

# Management of Monasteries

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The article is already published in:

Müller-Stewens, Günter/Muff, Markus/Eberle, Thomas (2014): Management von Klöstern: Ein Erfahrungsbericht, in: zfo Zeitschrift Führung + Organisation, 83 (3), S. 184-189

At the Benedictine University of Saint Anselmo in Rome, a premiere took place in September 2013: 35 abbesses and abbots, priors and prioresses, cellerars, and other Benedictine nuns and monks from all continents gathered to grapple with questions about the management of monasteries during the course "Leadership and the Rule of St. Benedict," which was conducted in cooperation with the University of St Gallen.

## **The context: The monastic community**

The crux of monastic life is the search for God; praise, thanksgiving, and giving glory to God are not confined to the liturgy, but are a life-long commitment that determines the entire lifestyle. Daily worship and prayer should take precedence in a monastery. Prayer opens men and women to God's will with all the strengths and gifts bestowed on them.<sup>1</sup> This means that, ideally, monks and nuns do not focus on their own needs, wishes and/or intentions, but subordinate themselves to God's will. According to Scripture, God's will comprises *well-being and a good life for all!* Following this principle, Benedictine monks and nuns consider the common good; they endeavor to be free of individual interests and group selfishness and to avoid the pursuit of personal advantage. In ideal circumstances, monasteries are not self-centered organizations, but rather combine their praise of God with the shaping of the world order - especially with serving the needy.

## **The raison d'être of monasteries is divine worship and serving the needy.**

### **Operational and business-related consequences of monasteries' mission.**

Based on this mission - serving the needy - monasteries have for hundreds of years not only built churches, but just as intensively have pursued agriculture and handicrafts, upheld science and teaching, and built hospitals and orphanages. Consequently, a broad spectrum of cultural, social and charitable, as well as economic, activities evolved. Benedictine monks and nuns therefore run various types of schools, crafts and arts businesses, farms, hotels, as well as guest houses, printing-works, fish farms, etc.

## **Their mission to serve the poor, led monasteries to establish various kinds of enterprises**

The number of employees in monastic establishments often exceeds the number of monks and nuns substantially. These sizeable undertakings require an efficient organization and administration because they have to be managed profitably. A monastery is not out to maximize its profits, but the survival of both the enterprise and the monastery must be financially secured. Each generation is responsible for handing over its monastery to the next generation in a good condition (also regarding its finances). However, for many monasteries this is no simple task. The increase in wage costs (e.g., increasingly due to fewer monks being available for teaching duties, whom external teachers then have to replace), as well as the maintenance costs of protected monuments makes this hard to accomplish. If a monastery were to suffer a financial loss, this would boil down to, for example, the disposal of land and/or property.

### **Tensions between monastic life and the free market**

There is an increasing tension between the ideals of monastic life and free market laws, with which a religious community's enterprises have to be aligned. There are often misunderstandings and conflicts of interests between the monastic view of the world and economic reality, which does not accommodate this view.<sup>2</sup>

A monastery's secular activities should not, of course, exist completely unconnected beside the monastic world; instead, a monastery's service to mankind should be based on Christian ideals and on Benedictine regulations.<sup>3</sup> According to Benedictine regulations, business activity, organization, and the pursuit of targets in practice should not strive to increase monastic property, but should first and foremost be constructed to serve mankind. Serving the stakeholders (monastery's school students, monastery's shop customers, the faithful in pastoral care, etc.) and not their own well-being is of prime importance. Despite the often harsh business reality, a monastery is expected to ensure that the Benedictines' relationships with this reality is fundamentally oriented towards charity and Christian love.

### **The history of the Benedictines**

The history of the Benedictine starts with Benedict of Nursia (480-547 AD). With the Rule of St. Benedict (RB), Benedict created a basis for the community that is still valid. Currently, about 7,500 Benedictine monks and 16,500 Benedictines nuns live in about 800 independent communities on all continents; in addition there are smaller, dependent houses and communities. In recent years, the Benedictine membership in Europe has declined significantly, but in other parts of the world, its communities have grown. However, their effects and the monastic institution have often lasted for many centuries.<sup>4</sup> This is also a success story that should be fostered.

By definition, a monastic community is a religious community. Work plays an important role in such a community: Work is participating in God's creation. Work is serving the needy and a remedy for indolence. Benedictine monasteries are obligated to be largely economically self-sufficient. A monastic community's economic activities should provide for its maintenance. In addition, the proceeds of this work should also care for the needy and the poor. The Benedictines are therefore not only active in spiritual and pastoral fields, but also in cultural, charitable, and economic areas. Nevertheless, monasteries were not established as industrial enterprises. Benedictines should not favor anything above divine worship not even work. The search for God occurs during prayer and work, and reading of Scripture nourishes this search ("ora et labora et lege").

### **The hard reality of the business world and ideal Christian charity are not always easily reconcilable.**

Dealing positively with these areas of conflict is no trivial matter. It requires deliberation, insight, and honesty in a secular world to fruitfully reconcile obeying God and the emerging responsible world order in terms of servicing mankind. Understandably, many monastic communities experience problems in this regard. The management results, as well as the self-understanding and the organization itself demonstrate these problems.

Many monastic establishments are not run profitably. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the monastery management to hold their own in the daily business activities. The more a monastery's economic self-sufficiency is at risk, the greater the danger that a community will focus too much on its economic activities.

However, the problem often lies even deeper. Many monks and nuns suffer from being torn between the

two evidently and increasingly opposed worlds and are unable to find a balanced approach to these areas of conflict. If a work ethic and efficiency-oriented thinking - rather than prayer and divine worship - were to increasingly determine the everyday monastic activities, this could lead to an alienation from monastic life.

**Many monks and nuns suffer from the conflict between the everyday spiritual and economic monastic activities.**

To some extent, the rules of everyday monastic activities intentionally alienate nuns and monks from the world's normal hustle and bustle. Simultaneously, they must exist economically with their business activities in this world without having to relinquish their claim to "provide charitable Christian service." This tension, i.e. the difficult to maintain balance between the various demands, can lead to conflicts, demotivation, and depression. In some cases, this could also be the reason for addiction or withdrawal from a monastic community.



**Fig. 1**  
Monastery meets business school: Abbesses and abbots, prioresses and priors, nuns and monks meet University of St. Gallen management experts at the Benedictine University of Saint Anselmo in Rome.

**The challenge of contributing to shaping the world order**

A monastic community specifically needs guidance regarding the way it needs to operate the monastery and its enterprises profitably. This must be based on the long monastic tradition and with a view to maintaining the own spiritual identify.

Many monastic communities are so preoccupied with their everyday issues that they do not succeed in adequately converting their Christian-Benedictine value frameworks into an operational concept. Monks and nuns could help shape the world constructively and positively with their opportunities and on the basis of their Christian conviction. Nevertheless, too often an organization is maintained that is too strongly based on hierarchical principles, but which serves as a substitution for the lack of a jointly developed and responsible approach to this shaping of the world. Complicated decision-making processes are often followed, at times one encounters a one-sided trust in authority, as well as the delegation of personal responsibility to the abbot. The associated concentration of power can - depending on the abbot's personality - become a risk for a monastery in the worst case. Individuals' skills and competencies, as well as those of the entire community should be strongly integrated.

### **Monasteries' strong hierarchical organizational structure poses a financial risk.**

In view of the above outlined areas of conflict, a course for monks and nuns had to specifically include this participation in shaping the world order. In addition, we dared not be naive with regard to the present situation and the options for action. Thus, in the Western world, one tends to be confronted with a decline in the number of new entrants, i.e. work is spread over a decreasing number of members. In some monasteries, new members are also not necessarily interested in being available for work in the context of the monastic community. Many seem to want to distance themselves from society to primarily devote themselves to a life of contemplation.

### **Monastery leaders should be empowered and everybody's participation facilitated.**

The aim of the course is to empower and educate those leaders in order to focus their attention on a monastery's future given their awareness of its historical heritage. Melancholy and doubts are not appropriate here.<sup>5</sup> Such leaders should also be able to provide hope in difficult circumstances. Should you feel overwhelmed by the tasks at hand, it is vital to reinforce your awareness that you are not alone in this. Remaining self-critical, open, and dynamic - this increasingly also applies to monastic communities. Valuable traditions can usually only be maintained through change and through modernizing.

### **In practice**

Although there are no panaceas for the management of monasteries, there are a number of challenges that most monasteries should face:

- The communal aspects should be fostered more in order to reach a shared understanding of the key aspects for the future development.
- Monastic enterprises' systems and procedures should be professionalized which should, in turn and in some places, create more free time for contemplation.
- Resistance to change is often justified on the basis of monastic rules. However, on closer inspection, these often provide more leeway than is assumed in some places. It is essential to make good use of this leeway.
- More than ever, the value base, identity, and history of a monastery should be used as a positive distinguishing feature in the markets in which a monastery is active.

### **Teaching conceptions: Objectives and structure**

Both sides regarded the undertaking of such a course as an experiment, since it raises many questions: Can co-operation with a business school ever be meaningful? Can business school concepts make a useful contribution to monastery management? Is a business school's value system not diametrically opposed to that of a religious order? Is it not dangerous for a religious order, characterized by the social doctrine of the Church, to be influenced by management theory committed to market-based values? Is a philosophical-theological university actually the right location for an event in which management tools are utilized? Will it be possible to find a common language in light of the two sides' divergent vocabularies? Given the different contexts in which they operate, is there enough common ground between the participants from across the globe?

The participants had many critical questions and specific challenges with regard to this undertaking. Nonetheless, it was felt that in view of current developments in many monasteries, something had to be

done, that one had to evidently take a risk. From the start, the Abbot Primate supported the project wholeheartedly.

The lecturers of the University of St. Gallen had no specific experience with monastery management. The Benedictine monks and nuns quickly made it clear to the teachers that the sparse literature on this topic in the management sciences was not of much use. There are, of course, countless observations by Benedictine authors on the application the Rule of St. Benedict in businesses. But in this case, another direction was indicated. The task was: How can secular knowledge from the management sciences, combined with the monastic knowledge of the Rule of St. Benedict and the social doctrine of the Church in monasteries, be usefully applied?

In order to make these areas of knowledge useful in an interdisciplinary way in the course, the course modules were organized in tandem: A representative of the Benedictines and a representative of the University of St. Gallen jointly designed and moderated the four course modules: Strategy, leadership, organization, and project management. In addition to conveying the content, one of the essential course objectives was to provide a platform for the participants, on which they could introduce their own management experiences and challenges to the discussion. The people in charge would be led towards a well-coached exchange, which could also inspire the community at home.

### **Assumptions**

Management sciences are not value free. The frames of reference that they develop can be linked to different normative systems. This was a case of daring to experiment by combining management knowledge with the Church's social teachings and the Rule of St. Benedict.



**Fig. 2**

What are the present day key challenges for the Benedictines? Small groups of course participants work on the topics: strategy, leadership, organization, and project management.

### **It was necessary to combine market-oriented management with the monastic value system.**

Another assumption was that a majority of all other organizations' existing challenges are rather similar: In monasteries there are also conflicts that need to be handled, taboos that need to be questioned, projects to complete, etc. There is also the question of an appropriate management style: Should this, for example, rather be discussed by the monastic hierarchy, or by means of the strong involvement of the followers? And what about the empowerment of the younger generation? Etc.

The basic assumption and requirement of all the organizers and designers were ultimately that the monastic community's activities would progressively become more of a routine, systematic, and predictable. There would then be more tranquility and time available for actual monastic life. The community

and its members would permanently find a better internal balance. Ways and means would be found, with whose help Christian value standards and norms would enrich the economic activities even better.

## **Rekindling the fire**

At the many workshops aiming at the application of the theoretical contents, the monasteries represented at the courses were usually the subject matter. There they could question the usefulness of what they learnt in respect of their individual contexts, as well as collect and evaluate observations on dealing with the management knowledge in respect of this context. The diversity of the monasteries represented at the course was significant. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made to deduce key challenges for the religious order community.

### *1. Rekindling the Benedictine fire*

As a result of the difficult situation in which many monasteries find themselves, many of these communities experience a partial sense of failure. It requires creativity to spot this prevailing mood. Monastic communities need to generate positive momentum in order to deploy their remaining resources creatively, in a future-oriented way, and in keeping with their mission. Especially positive, young religious order members need encouragement.

### *2. Surmounting individualism*

Besides nurturing the prayer meetings in monasteries, ways should be found to nurture the communal aspects. A start could be made, for example, by developing a common vision and strategy that suits the context exactly. More commonality also includes the sharing of relevant information and increasing the transparency.

### *3. Utilization of existing degrees of freedom*

In a religious community there are many rules, norms, and taboos that partially hinder necessary change. It is, however, striking that many a limitation is interpreted more narrowly than strictly necessary. The Rule of St. Benedict probably presents more degrees of freedom than is assumed. For example, a monastery lost young novices because they were forbidden to wear jogging clothes for sports. It takes courage and determination to question non-essential rules and to overcome them.

### *4. Dealing more visibly with the outside world*

The discussions were mainly focused on the own inner world. Examples of topics were recalcitrant fellow brothers and sisters, various interests, etc. The major changes currently taking place in the monastic environment and influencing this were hardly systematically discussed in terms of their implications: What are the expected impacts of trends such as the “aging society,” “changing values,” and the rapid development of information and communication technology and how can we respond to these? Spirituality should not be blind to the reality of our world.

### *5. Address unanswered questions with the future in mind*

Many of the challenges, such as the role of nuns in the Order and the empowerment of the next generation have specifically been left hanging in the air for a long time. With infinite patience and faith in God, monastic orders have regularly postponed addressing these issues. If these kinds of questions receive no attention for too long, they will prevent the required evolution of the entire community.

### *6. Professionalization of the systems and procedures*

The discussion of management problems is often reduced to the topic “management style.” However, efficient systems and procedures are no less important.<sup>6</sup> This concerns, for example, a truly meaningful reporting system on a monastery’s financial situation, which is required for internal control, but also for co-operation with benefactors whose foundations currently require a high degree of professionalism.

Reliable organizational structures and routines are another example, as they can be a relief for those involved.

### *7. Utilization of the differentiation potential*

A religious community's strongly shared value base, identity, and history give it a unique potential to differentiation itself. This is not only true in spiritual terms, in which it is important to know God's will and to follow Him, but also where a monastery has a relationship with external stakeholders. One's love for one's fellow human beings which bears such relations as a matter of course and with humility, is a precious good and contributes to the differentiation of monastic services.

All monasteries are, of course, different and there are no general recipes for handling the various challenges. Each case needs to be carefully analyzed before action is undertaken. Today, religious communities face major development challenges that are related to their members' capability to change. They need the skills to do so, but also the substantiated hope that there is a way open. Monasteries need to pass this hope on.

### **Summary**

In cooperation with the University of St. Gallen, the Benedictine University Saint Anselmo in Rome presented a course on "Leadership and the Rule of St. Benedict" for abbesses and abbots, prioresses and priors, cellerars, and other Benedictine nuns and monks. The core task was: How can secular knowledge from the management sciences, combined with the monastic knowledge of the Rule of St. Benedict and the social doctrine of the Church in monasteries, be usefully applied? No general recipes were found for handling the diverse challenges that the various monasteries faced. The key challenges for the religious communities were, however, formulated.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> This means listening to God ("obscura o fili"), as in the Rule of St. Benedict.

<sup>2</sup> See Kieser, A.: From asceticism to administration of wealth. Medieval monasteries and the pitfalls of rationalization. In: Organization Studies, vol. 8, 1987, Chapter 2, pp103-123.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent discussion on the Rule of St. Benedict, see Casey, M./Tomlins, D.: Introducing the Benedict's Rule, St. Ottilien 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See Rost, K./Inauen, E./Osterloh, M./Frey, B.S.: The corporate governance of Benedictine abbeys: What can stock corporations learn from monasteries? In: journal of Management History, volume 16, 2010, Chapter.1, pp. 90-115.

<sup>5</sup> An example of an accurate and critical analysis of the current situation in the Catholic Church, without cynicism or polemics, but combined with a positive attitude and hope-giving ideas, is the book by T. von Mitschke-Collande: Schafft sich die katholische Kirche ab? Analysen und Fakten eines Unternehmensberaters, München 2012.

<sup>6</sup> See Payer-Langthaler, S./Feldbauer-Durstmüller, B.: Performance Management im Kloster. Das Beispiel der Benediktiner in Österreich. In: Gmür, M./Schauer, R./ Theuvsen, I. (Hrsg.): Performance Management in Nonprofit- Organisationen, Bern 2012, S. 98-108; Soegtrop, U.: Nachhaltiger Wandel im Kloster. Organisationale Veränderungsprozesse in der Benediktinerabtei Burg Dinklage, Baden-Baden 2003.