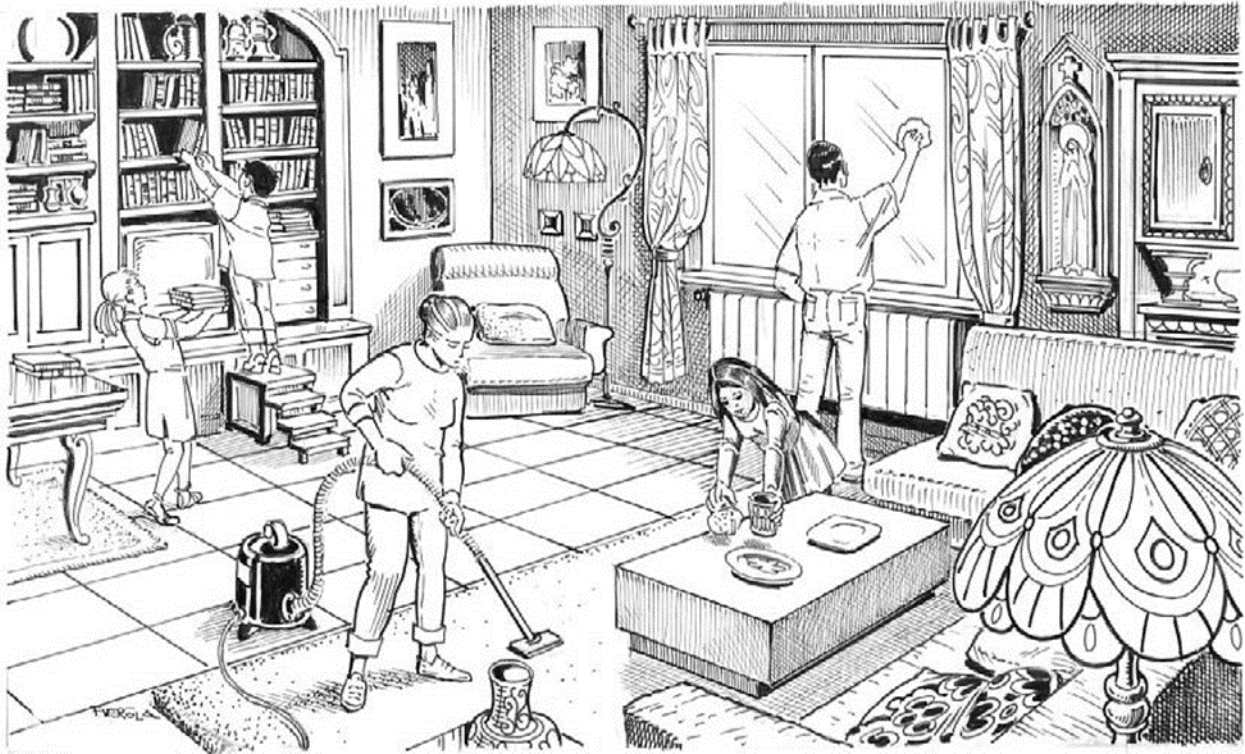
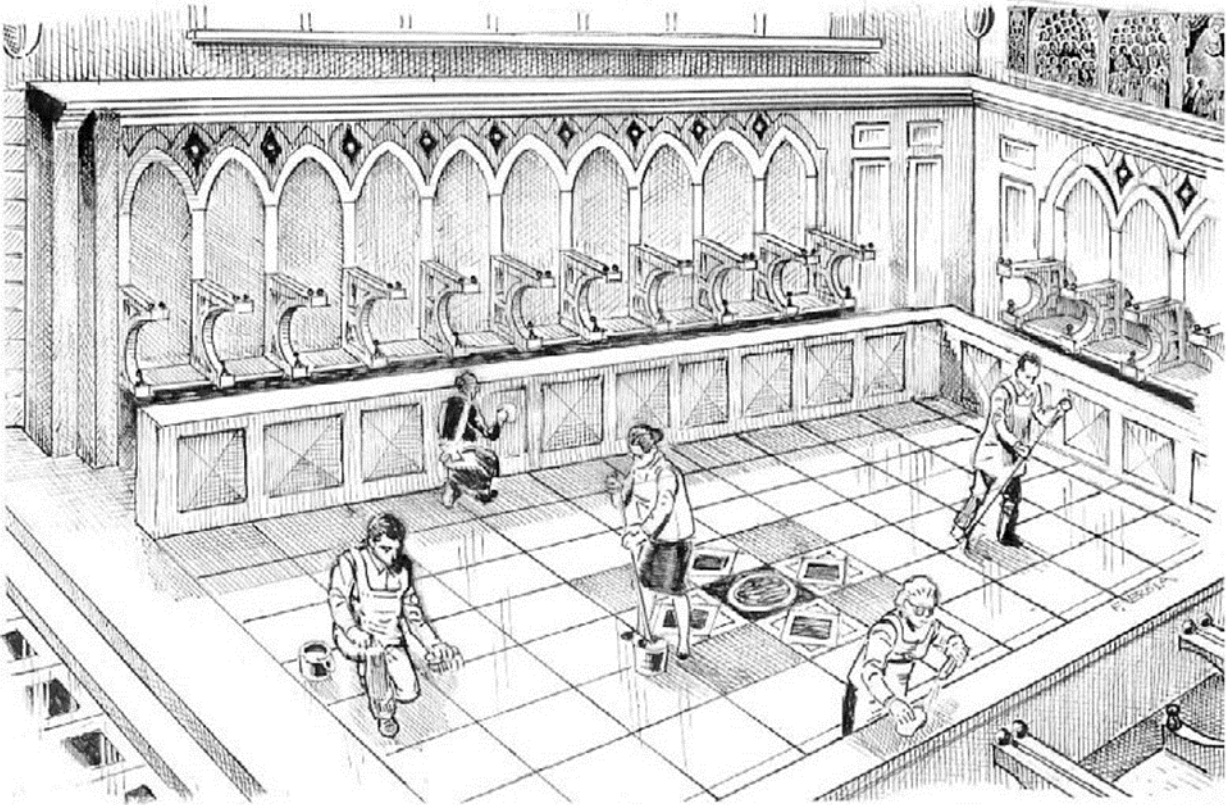
Let the brothers serve each other and let no one be dispensed from the service of the kitchen, except by illness or by a commitment of greater importance, for thus greater merit is acquired and charity is increased (Rule of Saint Benedict, ch. 35)

But for our dwelling to be truly the house of God, in which no one is troubled and saddened, it must be clean and ordered. And this, as Saint Benedict teaches, is a very noble and meritorious commitment before God and a great exercise in charity. Moreover, prayer requires not only the study of Sacred Scripture and commitment to singing, but also that the church, choir or family corner of prayer be clean and orderly.

The guests of the monastery, helping the monastic community in this, can learn to do the same at home.

And, beyond the corner of prayer, obviously the whole house must shine like a welcoming home, so that the guests who attend it can exclaim: «This is the very house of God and the gate of heaven» (Gn 28:17).





The meal: a ritual and a common commitment

Today fast-food reigns and everyone makes do as they please, placing their professional activity, school, sports or other above the respect for family schedules. Then when you happen to eat together, the television on, or father behind the newspaper and children with the mobile phone in operation, each for himself and God for everyone - so to speak!

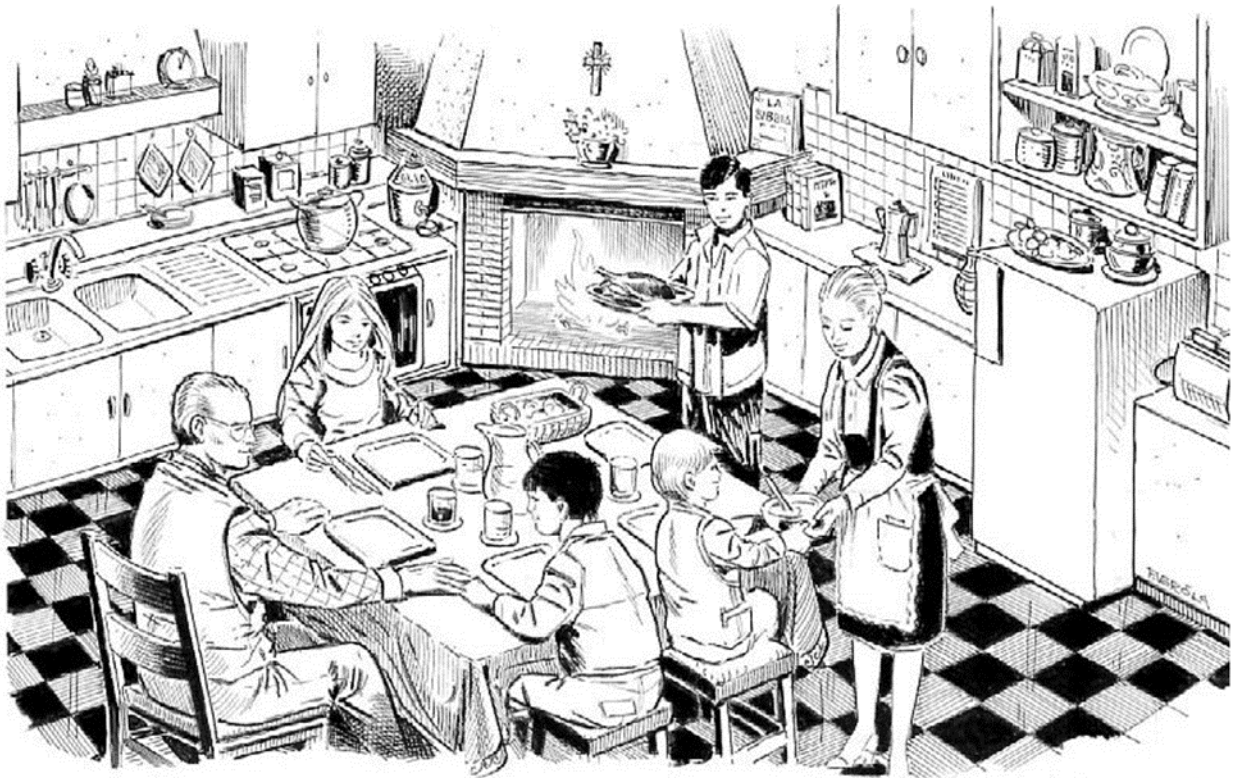
Traditionally, however, the meal was a rite of communion, to which guests of greater consideration were invited as a sign of communion with them, as if they were invited to participate in the sacred warmth of the family community. Who knows if the current emergency does not invite us, among other things, even to rebuild this sacred warmth, gone so miserably lost!

But we must begin to roll up our sleeves and take an example from those who know how to dedicate their time and commitment to the community to make the gifts of God ever more tasty.



Even male monks would have much to learn about this. But certainly the monastic table still retains its ritual character today, with the initial prayer, to which it is not licit not to be punctual, respectful silence, reading, table service in turn and friendly and moderate conversation on holidays. All of which even families could draw inspiration from.

And why leave all the tidying up of the dishes on poor mommy's shoulders?





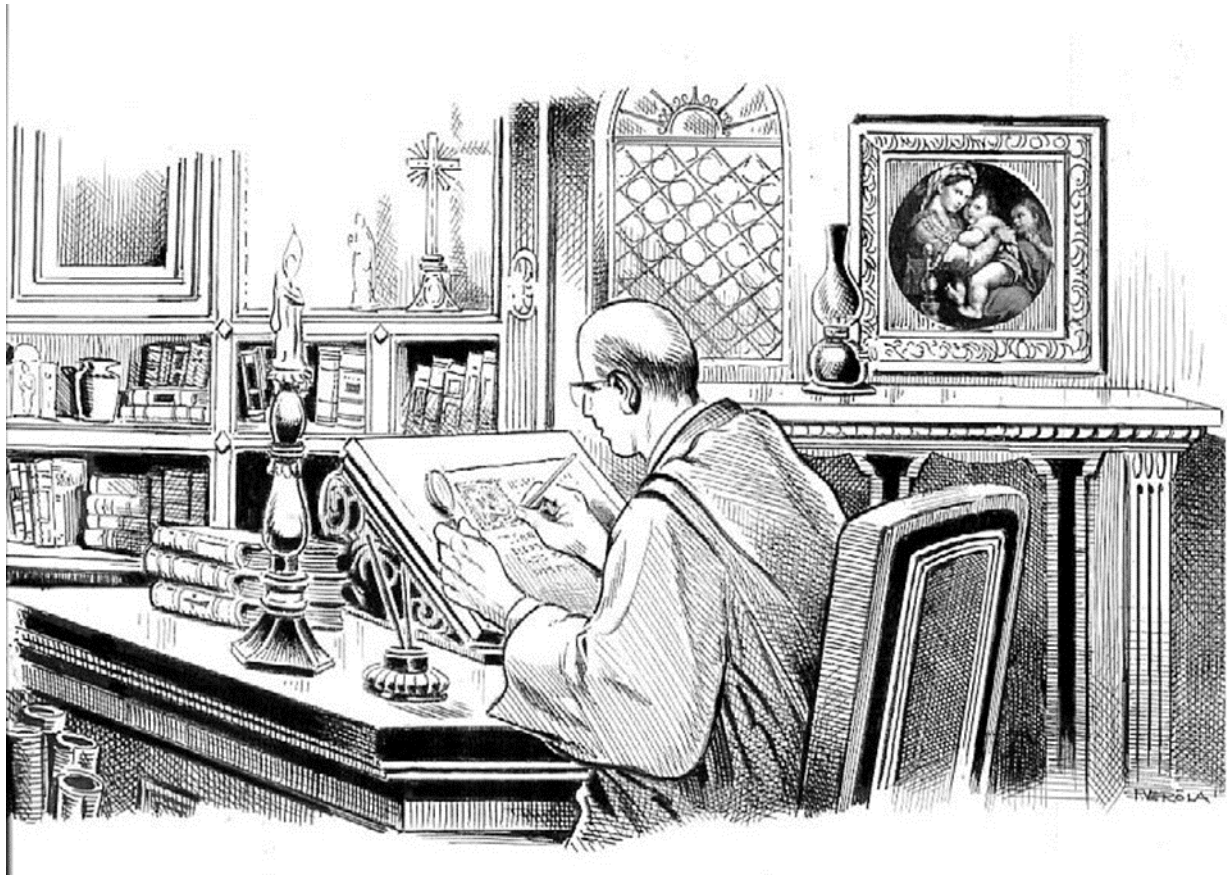
Work at home and work outside the home

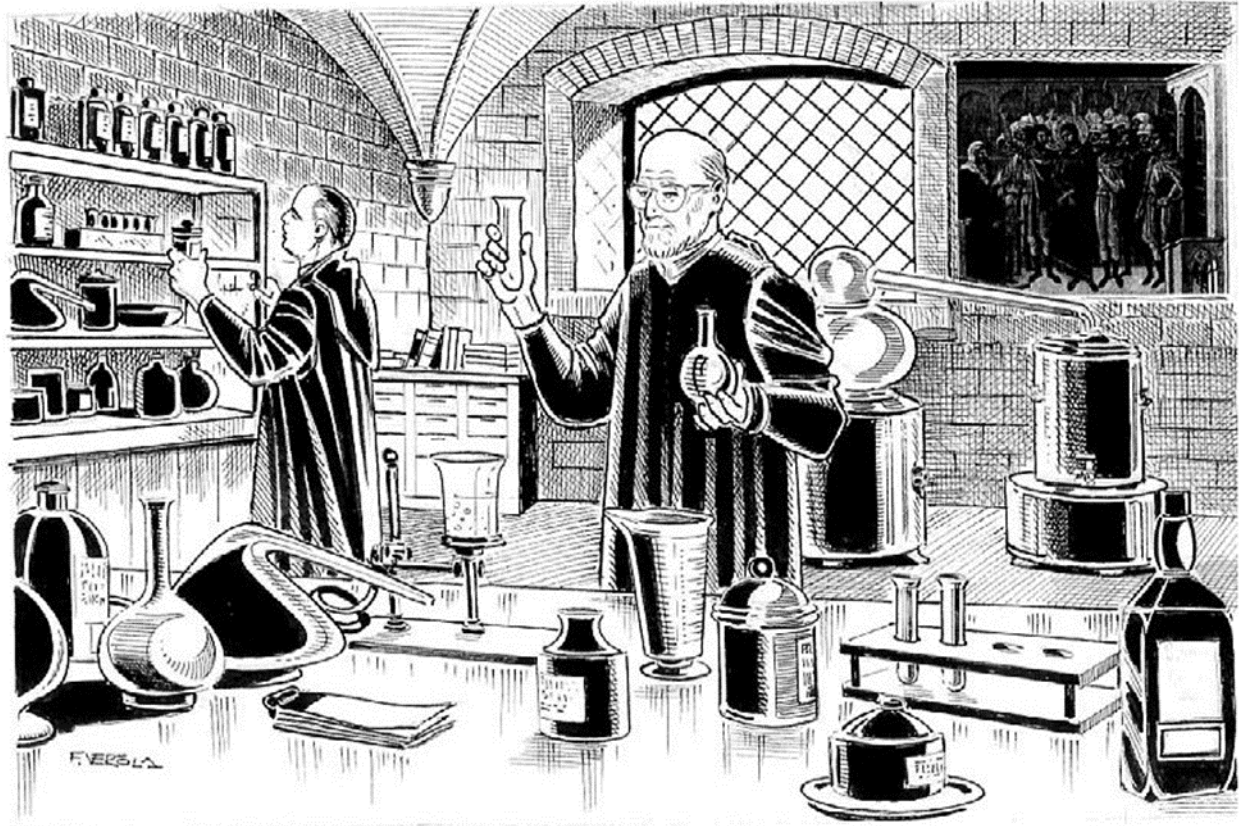
But the work in the house has many implications, so as to be able to engage the best faculties of all the members of the family, not only for the most humble services of cleaning, washing, cooking or other, but also to decorate tastefully the house of God or for useful and profitable crafts, to the delight of children, common utility and savings.

Those who have land could imitate the industriousness of the monks, who, not only in the Middle Ages, but often even today, take care of orchards and gardens. The current interest in ecology seems very favorable to develop this kind of activity, in the adults as well as in the young, for whom it would be, besides a useful physical exercise in the open air, also a powerful educational means to orderly commitment and a lesson in natural religion, in contemplating the works of creation and in caring for their preservation.

Obviously, professional work is also valuable, not only for economic gain, but also because it allows you to transmit in your work environment everything that you have received in your home.

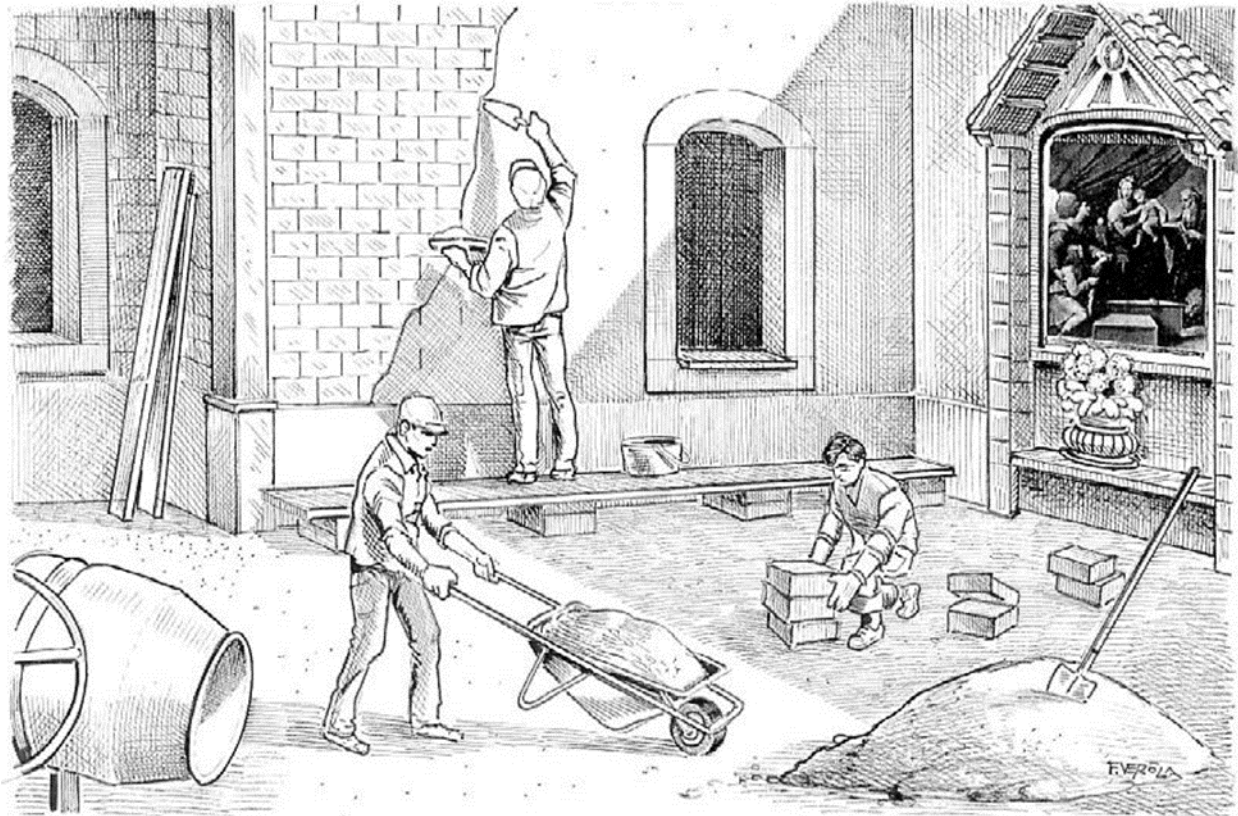












Training and study

We must not believe that study and commitment to education for one's self and others are reserved exclusively for the school. Certainly the school is important, but, in addition to the serious doubts aroused by certain trends in school today, it can in no way replace the training that must be given by the family. The catechetical school itself needs to be substantially supported by the religious formation given in the family.

In addition to the good example and daily practice of virtues, that the obliging commitment of all in the most humble works, as we have seen, has the irreplaceable task of penetrating deeply into souls, is also necessary the formation of the mind through study, reading and familiarity with the best expressions of human ingenuity in the different fields of science, letters, art and religion. Unfortunately, in our day a low-level culture is increasingly rampant, and unfortunately also manifestations of the most degrading degenerations, made available to all, including adolescents, pre-teens and children. through modern means of communication.

A family that wants to make its home a house of God, cannot but face this invasion of degrading culture and degeneration with the greatest determination. Letting go of the current is irresponsible.

First of all, the use of electronic means must be very limited, and children must not be admitted to them before a convenient age. We must then exclude from our own homes any unacceptable content, whether it is spread by electronic media or television, whether it is found in books, newspapers or magazines. If you don't watch closely, we know how many negative messages go around the houses.

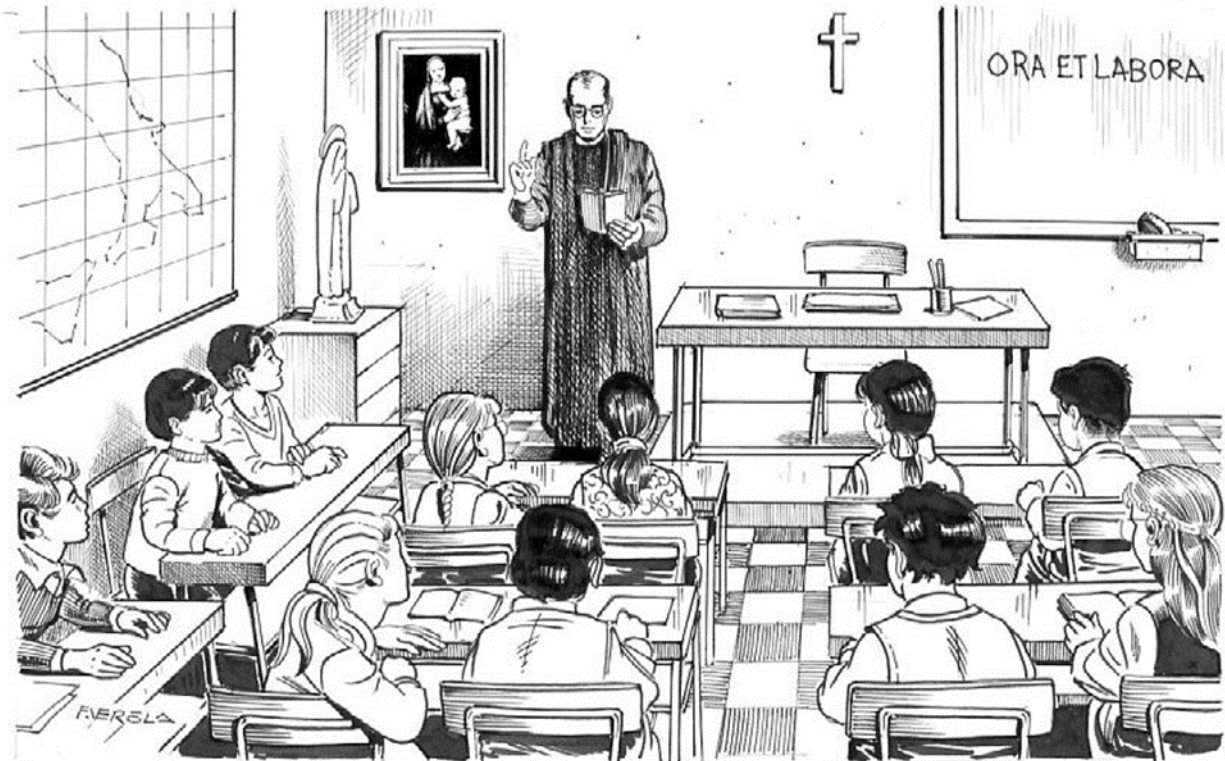
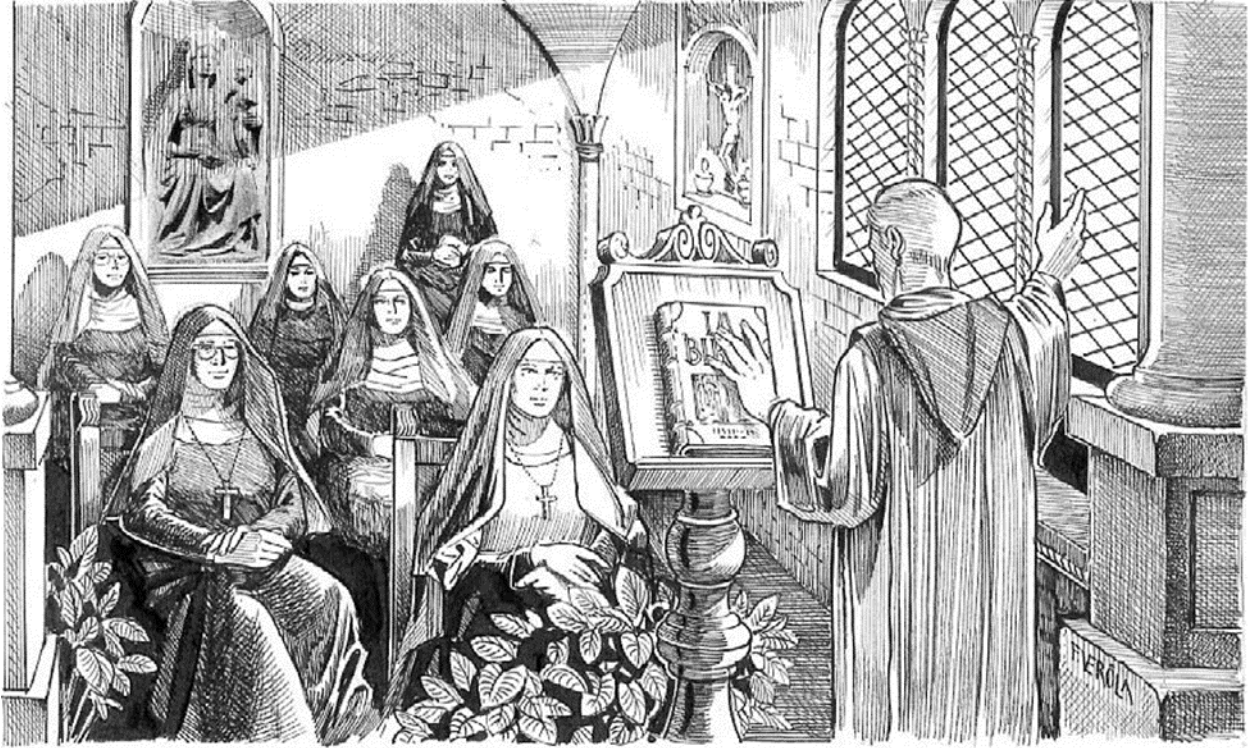
But this work of exclusion of evil must be accompanied by a work of promotion of good. Not only, that is, negative messages must not go around the house, but, on the contrary, it is necessary to make present and clearly visible all that can transmit positive and formative messages, in the readings as in the videos, in the music, in the art, in games and in everything that can influence the formation of our and our children's souls.

This is why we must keep in mind that the internet not only spreads the worst things, but it is also a means of making use of immense treasures of culture, music, art and religion. This opportunity, which once did not exist, must be taken advantage of.

At the same time we must also cultivate the most traditional means, and above all the formation of a good library. What treasure can be for the little ones and for the young people to have at hand books full of wisdom, beauty and religion! Are there in our homes?

At this point the objection arises: but who teaches us to orient ourselves in the middle of the Babylon of the internet or to find the most valid books or videos in the middle of the dirty production that floods us?

The objection is more than fair. It is clear that there is a need for education that goes beyond ordinary school curricula, which could and should be provided by religious communities and which parents should then commit themselves to pass on to their children. It would be an urgent mission for pastors and religious communities to give this help to families, who urgently need it. But the religious communities themselves have a duty to cultivate and deepen the religious and human knowledge necessary to orient themselves and to guide others in this difficult moment.





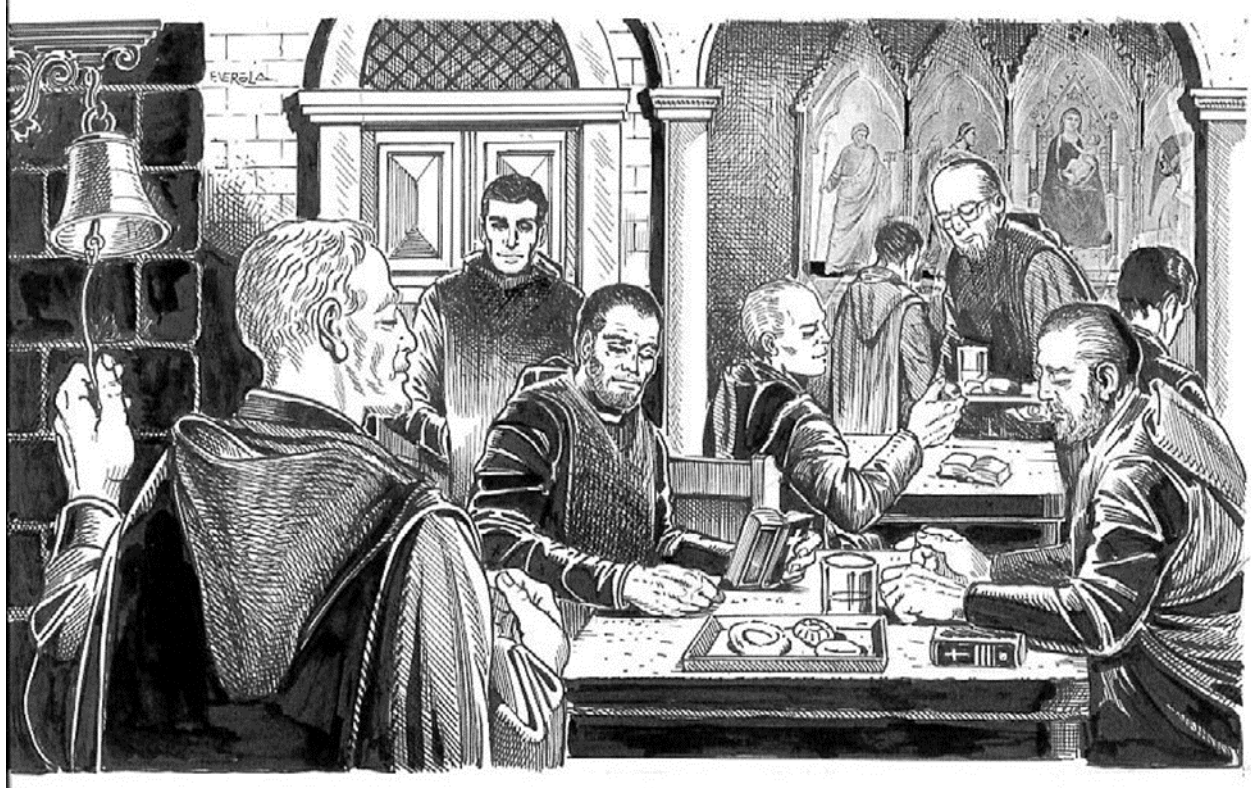


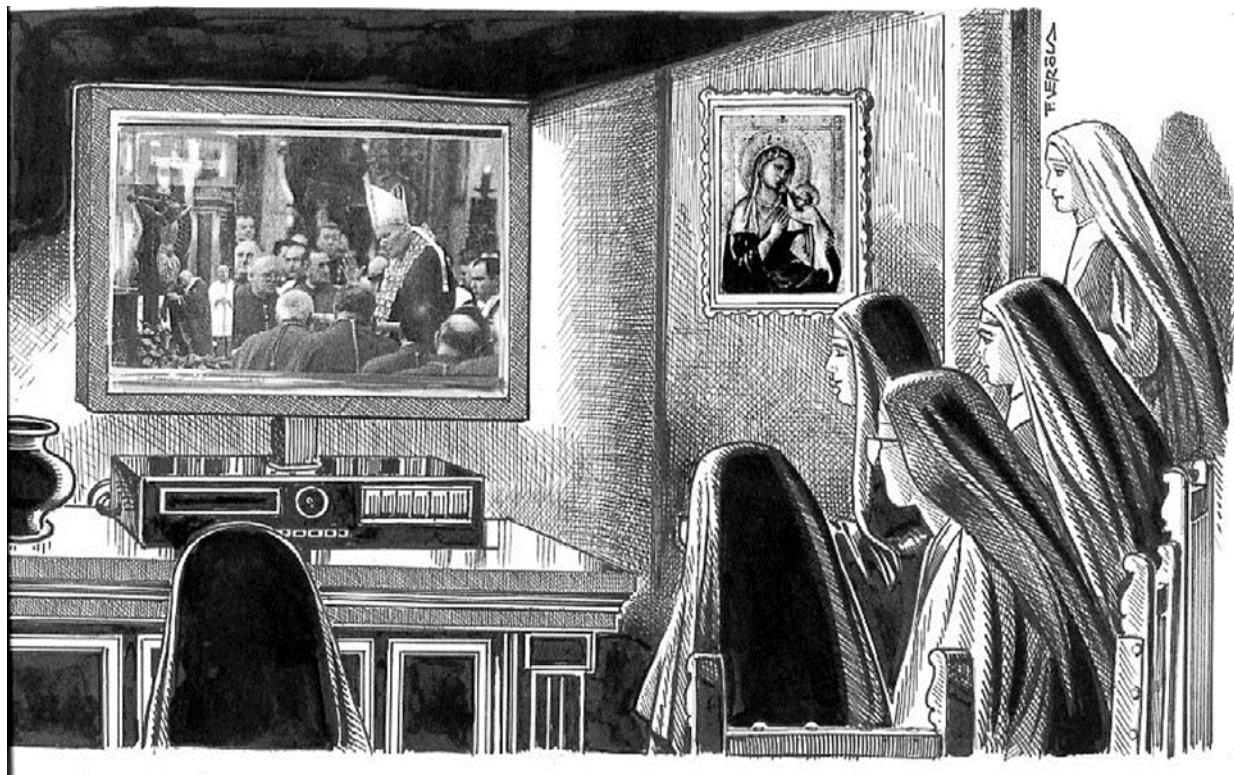
Convivial moments and rest

Enjoying art, music, beautiful and rewarding shows is not only part of the sphere of study, but should also brighten up the moments of common recreation and relaxation at the end of the day in preparation for the night rest. Unfortunately, even in these things harmful habits have been introduced. The most common entertainments are often polluted by vulgar or worse contents and by bad habits, very common among the young, but not for this reason less reprehensible. There is also a tendency to look for these diversions away from the family, favoring a lack of control and a deleterious individualism. Too often in the evening we desperately look for a fulfillment with entertainment away from home, out of measure and out of time, thus also losing the benefit of a healthy night's rest.

To all this it is necessary to react by rediscovering the true peacemaking beauty of art and real music and returning to make the leisure and evening relaxation a precious good of the family and not an escape from it. In the evening it is good to stay at home, to rejoice together in what art or healthy entertainment offers, to conclude with prayer and not too late to go to rest in peace and silence, imitating the rules and customs of cloistered communities.

Even the modern means, well used, can offer a substantial contribution to enrich the moments of recreation and leisure with rewarding experiences. In this too religious communities should be able to offer their support, after having acquired the necessary formation.







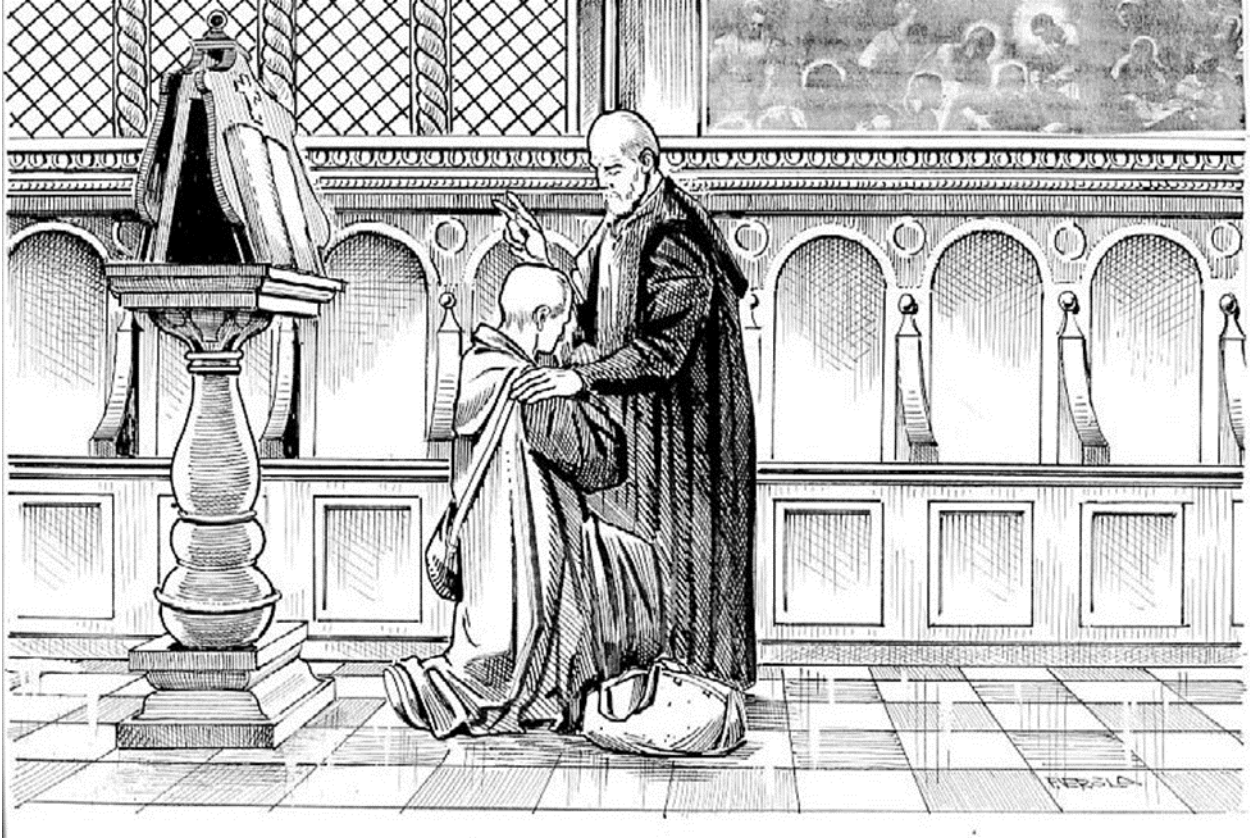
Protection of the family environment

Saint Benedict wants the monks who have to go away for some reason outside the monastery or on a journey to receive a special blessing and be accompanied by the prayer of their confreres, because, as in the monastery they are committed to building the house of God, so unfortunately very often in the world one is in the house of the devil. For this reason the monk must always remember which world he belongs to and, once he has fulfilled his mission in the world, he must hurry to return to the community.

Families should also offer similar protection to their members, especially the youngest, and the latter should learn to love their own home, just as the house of God, in which no one is troubled and saddened, because it is regulated by the wise norms established by Saint Benedict.

For this reason, life in God's house must be joyful and lovable, thanks to the commitment of everyone to do his part so that everything is done in the way and in the time due. This makes us understand how important is, in the life of the house, the virtue of punctuality.

How happy our young people should finally come home after the various external commitments with school, sport, friends!



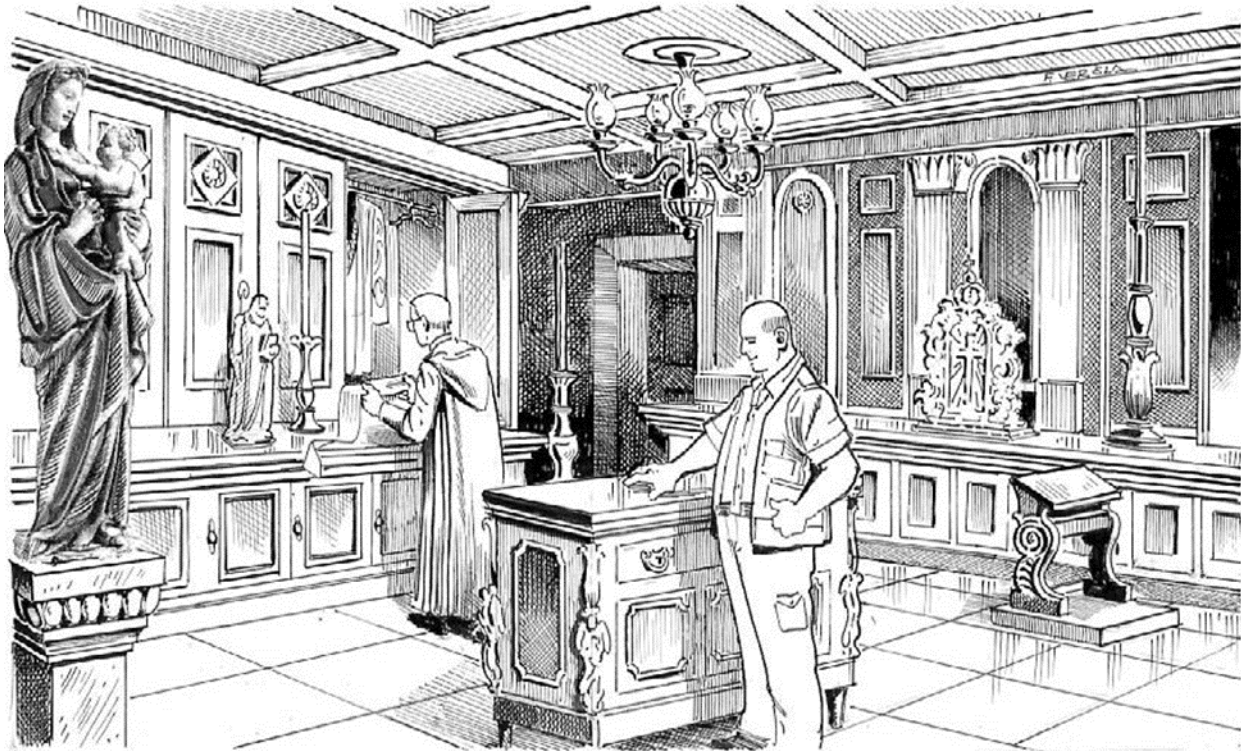
Furniture and clothing

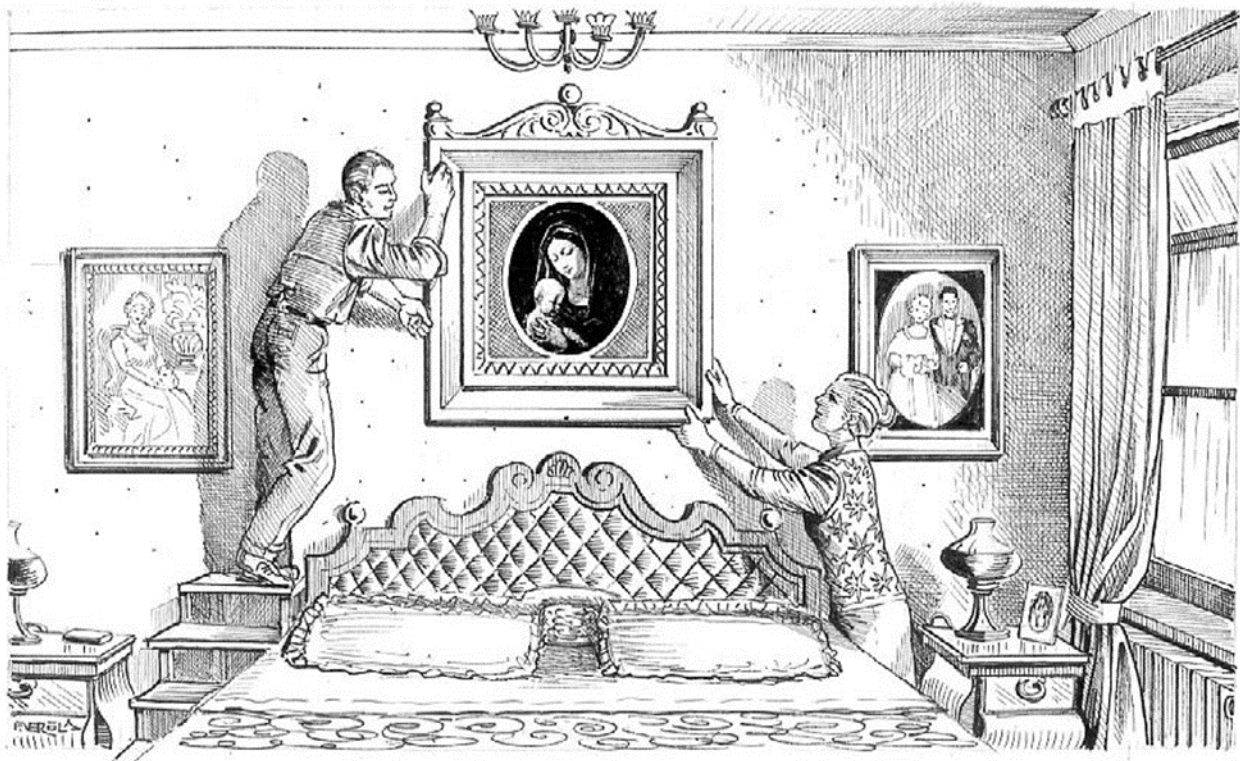
Saint Benedict gives only some sober indications on the furnishings of the monastery and on the clothes of the monks. But the following tradition has greatly developed these few indications, in which the saint has shown how these elements are fundamental for regulating life well in the house of God.

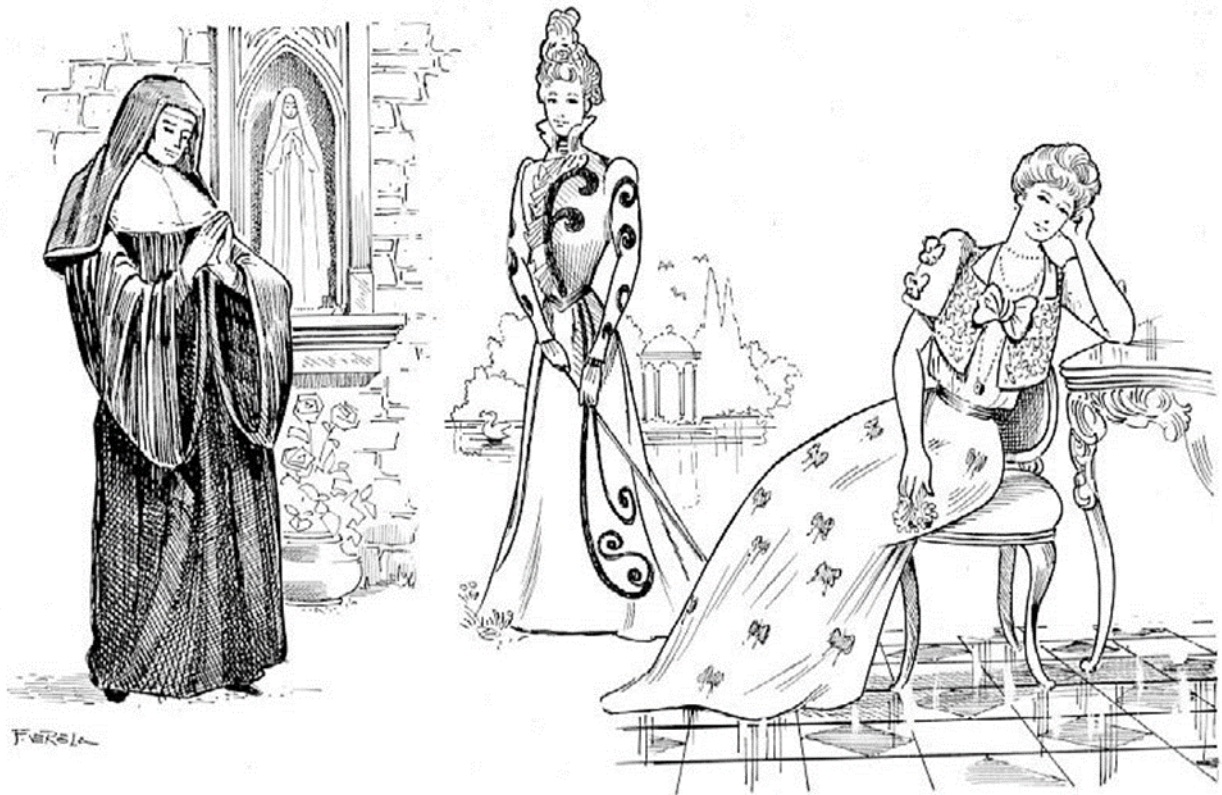
If for Saint Benedict the oratory of the monastery must be what its name says, and therefore nothing foreign must be done or stored there, this means that the environments of the house of God must foster the good life that is conducted in them. This is why the monks, through the centuries, have furnished their dwellings with sacred images and sculptures, not only in the church, but also in the ambulatory, in the cloisters and in the private rooms. Similarly, even the clothes they wore were a reminder of the sacredness of their lives, and this very often did not harm the aesthetics at all.

From these examples also families can draw inspiration, not only to properly adorn their space of worship, but also to confer to the environments of common or private residence, through a wise choice and arrangement of furniture, the right atmosphere to nourish holy and healthy feelings and habits.

Monastic clothes themselves may suggest an aesthetic that is also an expression of the soul.







Charity

But will caring so much for the inner life of the house of God close the hearts of family members to the sufferings of the needy? No, of course! What kind of Christian formation would be cultivated in the house of God if it were not open to all the problems of society?

But Saint Benedict teaches that problems are never linked only to the life of the individual, but they affect his whole family and his social group. So the best remedy is to heal all the associated life, starting with family life. A renewed family life in the light of the Rule of St Benedict and the example and teaching given by cloistered communities will be the best prevention against the evils that afflict society, and certainly prevention is better than therapy.

But even where evils have already penetrated, the best care will always be to heal the entire family life of suffering people in need. And in this not only individual members, but all together the family that is in better condition must put in its program to take charge of the most unfortunate families and bring to them, with material relief, even example, support, the formation necessary so that they can gradually heal and in turn take charge of radiating on other unfortunate families the flame of the charity of Saint Benedict, which from the cloisters, through the families that receive support from them, pours into the most remote corners of society.



Co-responsibility

Saint Benedict established that the abbot should convene the community to discuss the problems of the monastery together and that, before making a decision, he should listen to the opinion of everyone, even the youngest.

Throughout the Rule there is an invitation to co-responsibility extended to all monks. So, for example, Saint Benedict wants that everyone takes care of the objects belonging to the monastery, that of them be made an inventory and that nothing must be lost or wasted.

If this same care were to animate the members of a family, not only would unnecessary waste and expense be avoided, but a substantial contribution would be made to the protection of the environment, preventing the dispersion of materials that could be used and the accumulation of superfluous things.

But co-responsibility becomes more conscious if one imitates Saint Benedict's disposition to confront problems together by bringing together the chapter of the community. In the same way, families could hold moments of common, prudent and charitable discussion of family problems, so as to make everyone share in the responsibilities and decisions taken in common.

The first chapter of the family that is suggested is that organized to decide together to adopt, with enthusiasm, if possible under the guidance of a monastic community, this renewal of family life, with which the members of the family want to make their home a house of God, in which no one is troubled or grieved.

