

LOOKING AT THE ORIGINS OF THE PHRASE *ORA ET LABORA*

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1. *Ora et labora*: introduction to the problem

One of the most widespread maxims concerning work is *ora et labora* (pray and work), whether as a watchword and summary of Benedictine spirituality, or as a maxim included in the Rule that St Benedict wrote for his monks. Perhaps the most recent reference to this phrase comes in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which states, „Later, Saint Benedict of Norcia proposed that his monks live in community, combining prayer and spiritual reading with manual labour (*ora et labora*). Seeing manual labour as spiritually meaningful proved revolutionary. Personal growth and sanctification came to be sought in the interplay of recollection and work.”¹ Although it would not be true to say that Pope Francis explicitly attributes the authorship of the phrase to St Benedict – what is more, he adds *lectio divina*, spiritual reading, to the prayer-and-work duo – the context could be said to imply that it is his.

An examination of about fifteen works of history and encyclopaedia or dictionary entries² shows that only four of them contain an explicit reference to this phrase

¹ Pope FRANCIS: Enc. *Laudato Si'*, no. 126. To prayer and work, Pope Francis adds a third element, *lectio divina* or prayerful spiritual reading, which is indeed one of the main activities of Benedictines. Cf. also JOHN PAUL II, speech at the Europeistic Act in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 9 November 1982. *Juan Pablo II en España*. Madrid, BAC, 1982. 184–187.

² Cf. Karl BIHLMAYER – Hermann TUECHLE: *Storia della Chiesa*. Vol. I. Brescia, Morcelliana, 1969.; Albert EHRHARD – Wilhelm NEUSS: *Historia de la Iglesia*. Vol. 2. Madrid, Rialp, 1962.; Agustin FLICHE – Victor MARTIN: *Histoire de L'Eglise. Depuis les origins jusqu'a nos jours*. Vol. 4. Paris, Bloud & Gay, 1937; LUDWIG HERTLING: *Historia de la Iglesia*. Barcelona, Herder, 1968.; Phillip HUGHES: *A Popular History of the Church* Vol. II. New York, Macmillan & Co, 1998.; Hubert JEDIN: *Manual de Historia de la Iglesia*. Vol. 2. Barcelona, Herder, 1987.; Pierre DE LABRIOLLE et al.: *Storia della Chiesa*. Vol. IV. Turin, S.A.I.E., 1961.; Joseph LORTZ: *Historia de la Iglesia*. Madrid, Ediciones Cristiandad, 1962.; Bernardino LLORCA: *Historia de la Iglesia*. Vol. I. Madrid, Guadarrama,

as an expression – or *the* expression – of Benedictine spirituality, authored by St Benedict. To cite just two examples, Bihlmayer says “Monks were also asked for a certain degree of learning, whereby „*Ora*” was organically connected to „*Labora*”;³ and Lortz says, „St Benedict orders the lives of monks – *ora et labora* – completely around the celebration of the liturgy”.⁴ By contrast, other manuals of long-standing tradition such as Hubert Jedin’s work do not refer to the phrase at all, but simply ignore it.⁵ Two of them – Hughes and Orlandis – refer to work and to prayer as the proper activities for monks, but also add a third, *lectio divina*.⁶ Perhaps the most noticeable fact is that none of them raise the question of the origin of the phrase *ora et labora*, Benedictine or otherwise; nor do they allude to its presence or absence in the Rule of St Benedict. However that may be, in the context of Church history books, the omission of such a specific question is not really problematic.

The proof that the phrase is not St Benedict’s own is simply that it is not found in the ancient text of his Rule (RB) – either in Chapter 48 which deals with manual work, or in any of the other seventy-two chapters. Both of the most recent critical editions of the Rule, produced by Benedictines – Terrence Kardong and Adalbert de Vogüé – say little on the topic.⁷ De Vogüé, of the Abbey of Pierre-qui-Vire in France, merely mentions the expression to expand on its importance and to include a reference to *lectio divina*,⁸ as mentioned above. More striking is the fact that Kardong’s critical edition actually refers to an article by Meeuws⁹ that is commonly held to settle the question – but only with reference to a very secondary matter;¹⁰ yet in an article published almost simultaneously with his critical edition (both being dated 1996), Kardong expressly states that the answer to the question of the phrase’s origin is given in Meeuws’ article.¹¹

BAC, ²1955.; Jean-Marie MAYEUR et al.: *Histoire du Christianisme des origines à nos jours*. Vol. 2. Paris, Desclée–Fayard, 1995.; José ORLANDIS: *Historia de la Iglesia*. Vol. 1. Madrid, Palabra, ³1998.; Gregorio PENCO: *Storia del Monachesimo in Italia: dalle origini alla fine del Medioevo*. Milano, Editoriale Jaca Book, 1995.; Karl SUSO FRANK: Benedikt von Nursia. In: Martin GRESCHAT (ed.): *Gestalten der Kirchengeschichte*. Vol. 3. Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1983. 35–46.; Alberto TORRESANI: *Storia della Chiesa*. Milan, Ares, 1999.; Janina KOWALCZYK: Benedyktyńska Reguła. In: Feliks GRYGLEWICZ et al.: *Encyklopedia Katolicka*. Vol. 2. Lublin, Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, 1989. 258–262.

³ BIHLMAYER–TUECHLE op. cit. 443.

⁴ LORTZ op. cit. 141.

⁵ Cf. JEDIN op. cit. 480–490.; MAYEUR op. cit. 752.; FLICHE–MARTIN op. cit. 594.

⁶ Cf. HUGHES op. cit. 75.; ORLANDIS op. cit. 126–136.

⁷ Cf. Terrence KARDONG: *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary*. *The Liturgical Press*, 1996.; Adalbert DE VOGÜÉ: *The Rule of St. Benedict: A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary*. Trans.: J. B. HASBROUCK OSB. Kalamazoo, MI, Cistercian Publications, 1983.

⁸ DE VOGÜÉ op. cit. 242.

⁹ Cf. Marie-Benoit MEEUWS OSB: *Ora et labora: devise bénédictine? Collectanea Cisterciensia*, vol. 54. (1992–1993), 193–219.

¹⁰ Cf. KARDONG op. cit. 416.

¹¹ Terrence KARDONG: *Work Is Prayer: Not! Assumption Abbey Newsletter*, vol. 23., no. 4. (1995).

The question does indeed appear to have been answered in 1992 by the Benedictine Marie-Benoît Meeuws, who shows that the phrase *ora et labora* is of fairly recent origin. According to Meeuws it originated in a book about Benedictine life by Maurus Wolter, the first Abbot of Beuron Abbey in southern Germany,¹² published in 1880, which became quite well known. Written in Latin, the book refers to the phrase as follows: *Hinc vetus clarissimaque illa monachorum tessera: Ora et labora! Opus Dei atque opus laboris, en duplex Dominici servitii ratio, in Maria ac Martha adumbrata, sive alae duae ad altissimam attolunt perfectionem.*¹³ Roughly translated, „Hence the ancient and extremely famous watchword of monks: Pray and work! The work of God and the work of labour: here is a double way of serving the Lord, as represented in Mary and Martha, or as two wings raising a person to the heights of perfection.” Curiously, however, Wolter calls the phrase *vetus clarissimaque*, ancient and extremely famous, so he does not claim the authorship of it but invokes a long-standing oral tradition. Meeuws’ article does not give the page-reference in Wolter, nor is it given by subsequent authors who quote Meeuws’ discovery. In the years since the publication of Meeuws’ article this discovery has not attained much currency even within the international scholarly community.¹⁴

I will look briefly at some approaches to this question. In a 1993 sociological study, Hans Meier (who probably was unaware of Meeuws’ suggestion) said that the phrase could have originated in the Carolingian period.¹⁵ Had it done so, though, a search in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* collection would surely have produced some results. However, there are 123 occurrences of the word *labora*, and in none of them is it connected to the word *ora*. Nor is it found in the *Library of Latin Texts* that contains the *Corpus Christianorum – Series Latina* and the *Continuatio Mediaevalis*. In the searches I have conducted in these sources, I have only found one case where the words *ora* and *labora* are in any proximity, and that was in Thomas à Kempis’ work *Vita boni monachi*, where he writes, „*Saepe ora cum Antonio. Labora cum Pachomio*” („with Antony, pray often. With Pachomius, work”). This all indicates that until at least the fifteenth century the phrase was not well known, and still less attributed to St Benedict.¹⁶

There is likewise a very notable absence of data in some major works. For example, in the magnificent volume on St Benedict published to mark the fifteenth centenary of his birth, and subtitled, tellingly, *Symbol abendländischer Kultur „ora et labora”*

¹² Maurus WOLTER: *Praecipua Ordinis Monastici Elementa, e Regula S. Patris Benedicti*. Brugis, 1880.

¹³ *Ibid.*, quoted by MEEUWS op. cit. 213. and note 20.

¹⁴ It is notable that, for example, an online bibliography dated 2005–2009 by Aquinata Böckman, an expert on the Rule of St Benedict, refers to an article by Marie-Benoît Meeuws [or Meeus] from 1980, and not to the one discussed here, which appeared between 1992 and 1993. Cf. <http://www.osb.org/rb/rbbib/b2vocab.html>

¹⁵ Cf. Hans MEIER: *Ora et labora*. Die Benediktinregel und die europäische Sozialgeschichte. *Communio*, 1993/22. 431.

¹⁶ Data from *Brepolis Publishers On Line*. The publication *Continuatio latina* contains texts written up to the twentieth century.

(„symbol of Western Culture »Pray and Work«”),¹⁷ the only place where the motto is mentioned is in the chapter on art, with reference to representations of the saint holding an open book. Jan Karen Steppe explains that traditionally, most such books display the words *Ausculata, o fili* („Listen, O my son”, the opening words of the Rule), or *Regula Monachorum* („the Rule of Monks”); however, a few produced in America – and therefore relatively recent – bear the motto *Ora et labora*.¹⁸ This matches or confirms Meeuws’ thesis, since the American foundations were set up by German monks, and the first dates from 1846, in Pennsylvania. However, this does not prove that the phrase was ancient and famous, as Maurus Wolter calls it. It is not quoted or referred to anywhere else in this extremely extensive work.

In Spanish-language works, explicit reference to Meeuws’ work is to be found in García de Gortázar’s 2004 book, in the chapter by Fr. Antonio Manuel Pérez Camacho. However, what he says is that *ora et labora* is a famous expression from the Desert Fathers,¹⁹ which is not found in St Benedict or in other ancient ‘Rules’, but which reflects the characteristic lifestyle of monks. He quotes Meeuws in support of the absence of the motto *ora et labora* from the writings mentioned, but does not repeat Meeuws’ suggestion as to its origin.²⁰

Finally, in 2008 Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle refers to Meeuws’ thesis and leaves open the solution to this question. In an historical article on William Harvey, an English physician who was the first to describe completely and in detail the systemic circulation and properties of blood being pumped to the brain and body by the heart, she describes the title-page of Harvey’s masterful *Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* (1628), that included a banderole that wraps a doric column with the motto *Ora et labora*. She also explains the possible contacts that Harvey could have with the Benedictine spirituality in Scotland and in Padua, but especially with a member of the Ramsay clan, the Scottish family that bore as its motto *Ora et labora*. The origin of clan Ramsay has a notable Benedictine association: the name derives from its village of Ramsey where a powerful abbey prospered and became one of the most important Benedictine houses in England: Ramsey Abbey. Richard William alias Cromwell ordered its dissolution A shield with the brief phrase and a unicorn crest in Dalhousie Castle in Edinburgh, that belong to the clan Ramsay, was carved and dates to about 1450.²¹

¹⁷ Cf. Filips DE CLOEDT et al.: *Benedictus. Symbol abendländischer Kultur „ora et labora”*. Stuttgart–Zurich, Belsar, 1998. I had access to the second edition, published for the 1450th anniversary of his death. The complete title, that includes the words *ora et labora*, only appears on the cover.

¹⁸ The first Benedictine foundation in America dates from 1846, in Pennsylvania.

¹⁹ Cf. Antonio MANUEL PÉREZ CAMACHO OSB: *El ora en la jornada del monje: la liturgia en los monasterios del rito hispano al romano („Ora in the monk’s day: the liturgy in monasteries from the Hispanic to the Roman rite”)*. In: José Ángel García DE GORTÁZAR (ed.): *Vida y muerte en el monasterio románico („Life and death in the Roman rite monasteries”)*. Aguilar del Campo, Fundación Santa María la Real Centro de Estudios del Románico, 2004. 31.

²⁰ Cf. PÉREZ CAMACHO op. cit. 32.

²¹ Cf. Mor BOYLE: *William Harvey’s Anatomy Book and Literary Culture. Medical history*, vol. 52., no. 1. (2008), 73–91.

2. Some historic aspects of St Benedict's Rule

Concerning the sources and composition of the Rule of St Benedict, his great publicist in the Carolingian era, St Benedict of Aniane, mentions the existence of another Rule, the *Regula Magistri* or „Rule of the Master”, of unknown authorship, which bears an unmistakable similarity to St Benedict's. The problem arose of determining which came first, and which was inspired by the other. De Vogüé, in the mid-twentieth century, showed that the *Regula Magistri* came first and that St Benedict took inspiration from it.²² Once that is established, the next question is whether there is any dependence between the two Rules in what refers to work.

I will here set out briefly some points on which they harmonize and others where they differ. Chapter 50 of the *Regula Magistri* is entitled „On the times of the daily tasks in the different seasons”. St Benedict's Rule is more concise: „*De opera manuum cotidiana*” („On the daily work of the hands”), a clear reference to manual work. With regard to the content, the two Rules agree in not limiting themselves to manual work but leaving their meaning open to the inclusion of activities other than work, especially *lectio divina*, which is not mentioned in the chapter-headings. Moreover, *Regula Magistri* offers another chapter on work,²³ Chapter 86, which discusses „the monastery's farms”. According to this Rule, farms should be rented out, so that „it is a layman who concerns himself with secular things” and so that the monks avoid labour that is too hard. St Benedict's Rule has a different approach. Although they may pay people to work their fields, the monks do manual work themselves. Two aspects of this difference ask for analysis. First, the historical question: does it represent a step forward in monastic teaching? The second concerns the concept itself: if monks are dedicated to contemplation, why do they have to work?

A historical antecedent of work in monastic life is referred to by Jedin.²⁴ The first coenobitic monastery was founded by St Pachomius in Egypt around the year 320 and had great influence in both the religious and the cultural spheres. Shared life demanded shared mutual service. Monks' separation from the world and their renunciation of personal possessions also necessitated a shared effort not only to attain eternal salvation but also to survive here on earth. In that first monastery the monks tended to come from the poorer sectors of society and they would continue doing the same jobs as they had had before – bakers, fishermen, etc. – but now for the benefit of the monastic community. They had a positive view of work, in a culture that saw work as something negative by comparison with contemplation (*otium*) – a view typical of the Greeks and inherited by the Romans.

As well as this historical reference, St Benedict states explicitly that „When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are

²² Cf. PENCO op. cit. 51., where he sets out De Vogüé's arguments.

²³ Cf. García María COLOMBAS OSB: *La tradición benedictina: ensayo histórico*. („The Benedictine tradition: historical essay”). Zamora, Montecassino Ediciones, 1989. 108–109.

²⁴ Cf. JEDIN op. cit. 471–473.

really monks” (RB Chapter 48, 8). In other words, manual work has precedents in patristic literature and in Scripture.

With regard to the patristic tradition, the study on St Basil (330–379) by Augustine Holmes OSB, centred on his Rule, cites his teachings on the subjects of work and prayer. Work is an opportunity for spiritual combat and also for mortification. It keeps the body healthy and prevents it from becoming enslaved to pleasure or to the passions; and it is necessary in order to drive away the perils of idleness (Shorter Rule, 61). Holmes highlights the match between this last point and the well-known opening phrase of Chapter 48 of St Benedict’s Rule: *Otiositas inimica est animae* („Idleness is the enemy of the soul”).²⁵

However, for Basil not all kinds of manual work contribute to the purpose of monastic life. Those that should be avoided are the kind that bring the monk into contact with the world; those that produce a love of luxury; or those that distract from prayer and saying the psalms. Holmes notes the interesting fact that Basil, unlike the *Regula Magistri*, takes a positive view of agricultural work, in that it provides for the community’s daily needs. St Benedict’s Rule shares this positive view, since it includes or at least tolerates working in the fields in case of need, in spite of the effort required and in spite of the fact that monks might refuse to do it. St Benedict says that monks should not be saddened when they themselves need to work at harvesting (RB Chapter 48, 7).

So much for the link with tradition.²⁶ However, as indicated above, the place of work in the Benedictine rule also has roots in the practice of the Apostles, which means that it is linked with the Jewish view. Monastic life is not only comparable to the life of the twelve Apostles, who were mostly fishermen, but also to that of St Paul who, as a faithful Jew, in no way different from his contemporaries, followed the instructions of the Talmud. The study of religious writings and meditation on God’s word, done by all rabbis, had to be complemented by manual work, in his case tent-making, which also entailed the pursuit of perfection. The positive view of manual work found in the Jewish tradition is also clearly expressed in the Talmud: „In the same way as Israel was commanded concerning the Sabbath, so were they commanded concerning work.”²⁷ And it was found among the early Christians, as clearly proved by the famous text in the Letter to Diognetus and also some of Tertullian’s writings.

²⁵ Cf. Augustine HOLMES: *A Life Pleasing to God. The Spirituality of the Rules of St. Basil*. London, Cistercian Publications, 2000. 228., 471–473. Cf. also José Luis ILLANES: *Ante Dios y en el mundo. Apuntes para una teología del trabajo. (Before God and the World. Notes for a Theology of Work)*. Pamplona, EUNSA, 1997. Chapter 3.

²⁶ Reference to St Augustine is omitted for the sake of brevity. For a complete summary see ILLANES op. cit. Chapter IV.

²⁷ Kid. 33a, quoted by Louis Isaac RABINOWITZ: Labor in the Talmud. In: Michael BERENBAUM – Fred SKOLNIK (eds): *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Vol. 12. Detroit, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 408–411.; this quotation 409.

From all this we may conclude that the presence of manual work in monastic life was not a novelty introduced by St Benedict. Historically, it was preceded by St Pachomius' foundation, by the *Regula Magistri*, and by St Basil, who included it in his Rule. In contrast to the Greek attitude, Benedict upholds the value given to jobs by the rabbinical tradition and apparent in the New Testament. To this must be added the sociological fact of Christian lives from the first to the fourth centuries: without embracing monastic life they remained in the places and jobs they had already been doing before being baptized, which were for many of them the setting in which they lived out and crowned their Christianity.

3. The purpose and meaning of work in St Benedict and in Benedictine spirituality

To ascertain the purpose and meaning of work in St Benedict's writings and Benedictine spirituality, I shall follow the opinions of Benedictine writers. There can be no doubt of the importance of work in monastic life. However, as Colombas states, „The Rule, obviously, does not organize a monastery to produce and amass wealth, it does not aim to create a business, as we would say today; for the Rule, the monk is indeed a ‘workman’, but ‘God’s workman’, working for God and in the things of God”,²⁸ and his principal work is the *opus Dei* or divine office, and not necessarily the *opus manuum* or manual work.

A comparison of St Benedict's Rule with the *Regula Magistri* shows that Chapter 50 of the *Regula Magistri* explicitly mentions two purposes for the work of monks: the ascetical one of avoiding idleness, and the charitable one of acquiring something to give to the needy. St Benedict, however, speaks of manual work solely as a means to combat *otiositas*. De Vogüé sees this as his main concern: the monk should be occupied, and when he is not occupied with reading and meditation he should be occupied with work.²⁹ Here it is worth recalling how Kardong notes that St Benedict uses the term *otiositas*, idleness, and not *otium*, leisure. It is interesting to see how, while both words have the same etymological root, *otiositas* attributes a negative character to *otium*: it refers to laziness or sloth, one of the seven deadly sins.³⁰ But at the same time work is beginning to be seen as an activity that combats that vice. Diligence, as a human virtue, a good operative habit, is actually the opposite of the classic conception of work; there is a progressively widening gap between Benedict's view and the Greek and Roman understanding of *otium* as the most truly human state, while work, *nec-otium*, properly belonged to slaves or women.

Is this view of work sufficient for it to become, together with prayer, the key to Benedictine spirituality?

²⁸ COLOMBAS op. cit. 105.; Cf. also DE VOGÜÉ op. cit. 314.

²⁹ Cf. DE VOGÜÉ op. cit. cap. XV and Adalbert DE VOGÜÉ: *San Benedetto. L'uomo e l'opera*. Seregno, Abbazia San Benedetto, 2001. 119.

³⁰ Cf. KARDONG op. cit. 383.

Some history books, without answering that question directly, offer hermeneutic and historical explanations. The book edited by Jedin deals explicitly with the theme of Benedictine spirituality. The reason for entering monastic life has to be that of following Christ under the authority of the abbot and the obedience that is due to him. Every activity of the monks is directed towards this Christocentrism. He simply does not mention work.³¹ Fliche and Martin think the same: „The magnificent intellectual work done by the Benedictine order throughout the centuries may lead one to suppose that their legislator expressly recommended the work of the spirit. But in the chapter on this, we may meet with a certain disappointment.” And they conclude: „What he wants to foster above all are the characteristic virtues of the [monastic] state: the spirit of joyful obedience, the absolute authority of the abbot, perseverance in the way of life they have chosen, humility, the attentive celebration of the divine office, and generous hospitality.”³² All of this accords with two other major works by Benedictines: Penco’s book about monastic life in Italy,³³ and the critical edition of St Benedict’s Rule by Kardong, who sees the central point of his spirituality as the constant presence of the holiness of God.³⁴

Other studies offer historical lights on the question. Specifically, if manual work were central to Benedictine spirituality, the fact that in monasteries a certain distancing from such work arose little by little, would be inexplicable. Various explanations for this change are offered. Colombas, for instance, remarks that when monasteries began to be rich, the agricultural work was more and more left to servants and tenant farmers.³⁵ Indeed, in the Carolingian era, abbeys became places where several hundred monks lived, plus a large number of pupils of their schools, all within an urban setting dominated by the monastery. The abbey lived off the large expanse of land that it owned, worked by servants and tenant farmers, while the monks dedicated their time more and more to liturgical activities through prayer and asceticism. However, the increased power enjoyed by the abbot, not only in economic but also political terms, had some negative results. The eleventh and twelfth centuries show a constant swinging between decadence and reform, with one outstanding Pope and one outstanding monastery: Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) and the Abbey of Cluny (founded in 910), whose influence on spirituality and also culture was extremely significant. Jordan Aumann explains that Cluny’s importance lay in initializing „a certain centralization and uniformity of observance, [...] a refined monastic culture based upon intensive study of the Bible and the Fathers, a

³¹ Cf. JEDIN op. cit. 480–490. Kowalczyk also discusses the Christocentrism of the Rule: Cf. KOWALCZYK op. cit. 259.

³² FLICHE–MARTIN op. cit. 595.

³³ PENCO op. cit. Chapter 2.

³⁴ Cf. KARDONG op. cit. 434.

³⁵ Cf. COLOMAS op. cit. 391–401.

genuinely contemplative orientation, a far-reaching charitable activity, [and] serious though limited work, especially that of the scriptorium³⁶ – copying manuscripts.

This renewed focus, as well as its effects on the monks' lives, also had effects on the very structure of the Benedictine congregation, since, as is understandable, incessant apostolic activity and the time spent in the scriptorium meant that the monks moved further and further from the kind of manual work connected with agriculture etc. (since work in the scriptorium was also manual work). For this reason, this kind of work was done first by servants and tenant farmers as already said, and then by converts, family members or oblates, to whom the monks committed manual work and provision for the monastery's daily needs in terms of food, upkeep etc. This was the origin of the division between „choir monks” and „lay brothers” – a division that is particularly relevant to the topic of manual work, and also to an understanding of why the maxim *ora et labora* was not in fact conceived of as epitomizing these monasteries.

However, the eleventh and twelfth centuries were undoubtedly critical times for monastic life. At the dawn of the eleventh century there appeared the figure of St Bernard of Clairvaux, whose foundation of Cîteaux aimed to restore the observance of St Benedict's Rule. Perhaps its most outstanding feature was the return to manual work and especially to work on the land, as St Bernard preached. But this return was not what defined the life of a monk. Jacques Winandy, Abbot of Clairvaux after the Second World War, locates the undisputed faithfulness of this famous abbey to St Benedict's Rule in the fact that it consisted of an essentially contemplative life, comparable to that of Mary of Bethany and not that of Martha. The monk divided his time between reading, meditation, the recitation of the Divine Office in choir with his brother-monks, and also individual prayer done prostrate before the altar of the church. There is no mention, then, of work as essential to Benedictine spirituality.³⁷

It is worth pointing out that the Cistercians' return to manual work was not a new approach originating with the order. On the contrary, for centuries beforehand Christian teaching on work spread widely around what is now Western Europe, together with notable sociological changes. One of them is the appearance and consolidation of guilds, which strengthened the notion of work as an importance factor, capable of binding specific groups of workers together. These guilds or corporations underwent a long process of finding their position in society, becoming influential in both the economic and cultural spheres. To cite just one example,³⁸ between 1210 and 1235 Chartres Cathedral in France was completed with forty-two representations in stained glass of the different jobs done by the donors – bakers, shoemakers, butchers, etc. – facing the thirty-two panels donated by noble families.

³⁶ Carl PEIFER: *The Rule in History*. In: Timothy FRY: *RB 1980: The Rule Of St. Benedict*. Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1981. 122–123. Quoted by Jordan AUMANN O.P.: *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1985. Chapter 5., 86.

³⁷ Cf. Jaques WINANDY: *Benedictine Spirituality*, www.ewtn.com/library/SPIRIT/BENESPIR.TXT.

³⁸ Cf. Sara LUTAN: *Royal, Aristocratic and Bourgeois Patronage: the Examples of Chartres Cathedral and the Church of St. Martin in Candes*. *Assaph. Studies in Art History*, no. 4.(1999/4), 91–104.

Obviously the stained-glass windows from the guilds or corporations were paid for and chosen expressly by them, and display high-quality workmanship, colour, design and a rich variety of themes describing the job in question, by contrast with the windows of noble families who chose to represent their patron saint or protector, in a rather more static style. This was wonderful proof of the influence and economic power wielded by the guilds in those years. Manual workers were no longer servants or bondsmen, but free members of a society that needed and depended on their work, and their social, cultural and economic influence began to make itself felt.

At the same time the phenomenon of laymen taking over the manual work of a monastery in order to leave the monks time for prayer and *lectio divina* meant that religious life became synonymous with life in a church, not in the world; and furthermore, it strengthened the idea that someone who received a calling from God to join religious life was practising „first class” Christianity. Just as, during the classical period, there was a recognizable „aristocracy of humanism”, which considered that only the man who lived freely in a *polis* was living a fully human life, in the same way, by the end of the Middle Ages, the notion of the fullness of Christianity was adjudicated to a life lived apart, in a monastery. In other words, there appeared an „aristocracy of Christianity” that relegated lay-people to a less favoured state.³⁹ And even though there arose orders of preachers, orders of mendicants, etc., in them too the main activity continued to be contemplation, centred on prayer and the divine office.⁴⁰

4. The Benedictines’ interpretation

Benedictine tradition on this point varies considerably. De Vogüé, for example, referring to the importance of work in his commentary on the Rule, notes the polemics about *ora et labora* initiated by Winandy.⁴¹ Winandy says, „First, let us denounce the now classic formula: Pray and work. ‘*Ora et labora.*’ This formula omits one member – and not the least necessary one – of the traditional trilogy: prayer, *reading*, work.”⁴² De Vogüé goes still further and adds a fourth term, „meditating”.⁴³ And he concludes, „Benedict did not mean to perform a social or civilizing work, as some moderns would have it, or simply to prevent his monks from being idle, as others imagine [...] In reality Benedict stands exactly in the line traced by the Fathers, without claims of originality or civilizing designs, but also without losing any of the various motivations of the tradition. For him work is not solely an ascetical exercise,

³⁹ Cf. María Pía CHIRINOS: Monsignor Alvaro del Portillo e la nuova evangelizzazione. In: Pablo GEFAELL (ed.): *Vir fidelis multum laudabitur*. Vol. 1. Roma, Edusc, 2014. 167–186.

⁴⁰ Cf. ILLANES op. cit. Chapter 5.

⁴¹ Cf. DE VOGÜÉ op. cit. 314.

⁴² WINANDY op. cit.

⁴³ Cf. DE VOGÜÉ op. cit. 315.

an occupation to expel idleness. It is also an obligation towards the neighbor; the monks should earn their living and give alms.⁴⁴

Kardong's excellent critical edition of the Rule includes a section entitled „Benedict's Philosophy of Work", in which Kardong explains that the ascetical value attributed to work by St Benedict matches the view of Genesis in seeing work as a punishment for original sin.⁴⁵ This interpretation of the Bible, common in other authors,⁴⁶ is, however, incorrect. In the first chapter of Genesis we read that man was created to subdue the earth (cf. Gen 1:28) – quoted by John Paul II in his Encyclical on work.⁴⁷ The second chapter explicitly states the purpose for which man was created: *ut operaretur*, to work (Gen 2:15). Both passages precede the fall of man, which is related in the third chapter, with its consequences including „in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen 3:19), where „sweat" appears as a punishment. This interpretation, which discovers the presence of work in the first two chapters of Genesis and therefore clearly sees work as something positive (in contrast with the widespread tradition of seeing work as a punishment) has gained currency in Catholic circles over the past century largely thanks to the writings and spirituality of St Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, the founder of Opus Dei.⁴⁸ This truth had already been adopted by reformed Protestants, who interpreted these passages from Genesis correctly and reclaimed work as an essential activity for Christians and an opportunity for God's call to holiness.⁴⁹

In short, Benedictine spirituality helped to strengthen the value of manual work, but did not make it into the hinge or the centre of monastic life, which mainly revolves around prayer and *lectio divina*. The origin of the maxim *ora et labora*, and its attribution to St Benedict as the classic expression of Benedictine spirituality, is stated erroneously in several works of history. No partial or definitive clarification is to be found even among Benedictine authors, though Meeuws comes closest to providing one.

5. The importance of work in modern times: an open question

One final question remains: How did the phrase *ora et labora* become so widely known and find its place as the emblem of the Benedictine Order, although it was not to be found in the Rule?

⁴⁴ DE VOGÜÉ op. cit. 241.; cf. also KARDONG op. cit. 398–399.

⁴⁵ Cf. KARDONG op. cit. 398.

⁴⁶ Cf. MEIER op. cit. 435.

⁴⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Laborem exercens*. Introduction. 14 September 1981.

⁴⁸ In Furrow, Escriva writes: „Work is man's original vocation. It is a blessing from God, and those who consider it a punishment are sadly mistaken. The Lord, who is the best of fathers, placed the first man in Paradise *ut operaretur*, so that he would work." Josemaria ESCRIVA: *Furrow*. London – New York, Scepter, 1987. no. 482.

⁴⁹ Cf. Martin LUTHER: *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*. Charleston, Biblio Bazaar, 2009.

The first thing that needs to be pointed out is that, as stated above, Wolter himself calls the phrase „ancient and extremely famous”; he thus joins Catholic tradition (though perhaps not actually Benedictine tradition, as Meeuws notes at the end of the article cited above)⁵⁰ in thinking this expression dates from the Middle Ages and, as said above, he does not claim either to invent it, or to be the first to make it known. All of this would seem to suggest that this happy combination of the active and the contemplative life, of Martha and Mary, as Wolter put it, was a step taken by Catholic monastic tradition deriving from Benedictine spirituality (though not necessarily from St Benedict himself).

However, history does not appear to confirm this thesis. Despite the appearance of guilds in the mediaeval period, the concept of work as one of the elements in the soul’s progress towards God became, for a time, divorced from Catholic thinking, and was instead found to be an emblem of the Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin. Indeed, according to Max Weber, Luther saw the key to his reform in the term *Beruf* (job, calling) and specifically, the idea that Christians are called by God through work, in the active life. This was one of the main reasons that led him to despise the contemplative life as useless. Calvin, as is well known, took a further step that helped his followers construct the doctrine of predestination which, according to Weber, gave rise to the kind of people who were ideal for developing capitalism: men of steel, active, severe and constant, who saw professional success as a sign that they were saved.⁵¹

Not by chance, then, in the course of the centuries during which the Lutheran reformation spread, was the expression „work ethic” coined, referring specifically to the Protestant tradition. It clearly denied Catholicism any leading role with regard to the subject of work. Meeuws, indeed, in the article cited above, states firmly that in the modern age „silence seems to fall again on the phrase [*ora et labora*].”⁵²

The „work ethic” sums up Weber’s description of those first entrepreneurs who probably provided Adam Smith with the inspiration for his book *The Wealth of Nations*. This book was hugely influential in the history of ideas and economic

⁵⁰ The final section of this article gives a series of quotations from different Benedictines who unpack the motto *ora et labora*, expand upon it, or simply replace it with other expressions. Cf. MEEUWS op. cit. 216.

⁵¹ Cf. MAX WEBER: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York, Routledge, 1992. 31. It is significant that Weber, when speaking of Catholicism in this work, first published in 1905, says that in Catholicism too there had been attempts to infuse ordinary life with asceticism, but unsuccessfully; he refers to the Franciscan Tertiaries and to Thomas à Kempis. Weber’s book had a major influence on Western culture, and provoked strong reactions in the Catholic sphere. It is not, then, surprising that subsequent attempts to combine professional work and personal sanctification in the middle of the world from a Catholic perspective – and specifically the preaching of Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei – were considered by some people in the 1930s and 1940s as heretical. Cf. on this point Jose Luis ILLANES: Dos de octubre de 1928, alcance y significado de una fecha. In: Pedro RODRÍGUEZ – Pío G. ALVES DE SOUSA – José M. ZUMAQUERO: *Mons Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*. Pamplona, EUNSA, 1982. 59–99.

⁵² MEEUWS op. cit. 209.

history, and, together with the development brought about by the industrial revolution, was decisive in giving rise to the emergence of the „social question” in the nineteenth century. The importance of this theme at that period is not very much appreciated today. Richard Sennett, for instance, dedicates a whole chapter in his latest book to this great question and its foregrounding at prominent cultural events such as the 1900 Paris *Exposition Universelle*.⁵³ Indeed, parallel to that year’s great Exhibition, a major debate took place about a common enemy: the emerging capitalism which has gone down in history as „brute capitalism”, with its inequalities and oppression. The „social question” summed up the failure of the first, unregulated economic liberalism, which was terribly unjust on workers and nurtured conditions that favoured revolution.

All of this brought the theme of work to the fore, and reactions to it varied. They included the first social encyclicals, launching what is now known as the Social Doctrine of the Church. At last, this new awareness of work, which in classical times had represented non-humanity, slavery and the absence of freedom and reason; which in the Middle Ages broke out forcefully through the guilds; and which in modern times achieved major importance on the basis of the Protestant approach, began to occupy a central place in the various fields of human culture (laws, economy, sociology and the Catholic Magisterium). Perhaps its highest point was being declared a basic human right by the United Nations, as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after the Second World War.

However, despite the way work has become universal, the „work ethic” continued to be seen as a Protestant stronghold, not a Catholic one. This is indirectly related to the question of why „*ora et labora*” returned so strongly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A study by Juan Manuel Burgos may provide some help towards an answer. Burgos discusses in detail the reception given to Max Weber’s book on the relationship between the Protestant work ethic and the origin of capitalism.⁵⁴ He gives a fairly complete survey of reactions on the part of Catholics, and also in the field of economics, when Weber’s book was first published in 1905. Burgos’ main thesis is twofold: as against Robertson and Samuelson who denied any connection between religion and economics, Burgos aimed to prove a positive (though not actually universal or necessary) relationship between Protestantism and capitalism.⁵⁵ Secondly, as against those defending a connection between capitalism and Catholicism, he aimed at acceptance of the limitations of Counter-Reformation Catholicism with respect to certain Protestant economic theories. The paradigmatic example of this difference is Calvin’s proposal to change the moral judgment on lending money at interest, and so distinguish this activity from usury, gift or mere exchange.⁵⁶ As a result, the „work ethic”, at least in the nineteenth century and the

⁵³ Cf. RICHARD SENNETT: *Together*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2012. 35–64.

⁵⁴ Cf. Juan Manuel BURGOS: Weber e lo spirito del capitalismo. Storia di un problema e nuove prospettive. *Acta Philosophica*, no. 5. (1996), 197–220.

⁵⁵ Cf. BURGOS op. cit. 214–215.

⁵⁶ Cf. BURGOS op. cit. 216.

first half of the twentieth,⁵⁷ can truly be considered a mainly Protestant current of thought.

However, an indirect result of Weber's work was a reaction in the Catholic Church, which had already entered the fray on the side of the „social question”, with important documents such as the social encyclicals mentioned above. Accordingly in the twentieth century some philosophers such as Max Scheler⁵⁸ set about doing historical research to come up with Catholic expressions or maxims prior to the coming of Protestantism, which gave a positive view of work. One of these attempts, naturally, was to turn to the Benedictine tradition and its motto *ora et labora*. Perhaps this process may be part of the explanation of why it became widespread, though not the only or even the main one. In fact, this suggestion would clearly call for more detailed research.

⁵⁷ The middle of the twentieth century was marked not only by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also by the appearance and growth of an institution within the Catholic Church dedicated to spreading the value of human work as a means to holiness. This was Opus Dei and the message preached by its founder, St Josemaria Escriva, from 1928 onwards.

⁵⁸ Cf. MAX SCHELER: *Christentum und Gesellschaft 2*. Leipzig, 1924. 97. Cf. also MEIER op. cit. 432.