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# The Narrated Theology of *Stabilitas* in Gregory the Great's *Life of Benedict*

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## INTRODUCTION: THE *DIALOGUES* AND THEIR INTENT

POPE GREGORY THE Great (r. 590–604)<sup>1</sup> was a civic leader, an administrator, a director of missions, a prolific spiritual writer, a skilled homilist, and, in the eyes of later Christians, a saint and doctor of the Church. He is best known for exegetical works and his book on pastoral rule—erudite endeavors of spiritual theology, contoured for their particular audiences. Gregory's register of letters, which he edited himself, illustrates also his sedulous attention to the many duties of the bishop of Rome at the close of the sixth century.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I focus on the second of Gregory's *Dialogues*,<sup>3</sup> in which

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1. I cite the critical editions that I have relied upon, along with the principal English translations that I have consulted. Without giving notice, I modify cited translations where necessary.

2. See Thomas F. X. Noble, "The Intellectual Culture of the Early Medieval Papacy," in *Roma nell'Alto Medioevo* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2001) 179–219.

3. Gregory I, *Dialogi I-IV*, ed. Attilio Stendardi, *Opere di Gregorio Magno* 4 (Rome: Città Nuova, 2000); *Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman, *Fathers of the Church* 39 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959); *The Life of Saint Benedict—Gregory the Great*, trans. Hilary Costello and Eoin de Bhaldraithe (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1993). A summary of and engagement with scholarly discomfort surrounding these texts is given in Michaela Zelzer, "Gregory's Life of Benedict: Its Historico-Literary Field," *CSQ* 43.3 (2008): 327–37; "Gregory's Life of Benedict and the Bible: The Decoding of an Exegetical Program," *CSQ* 44.1 (2009): 89–102. A useful textual and theological commentary on the second dialogue is given by Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Life of Saint Benedict—Gregory the Great; Commentary* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1993). More recently, accompanying a new translation, is Terrence G. Kardong, *The Life of Saint Benedict: Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

he tells the life and miracles of Benedict of Nursia. At the outset of the *Dialogues*, we are told that Gregory recounts stories of recent Italian saints to inspire us “to love heaven as our home” (Gregory 1.Prol. 9)<sup>4</sup> and to strive for the interior sanctity of which outward deeds are a sign (compare Mo 20.7.17). I propose that the second dialogue teaches not only by examples of holiness but also by taking up Benedict’s history into a more symbolic, somewhat typological, mode. I call this mode a “narrated theology.” We glimpse it when we expand our view beyond Benedict’s words and deeds to include another narrative feature: his physical disposition.<sup>5</sup> At key moments, Benedict refuses to leave, to stay, or to turn back, or he remains seated or standing. As abbot of Monte Cassino, he does not move very much at all, let alone go forth from his abbey.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that Gregory’s announcements concerning these bodily poses serve not only to highlight his inner virtue but also to mark key points in a narrated theology of the Christian soul’s spiritual progress.

In this paper, I will first introduce the Gregorian concepts of spiritual “stability” (*stabilitas*) and of the spiritual “ruler” (*rector*), along with the spiritual journey by which “stability” is recovered.

Second, focusing on episodes that call attention to Benedict’s physical self-disposition, I will read his life doubly. Under one reading, these episodes proffer moral *exempla* wherein Benedict’s physical self-possession outwardly manifests a spiritual ruler’s proper response to attacks on him and on his community. Under another reading, the organization and emphases of these same episodes add up to an over-arching *narration* of

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4. Gregory I, Di 1.Prol.9 (OGM 4:74).

5. When his physical disposition (as opposed to his activity) is described, he is usually sitting; see Di 2.14.2, 15.1. When Benedict is or others are accosted by hostile agents, moreover, he usually *remains* as he was, seated or at least immobile, even when a physical catastrophe is underway; see Di 2.2, 8, 11, 14, 15, 16, 23, 27, 31. (In the last episode, Zalla even urges the silent Benedict “Rise—Rise!” Benedict does not interrupt his reading.) On two occasions Benedict does hasten to the site of a demonic attack but only to pray rather than to engage in the desperate rock-pushing or fire-fighting efforts of his monks; see Di 2.9, 10. Much is also made of his immobility when he goes forth in spirit to detail the plans for a new monastery to the monks at Terracina in Di 2.22.1–5. Inability to remain in place represents the spiritual *instability* of several characters in Di 2.4, 23, 24, 25. Benedict’s constant residence in Monte Cassino until his meeting with Scholastica is particularly noted by de Vogüé, *Life—Commentary* 108–9.

6. As Thomas Heffernan writes concerning hagiography in general, “for the sacred biographer . . . no actions . . . simply have an ontology without an ethical dimension.” See Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 69.

Gregory's theology of spiritual progress, all the way to fullness of love and the vision of God.

Third, I will argue that the motif of steadfast love rather than of physical claustration is the deepest foundation of this journey and that the dialogue universalizes the "way of Benedict" to guide even non-monastic readers to the heavenly homeland.<sup>7</sup>

### THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF *STABILITAS* AS BACKGROUND TO THE *DIALOGUES*

IN A PASSAGE from his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, Gregory describes the Christian soul's journey from faith to the full vision of God. It is a progression with four steps or, better, *layers*, for one does not wholly abandon the activities of the previous layer upon gaining the next. These are "cleansing" (*tergere*), "self-gathering" (*se ad se colligere*), "self-seeing" (*uidere se*), and "contemplation" of God (*contemplatio*).<sup>8</sup> By these, the soul, which cannot simply will itself to see God, moves from acquaintance with its own nature to acquaintance with God's (Hiez 2.5.8).<sup>9</sup>

7. To interpret the second *Dialogue*, I necessarily engage with Gregory's other writings. Underlying this engagement, of course, is my conviction that it was, in fact, Gregory who wrote the *Dialogues*. Not all share this view. In various times, the *Dialogues* have seemed so out of character with the image of Gregory as a sober moralist that some have deemed them forgeries. The most recent debate was opened by Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1987). Without rehearsing the scholarly debate here, I note that recent work by Matthew dal Santo summarizes this history while arguing in favor of an enduring majority's consensus in favor of Gregorian authorship. See Matthew dal Santo, "The Shadow of a Doubt? A Note on the *Dialogues* and *Registrum Epistolarum* of Pope Gregory the Great (590–604)," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61.1: 3–17. More recently, dal Santo has argued that the *Dialogues* participate constructively in a Byzantine and Italian controversy over the communion of saints and whether or not they continue to act after their deaths but before the general resurrection. See Matthew dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a view sympathetic to Clark's, see Terrence G. Kardong, "Who Wrote the *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory? A Report on a Controversy," *CSQ* 39.1 (2004): 31–39.

8. For a similar account, see Cuthbert Butler's "purgation," "recollection," "introversion," and "contemplation." Butler named these stages to argue a consistent structure in Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard. See *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of SS. Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life: Neglected Chapters in the History of Religion*, 2nd ed., with Afterthoughts (London: Constable, 1927) 65–92, 151–88. For clarity, I prefer Gregory's own vocabulary. Also, I suspect that Butler improperly divides certain elements of "introversion" from "recollection."

9. Gregory I, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam; Omelie Su Ezechiele* 2, ed. Vincenzo Recchia, *Opere Di Gregorio Magno [OGM]* 3 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1993) 2.5.8 (OGM 3/2:128); Gregory I, *Homilies*

By ascetical exercise, the preliminary “cleansing” parts the soul “from all affection for earthly glory, and from the gratification of carnal concupiscence,” in order to focus one’s love on God (Mo 6.37.58).<sup>10</sup> After this, “the first step” toward contemplation is “self-gathering.” The soul that would “gather itself to itself” (*se ad se colligat*) must learn “to curb from the mind’s eye the phantasms of earthly and heavenly images” so that “it may seek itself within such as what it is” without such images (*talem se quaerat intus, qualis sine istis est*). Next, “second,” is “self-seeing.” In “self-seeing,” the soul must “see of what sort it is when thus gathered” (*videat qualis est collecta*). From this self-knowledge it infers a glimmering of its Creator (Hiez 2.5.9).<sup>11</sup> “Third,” hoisted by the “engine” (*machina*) of love (Mo 6.37.58), the soul “rises [*surgat*] above [*super*] itself and by intention yields itself [*intendendo subiciat*] to the contemplation [*contemplationis*] of its invisible Maker” (Hiez 2.5.9).<sup>12</sup>

Gregory elsewhere describes the same journey in terms of the acts that advance it. First, one disciplines the body (i.e. cleansing) to “master [*edomuit*] in oneself the insolencies of the flesh.” One then fosters self-gathering and self-seeing by “train[ing] [*exerceat*] the mind through exercises [*studia*] of holy practice” to “broaden [*dilatat*] the mind through holy works.” Thereafter, one “must, over and above, extend [*extendat*] [the mind] to the secrets of inward contemplation” (Mo 6.37.56).<sup>13</sup> This four-part journey is not a mechanistic *techne* by which to achieve contemplative vision as some mark of excellence. It is Gregory’s sketch of the Christian’s long recovery from the fall away from God. In this path, the human person is restored to be as God created him or her to be.

When Gregory describes the life of this path, he often uses the word “stability” (*stabilitas*, also *soliditas*, *fortitudo*, or *constantia*). In Gregory’s usage, “stability” denotes more capacious and interior a reality than the

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on the *Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson, 2nd ed. (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008) 339; hereafter Hiez, OGM 3/2. “By no means availing” to “ponder [*considerare*] the invisible nature of almighty God” simply by willing it, the soul “retires [*recedit*] to itself” and “makes from itself steps of ascent for itself, that first it may consider [*consideret*] itself, if it is able, and then may examine [*inuestiget*], so far as it can, that Nature which is above it.”

10. *Moralia in Iob 1 (I-VIII)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, OGM 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1992) 6.37.56 (528); hereafter Mo, OGM 1/1.

11. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 339–40).

12. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 339–40).

13. Gregory I, Mo 6.37.56 (OGM 1/1:528). I will discuss the relationship between works of love and knowledge of God later in this paper.

communal and geographical fixity enjoined by Benedict's *Rule*.<sup>14</sup> By "stability," Gregory refers rather to a set of spiritual relationships: the soul is conformed to the life of God, and the acts of the body are directed by the life of the soul. This "stability" is an ideal of individual and communal human life with God and in the world.<sup>15</sup>

At the core of Gregory's "stability" is the rational soul's conformity, by knowledge and love, to the Creator (Mo 26.44.80). This interior conformity reflects the soul's *participation* in God's life (Mo 5.36.65). This participation is possible because, as rational, the soul is God's "image" (Mo 5.34.63). Participating in God's life by knowledge and love (Mo 5.38.68), the creaturely image inwardly *imitates* that life (Mo 25.3.4). The highest form of this participatory imitation is in contemplative vision (Di 4.1; Mo 5.34.63–5.36.65). Interior deiformity flows outward to others as the

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14. See Benedict of Nursia, *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1981) 1.10–11; 58.15; hereafter Reg, RB 1980. William Ullathorne's classic view of the monk's vow to *stabilitas*, obedience, and *conuersio morum* is quoted favorably by Cuthbert Butler in *Benedictine Monachism* (London: Longmans, 1919) 125–26. Ullathorne writes, "Saint Benedict binds his monks by the vow of stability to an irrevocable life in community, and in the community that has witnessed his training and profession." Such communal stability presumes geographic stability. Jean Leclercq, however, expands upon the *spiritual* dimension of this stability in "In Praise of Stability," *Monastic Studies* no. 13 (Autumn 1982): 89–98. According to Leclercq, the biblical and patristic trajectory sees "stability" as a divine gift, that is participatory and *deifying*: It is "stability in [God's] presence," which God "offers" to humans so that they "may participate in His being and His own peace." Leclercq surveys the historical meanings of *stabilis* and allied forms (*stabilitas*, *soliditas*, *stare*). As a "reality within the spiritual order" (89), the concept has developed in a "purely biblical" context and is not indebted first of all to pagan ideas (96). Somewhat against Ullathorne's definition, Leclercq writes that Benedict's *stabilitas* is not primarily locative; it is "a virtue by means of which we participate in the patience, obedience and perseverance of Christ" through the Spirit of his Resurrection "so that we also may participate in his glory, his joy, and his liberty" (98). The exterior locative discipline, therefore, manifests and protects the true, *interior* reality of stability. Adalbert de Vogüé warns against complete delocalization in "'To Persevere in the Monastery Until Death' (Stability in Saint Benedict and Others)," *The Monastery and the City (Word and Spirit)* 16 (1994): 125–58. He affirms spiritual stability but contends that, in monastic tradition, stability is *dependent* upon physical stability. Without commenting on the monastic tradition as a whole, I argue that locative fixity is *not* what Gregory, at least, has in mind, but rather something closer to the virtue described by Leclercq.

15. Carole Straw rightly calls attention to the centrality of this notion in Gregory's thought. Straw presents "stability" as the Christian's maintenance of moral and fleshly imperturbability, while living in the flux of the imperfect world. The interior peace of this *stabilitas* is secured by obedient self-configuration to a contemplatively apprehended transcendent ideal—that is, the Logos of God. See Carole Ellen Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 15–16, 75–76. I build on Straw's work by focusing on the role of love in this "stability." For Gregory, love is the root of stable obedience and of contemplative vision. This helps me bring out the full significance of Gregory's retelling of the life of Benedict.

soul lovingly “directs” (*administrat*) its corporeal acts in accord with its knowledge of God. For, when outwardly “perform[ing] various actions through the body,” the soul “orders” (*disponit*) these corporeal acts by “that one reason in which [the soul] was created” (Hiez 2.5.9).<sup>16</sup> Bodily life manifests and transmits outwardly the likeness of divine life to which one is inwardly conformed (Mo 4.29.55; Hiez 2.5.4).

From heaven to earth, from interior to exterior, stability flows from God to the lowest of creatures by way of human mediation. As deiform, the stable interior life is both an icon of God’s beauty and a microcosmic exemplar of the well-ordered universe, the macrocosm (Mo 6.15.18). Outward bodily life diffuses beauty into the macrocosm—both in the natural world and in human community (Mo 18.43.70). By such creaturely mediation in *stabilitas*, God “complete[s] the beauteous form” (*speciem impleat*) of the universe (Mo 5.34.63).<sup>17</sup> The universe’s outward beauty is God’s own beauty, mediated through the interior beauty of those who, created in his image, live in conformity with his life.

The stable human being mediates God’s beauty to the human community by bringing others into *stabilitas*. This is the proper exercise of the love of neighbor. Gregory calls the human mediator a “ruler” (*rector*). *Rectores* look above to God and, conformed to what they apprehend in him, order things below by authority and by example. The *rector*’s spiritual authority is usually explicit (ecclesiastical), often implicit, and may also include temporal authority. Peter Brown calls Gregory “deliberately vague” on such points; to an extent, *any* person with some “care of souls” ought to live as a *rector*.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, the *rector* must be formed by *stabilitas* in order to form others.<sup>19</sup> For, as Gregory writes in his *Regula pastoralis*, “No one presumes

16. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 340).

17. Gregory I, Mo 5.34.63 (OGM 1/1:446). See also Gregory I, Mo 4.29.55 (OGM 1/1:358). Although “[o]f himself [*ex semetipso*], the Creator of everything holds [*tenet*] all things” in existence, yet “to constitute the distinct order of a beautiful universe [*ad distinguendum pulchrae uniuersitatis ordinem*], he rules some parts through the stewardship of others [*alia aliis dispensantibus regit*].”

18. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, 2nd ed., The Making of Europe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) 211–12. Markus writes similarly in “Gregory the Great’s Rector and His Genesis,” *Grégoire Le Grand: Chantilly, Centre Culturel Les Fontaines, 15–19 Septembre 1982: Actes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, Robert Gillet, and Stan Pellistrandi (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1986) 141; see also Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* 29.

19. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* 66–67.

to teach an art that he has not first mastered through study" (Past 1.1).<sup>20</sup> The *rector* studies by consulting "the intention of the internal Judge" (Past 2.2) in prayer.<sup>21</sup> At its height, this prayerful consultation is contemplative (Eu 2.34.10). Formed by their prayer, *rectores* can "lead the souls of their neighbors to the eternal sanctuary" (Past 2.2).<sup>22</sup> For "whoever benefits by seeing spiritual things" should by preaching "deliver them to others." "Surely he sees so that he may declare" and "[be] concerned for his neighbor's advancement" (Hiez 2.2.4).<sup>23</sup> Contemplation also enables *rectores* to rightly administer the temporal concerns of worldly life, but without losing their mooring in the love of God (Past 2.3, 5; Mo 18.43.70).<sup>24</sup> As Robert Markus puts it, the *rector's* whole life is an interior "mediation between contemplation and action" that, outwardly, "mediates contemplation within the community."<sup>25</sup>

Along with knowledge, love also has a crucial part to play. For fallen human beings, temporal concerns (Mo 5.45.82; 8.30.50), the weight of thoughts and the needs of the flesh (Mo 8.30.50, 23.21.43; Hiez 2.2.14), and the intolerable brilliance of God's light (Mo 3.53.58; Hiez 2.2.12) make contemplation necessarily intermittent—when it is possessed at all. Christian *stabilitas* cannot stand in perpetual contemplation. Therefore, Christians keep *stabilitas* by continuously striving in "steadfastness of charity" (*soliditas caritatis*) (Hiez 2.5.22).<sup>26</sup> In charity, then, Christian *stabilitas* can journey from faith to vision (Hiez 2.5.14–16). Constancy of love ameliorates the tenuousness of contemplation because love transcends faith's

20. Gregory I, *Regula Pastoralis*, ed. Floribert Rommel, OGM 7 (Rome: Città Nuova, 2008) 1.1.1 (10); hereafter Past, OGM 7; Gregory I, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos, Popular Patristics Series 34 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007) 29.

21. Gregory I, Past 2.2.13 (OGM 7:38; Demacopoulos 51). *pro sola interni iudicis intentione*.

22. Gregory I, Past 2.2.13 (OGM 7:36; Demacopoulos 50).

23. Gregory I, Hiez 2.2.4 (OGM 3/2:52; Tomkinson 282). See also Mo 6.37.56; *Moralia in Iob 4 (XXVIII–XXXV)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, OGM 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 2001) 28.14.33; 30.2.8; 31.25.49; hereafter Mo, OGM 1/4. See also Past 1.5; 2.5; 2.7.

24. Gregory I, Past 2.5.16 (OGM 7:50; Demacopoulos 60). "[W]hen they are uncertain about how to order outward concerns," they must "always return to the mind as if to the tabernacle" to "consult the Lord." See also Gregory I, Past 2.3.14 (OGM 7:40; Demacopoulos 52). Then, by having "right thoughts in his breast" and by applying himself to "good works," the contemplative *rector* will "immolate, to the Creator" a corresponding sacrifice "from himself" (*de semetipso*). This sacrifice of right thoughts and good works "invites to sublime heights those who watch him."

25. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* 31. See also Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 78. Gregory finds this model in Christ himself; see for instance Mo 28.13.33.

26. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.22 (OGM 3/2:144; Tomkinson 350).



limited knowledge to embrace God *as if* he were seen (Mo 10.8.13; Hiez 2.10.5). As Gregory writes, “love itself is acquaintance” (*amor ipse notitia est*) (Eu 2.27.4).<sup>27</sup> Therefore, growth in love is growth in one’s capacity for seeing God (Mo 15.47.53; Hiez 2.5.17). This is why “holy works” are so important in the advance toward contemplation (Mo 6.37.56). Finally, love of God and neighbor also regulates the outward transmission of one’s apprehension of God (Past 2.5), lest one be drawn into pride or love of lower things (Mo 18.43.70).

Thus, the journey of *stabilitas* is a journey toward full contemplative participation in God’s life and to the full status of the *rector*, who mediates this life to others. We can find this theology narrated in a series of vignettes that make particular mention of Benedict’s physical position. In these moments, that position both exemplifies the *rector’s stabilitas* and marks the narrative stages in Gregory’s theology of the journey to the fullness of contemplation.

#### THE WAY OF *STABILITAS* IN BOOK II OF THE *DIALOGUES*

##### *Cleansing, self-gathering, and preparations for self-seeing—wilderness and abbacy*

##### *“Cleansing” by mortifying disciplines—withdrawal to the cave*

IN THE FIRST episode centered on his physical position, Benedict withdraws to a cave, refuses to leave, and rolls about in a thorn-bush. This is how it happens: after a boyhood during which he “gave his spirit to no [worldly] pleasure,” Benedict was sent to Rome for an advantageous education. There he saw his fellows “falling headlong into vice.” Fearful “lest, acquiring any worldly knowledge, he should plunge altogether into a vast abyss,” Benedict “stepped back” from that world. Turning from learning,

27. Gregory I, *XL homiliarum in Evangelia II*, ed. R. Étaix, SC 522 (Paris: Cerf, 2008) 2.27.4 (SC 522:170); Gregory I, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1990) 215.



he desired to “please God alone” (Di 2.Prol.1).<sup>28</sup> This loving desire began his journey to full stability, rooted in contemplation and bound by love.

After abandoning worldly ambition, Benedict must respond to outward occasions of vainglory and inward occasions of lust that threaten to upset *stabilitas* by disrupting his desire to please God. First, the soul must cling to God. Worldly ambition courts Benedict with fame after his prayer miraculously mends a sieve (Di 2.1.1–2). In response, Benedict establishes stability between himself and God: he re-submits his mind to the love of God by fleeing praise and the temptation to love human respect. Desiring “rather to spend himself in labors for God, than to be exalted by the accolades of this life,” he repairs to the solitude of a cave at Subiaco. His position in this cave is the anchor point of the episode. Here, he lives so as to love God rather than the pride-inducing adulation that he might have received from human society. In the cave, Benedict knows himself under God and not by the fragmentary panoply of exterior images of achievement (Di 2.1.3).<sup>29</sup>

Second, the body must serve the soul. Benedict establishes stability within himself by mortifying the *internal* fragmentation that murmurs in fleshly desire. When the devil rouses from Benedict’s memory the image of a beautiful woman, the hermit’s spirit is “kindled with such fire” within, “that the flame of love could hardly be restrained in his chest” (Di 2.2.1).<sup>30</sup> The image rouses a yearning for bodily pleasure that nearly drives him bodily out of his wilderness. As Gregory warns elsewhere, the remembered possibilities of one’s old life cause distress by awakening old worldly loves (Mo 24.11.26). Benedict must quash the addictive alliance of image and desire by disciplining this desire. Rather than let his body command his mind through sensual desire, his mind commands his body to submit to the pain of rolling in a thorn-bush. He thus re-conforms his body to his God-turned soul by means of the very sense-channels that threaten him. This is *stabilitas* in dramatic action! “His triumph was complete” when he “vanquished sin” by “chang[ing] the fire” of pleasure for that of pain (Di 2.2.2).<sup>31</sup> *Stabilitas* is preserved not in the pain itself, but in his mastery of his body to the point of being able to endure that pain

28. Gregory I, Di 2.Prol.1 (OGM 4:136; Zimmerman 55; Costello 3).

29. Gregory I, Di 2.1.3 (OGM 4:138; Zimmerman 57; Costello 4).

30. Gregory I, Di 2.2.1 (OGM 4:142; Zimmerman 59; Costello 21).

31. Gregory I, Di 2.2.2 (OGM 4:142; Zimmerman 59–61; Costello 21).

voluntarily. Keeping his love gathered upon God, *stabilitas* harmonizes Benedict with God, and body with soul.

Both as an *exemplum* and as a piece of narrated theology, Benedict's perseverance in the cave is the first instance in which mastery of bodily position signifies the soul's opposition to diabolical destabilization. Benedict's desire nearly stirs him to exterior motion. Being "almost conquered by the pleasure," he "thought to abandon his wilderness," but, by grace, he moves not (Di 2.2.1).<sup>32</sup> His desire for God holds him fast. Throughout the second *Dialogue*, such bodily steadfastness will show Benedict's *stabilitas*. The devil will often attempt to divert Benedict from a repose or motion that Benedict has adopted in service of spiritual stability. When Benedict remains as he is, he triumphs.

As a piece of the narrated theology, this vignette transcends the particular problem of lust. Benedict's experiences illustrate how ascetical "cleansing" undoes the fall's fundamental inversion—the setting of one's soul above God in worldly pride, and the setting of the body over the soul by loving bodily pleasure above God. Benedict's wilderness fixity signifies the fruit of the Christian's initial "cleansing." For, by clearing in him a space wherein the love of God might flourish, asceticism has preserved the interior spiritual immovability of Benedict's *stabilitas*.<sup>33</sup>

Sheltered by "cleansing," the stable soul forsakes its love of the Lord neither for worldly praise nor for fleshly pleasure, and so becomes fit to transmit *stabilitas* to others by the active love of neighbor. As an *exem-*

32. Gregory I, Di 2.2.1 (OGM 4:142; Costello 21).

33. "Cleansing" ameliorates the fallen tendency to seek an impossible satisfaction apart from God; thus Mo 6.37.56. For, in fallen souls, images of created things rouse fragmentary desires that choke every aspiration toward God; thus Mo 1.35.19; Hiez 2.5.9; Eu 1.15.3. The soul "cleanses" itself to preserve *stabilitas* in God, by ascetic practices that "soften" (*maceratio*) or "afflict" (*afficere*) the flesh; thus Hiez 2.10.4, 23; also Gregory I, Hiez 2.10.4, 23 (OGM 3/2:270, 290; Tomkinson 442, 457). This mortifies and disciplines one's corporeally-directed desires, as in Mo 6.37.56–6.38.58. By disentangling one's love from exterior goods, "cleansing" frees one to gather all desire and devotion toward God; it makes room for growth of the love of God; see Past 3.13; Mo 7.26.30; 7.26.32; 7.28.34; 7.27.33; 9.38.61; *Moralia in Iob 2 (IX–XVIII)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, OGM 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1994) 12.51.57 (hereafter Mo, OGM 1/2); *Moralia in Iob 3 (XIX–XXVII)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, OGM 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1997) 24.8.15 (hereafter Mo, OGM 1/3); Mo 25.7.13–14; *Homiliae in Hiezechihalem 1*, ed. Vincenzo Recchia, OGM 3 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1992) 1.4.9–10; 1.3.18 (hereafter Hiez, OGM 3/1). Love also atones for sins and builds up virtuous living centered on God. With desire thus re-ordered, the life of *stabilitas* appears not as a diminution of personal flourishing but as its full realization. Lower pleasures are known to be but echoes of the supreme happiness that is to be found in direct union with God.

*plum*, Benedict now shines as the *rector*. Having vanquished both vain-glory and lust by obedience of soul to God and body to soul (Di 2.3.1), Benedict comes forth as a *rector* in answer to God's call (compare Past 1.5). He has become "ready to instruct others in the practice of virtue" as an authoritative "teacher of souls" (Di 2.2.3–3.3). God wishes to "reveal to others" the example of his "virtuous life," by setting him "on a lampstand to give light to everyone in God's house" (Di 2.1.6).<sup>34</sup> As Gregory writes in the *Moralia*, such holy persons "are sent" and, "from the retirement of contemplation," "go forth like bolts of lightning . . . to the public life of employment." They return to the world not for pride or lust but "for our sakes," to transmit Godly *stabilitas* to others (Mo 30.2.8).<sup>35</sup>

*"Self-gathering"—Gathering "to" and dwelling "with" oneself—The first and second abbatial periods*

THE NEXT INSTANCE of bodily position comes during Benedict's life as an abbot. Having gone forth into the world as a *rector* to transmit stability to his neighbor, Benedict accepts an abbacy. There he "keep[s] guard over the regularity of life." The monks, however, ill-accustomed to this "rule of uprightness" (*normam rectitudinis*), find it "too difficult to be forced to think anew" (Di 2.3.3).<sup>36</sup> They reject Benedict's authority and even attempt to murder him. Keeping a "serene countenance and tranquil mind," Benedict blesses them before departing again "to the place of his beloved solitude" (Di 2.3.4–5).<sup>37</sup> What does this departure mean?<sup>38</sup>

Benedict is not a *rector* who mistakenly "despise[s] the infirmities of his neighbors" while "pursuing high things" (Past 2.5).<sup>39</sup> Rather, his departure is an *exemplum* of moral prudence! When a *rector's* leadership is rejected, "zeal for [others'] virtue" only "fills the mind with disquietude and agitation." Such perturbation "soon bedims the [mind's] eye" so that "it can no longer see the things, far above," that in tranquility it

34. Gregory I, Di 2.1.6 (OGM 4:140; Costello 11).

35. Gregory I, Mo 30.2.8 (OGM 1/4:160–62).

36. Gregory I, Di 2.3.3 (OGM 4:144; Costello 30).

37. Gregory I, Di 2.3.4–5 (OGM 4:144–46; Costello 30).

38. Following de Vogüé, Terrence Kardong makes the plausible suggestion that Gregory lingers over this question here because of "[his] own regrets at the difficult task he has undertaken as pope." See *Life of Saint Benedict* 26.

39. Gregory I, Past 2.5.16 (OGM 7:48; Demacopoulos 58).

contemplated “clearly” (Mo 5.45.82).<sup>40</sup> If the *rector* abandons the task of moral leadership while remaining in his position, then outward conflict may abate, but mere temporal administration becomes a prison: “While visible things alone are thought of, the invisible light is not admitted to the mind” (Hiez 2.5.18).<sup>41</sup> With his days consumed by exterior matters, Benedict would have lost even his own rootedness in contemplation. Importing his subjects’ turmoil into himself, he would have “lost himself without finding them” (Di 2.3.5).<sup>42</sup> Therefore, one might break stability of community and location in order to preserve spiritual stability under God.

Benedict’s departure is not solely for the protection of his own contemplation, but also for his mediation of *stabilitas* to others: “[P]erfect souls who find their work ineffectual go elsewhere to work more fruitfully.” Attracting others to his solitude, Benedict the “living one” now “raised a multitude from death of soul” (Di 2.3.11–12).<sup>43</sup> Having preserved his own rootedness in contemplation and the love of God, Benedict’s active love of neighbor can fulfill the description of the consummate *rector* in the *Homilies on Ezekiel*:

[One] who passes through active life, perfectly led, [may go on] to the freedom of the contemplative . . . . And very frequently such a one is able to pass over [*transire*] to contemplative life without abandoning the active . . . [so that] one who attains contemplation does not relinquish exteriorly the good works whereby one can benefit others. (Hiez 1.3.11–12)<sup>44</sup>

We must always distinguish between the historical narrative of Benedict’s exemplary life and the narrated theology that the dialogue weaves from historical events. Gregory’s narrated theology develops in order, as it singles out for comment the dimensions of Benedict’s spiritual life that correspond to the successive stages of the journey to contemplation. In-

40. Gregory I, Mo 5.45.82 (OGM 1/1:468).

41. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.18 (OGM 3t/2:140; Tomkinson 347).

42. Gregory I, Di 2.3.1–7 (OGM 4:144–46; Zimmerman 61–63; Costello 30–31). “Had the holy man wished to hold [them] long in compulsion under him . . . perhaps he would have exceeded his own accustomed strength and his tranquility’s limit, and his mind’s eye would have strayed from the light of contemplation . . . . [U]nmindful of his own condition, he would have both abandoned himself [*relinqueret*] and not found them” (Di 2.3.5). Compare Mo 5.45.82.

43. Gregory I, Di 2.3.11–12 (OGM 4:148; Costello 32).

44. Gregory I, Hiez 1.3.11–12 (OGM 3/1:142–146; Tomkinson 65–66).

dividual stages are signaled by moments in which Benedict responds to some challenge to *stabilitas*, often associated with mobility or immobility. Hence, although Gregory notes that the historical Benedict practiced contemplation in this first abbacy (Di 2.3.5), he waits until the end of Benedict's life to describe and expound contemplation, after the narrative has illustrated the preceding spiritual itinerary. Therefore Benedict's acts can symbolize particular stages of the soul's ascent even as they also exemplify the life of a *rector* who already treads the contemplative heights of *stabilitas*.

At this point in the narrated theology of *stabilitas*, we should expect "cleansing" to be followed by "self-gathering." From what is one "gathered"? Humanity fell by turning its love from God; divorced from him, humans lost contemplation and contemplative stability (Di 4.1.1–2). Now they look for happiness outside of God by instrumentalizing the things of this world for pride and pleasure, submitting the soul to the body's domination. Having thus forsaken *stabilitas*, the soul is "scattered" (*sparsa, dispersa*) (Mo 5.34.61):<sup>45</sup> It addictively ruminates over images of material things, the tokens of a satisfaction sought apart from God. However, as "nothing it receives satisfies the mind, in that it has lost [God], who might have satisfied it truly," the scattered mind "var[ies] by the fit of alternating desire" and "is ever seeking some other place through uneasiness" (Mo 8.10.19).<sup>46</sup> Finally, the scattered mind cannot *really* conceive—much less desire—anything beyond the corporeally knowable (Di 4.1.2). It is bound to a materially contoured false knowledge of self and of God (Eu 2.31.7)—and thus pursues a similarly deficient love of self and love of the world in opposition to love of God. Gregory writes:

[T]he mind intent [*intenta*] on the visible . . . while it prostrates itself in corporeal images [*in imaginibus corporeis iacet*] is not able to rise [*surgere*] to incorporeal things. From this it happens that [the mind] is the more severely [*deterius*] ignorant of its Creator [*nesciat*], as it more familiarly [*familiarius*] bears [*portat*] bodily creatures about in its thought [*in cogitatione sua*]. (Eu 2.30.10)<sup>47</sup>

These circumscribe the truth of oneself and God. Even when some

45. Gregory I, Mo 5.34.61 (OGM 1/1:444).

46. Gregory I, Mo 8.10.19 (OGM 1/1:626–28). Compare Mo 9.5.5.

47. Gregory I, Eu 2.30.10 (SC 522.244–46; Hurst 246). Compare Augustine, Trin 4.1–2.

true knowledge of God is had by divinely given faith, scattering rouses old desires in order to choke off this incipient aspiration toward God before it should take firm root (Eu 2.31.6, Mo 26.44.79).

The soul thus “unseemly” “scattered over the many” must “gather itself into the One.” Then it can eventually “prevail by the great force of love” to “contemplate the Being that is one and incorporeal” (Mo 23.21.42).<sup>48</sup> That is, while ongoing cleansing keeps desire detached from images and gathers one’s love toward God, self-gathering cognitively “gathers oneself to oneself” (*se ad se colligat*) by laboring against habitual recurrence to sense images. Self-gathering “tread[s] down whatever occurs to corporeal thought of sight, hearing, smell, bodily touch, or taste” (Hiez 2.5.8–9).<sup>49</sup>

Once “gathered” (*collecta*), one can know oneself as *God’s* creature, a rational spiritual-corporeal creature. The soul knows that it is “created beneath God and over the body [*sub Deo super corpus*], so that, being enlivened [*uiuificata*] by its Superior, [the soul] may enliven the inferior [body] that it directs [*uiuificet inferius quod administrat*]” (Hiez 2.5.9).<sup>50</sup> The soul is charged with following God and with directing the body accordingly (Hiez 2.5.9).<sup>51</sup> Gathered self-knowledge, neither bounded by the material images nor limited by the horizons of bodily pleasure and prideful aggrandizement, permits the soul to avoid scattering and to rise with undiluted love toward God—growing in *stabilitas*.

Benedict’s exit from the monastery into the wilderness signals by a physical transition the narrated theology’s arrival at the stage of “self-gathering.”<sup>52</sup> Lust is not the only occasion of scattering. Unlike his earlier perseverance in the cave, had Benedict remained in the monastery, his self-gathered knowledge of himself as a spiritual-corporeal creature under God would have been obscured by immersion in practical care for material realities from which human conflict had excluded spiritual fruitfulness. Gregory warns, “By the turbulence of excessive thought” (*per cogitationis motum nimiae*), “we are led out of ourselves” (*extra nos*

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48. Gregory I, Mo 23.21.42 (OGM 1/3:322). *Et postquam per multa indecenter sparsa est, in unum se colligere nititur, ut si magna ui amoris praeualet, esse unum atque incorporeum contempletur.*

49. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.8–9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 339–40).

50. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 340).

51. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 340).

52. De Vogüé also notes the shift of narrative focus from ascetical to contemplative but does not attribute to Gregory the detailed progression that I propose. See de Vogüé, *Life—Commentary* 37.

*ducimur*). Thus outside, “we are at once ourselves and yet not *with* ourselves, because, not at all seeing ourselves, we wander midst other things [*per alia uagamur*]” (Di 2.3.5).<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, Gregory specifies that a mind “wanders” insofar as it is consumed with concern for passing things and temporal affairs to the *exclusion* of God (Di 2.4.1).<sup>54</sup> This, as we have seen, is the foundation of scattering.

By leaving, therefore, Benedict signifies not a mind’s wandering but its “self-gathering.” He can be said to have “dwelt with himself” (*habitasse secum*) in that, “ever watchful [*circumspectus*] in guarding himself; ever regarding himself [*aspiciens*], ever weighing himself [*examinans*] before the eyes of the Creator; he did not strew about [*deuulgauit*] the eye of his mind outside of himself” (Di 2.3.7).<sup>55</sup> He neither confuses himself with images nor immerses himself in them unto scattering.

Benedict’s self-examination is the activity of “discernment” (*discretio*), which Gregory elsewhere explains. All sensorily apprehended things “are to be driven away [*abigenda*] from the mind’s eye by the hand of discernment [*manu discretionis*] so that the soul may regard [*consideret*] itself such as it was created.” By *discretio*, the soul judges itself, conceived “without bodily images,” under God and over the body (Hiez 2.5.9).<sup>56</sup> Self-gathered discernment entails a *moral* self-judgment in light of the *fact* of one’s constitution under God as an embodied incorporeal soul. It is a judgment regarding how well one follows God above created things. One knows oneself as God’s and, increasingly, *as* one is known by God. But this is not yet “self-seeing,” in which one makes passage from knowledge of oneself as God’s spiritual-corporeal creature to knowledge of one’s spiritual constitution in relation to God’s own.

53. Gregory I, Di 2.3.5 (OGM 4:146).

54. Gregory I, Di 2.3.5 (OGM 4:146; Zimmerman 62–63; Costello 31). For the mind’s “wandering” as a spiritually unfruitful form of care for temporal affairs, see *uaga* in Di 2.4.1 (OGM 4:150; Costello 41).

55. Gregory I, Di 2.3.8 (OGM 4:146; Costello 31). De Vogüé and Kardong call attention to a thematic parallel with the *Rule* of Benedict concerning the first step of humility: “While he guards himself at every moment from sins and vices of thought or tongue, of hand or foot, of self-will or bodily desire, let him recall that he is always seen by God in heaven, that his actions everywhere are in God’s sight and are reported by angels at every hour.” Thus Benedict of Nursia, Reg 7.12–13 (RB 1980: 192–95). See Kardong, *Life of Saint Benedict* 29.

56. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 340).



*Self-seeing and preparations for contemplation—Monte Cassino*

*By “self-seeing,” one grasps one’s intimacy with God and catches some inkling of God’s nature*

IN “SELF-SEEING,” ONE dwells “in” oneself (Hiez 2.5.17–18). The narrated theology reaches this stage in Benedict’s abbacy at Monte Cassino. Whereas “self-gathering” withdraws *from* attachment to the world, “self-seeing” stretches out *toward* God. One moves from knowledge of the *fact* of the Creator to a knowledge of ongoing *intimacy* with the Creator; one does not just obey the creator but embraces him (Hiez 2.5.8–11). Earlier, after Benedict left his first abbacy, the narrated theology highlighted self-gathered guard over oneself. Now, at Cassino, mention of physical position tends to come in episodes that focus on Benedict’s *prayer* in relation to his care for his monks. I propose that these episodes thus symbolically relate the active love of neighbor to the transformative embrace of God that prepares for contemplation.

Attention to prayer supports a narration of the theology of “self-seeing”: “[L]ifted [from the world] to itself, the soul understands [*intelligit*] her own measure and recognizes that she transcends all things corporeal” (Hiez 2.5.11).<sup>57</sup> The soul recognizes her own immateriality, unity, presence throughout the body, and life-giving and commanding role vis-à-vis the body (Hiez 2.5.9). Then the soul “reaches [*tendit*] from an understanding of herself to an understanding of its Creator [*ab intellectu suo se ad auctoris intellectum*]” (Hiez 2.5.11);<sup>58</sup> that is, the soul infers similar such attributes—in a transcendent manner—of God, who is uncreated, one, omnipresent, and life-creating (Hiez 2.5.10).

But because this analogical leap of understanding, which precedes contemplation, is a leap *toward God*, it is an act of *prayer*, which must be prepared by exercise in the love of God and neighbor. One must “broaden the mind in holy deeds” (Mo 6.37.56).<sup>59</sup> Hence the narrated theology

57. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.11 (OGM 3/2:132–34; Tomkinson 342).

58. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.11 (OGM 3/2:132–34; Tomkinson 342).

59. Gregory I, Mo 6.37.56 (OGM 1/1:528). Gregory declares: “[Having] subdued the insolencies of the flesh,” one must “discipline his mind by the exercises of holy working” (*mentem per studia*

of “self-seeing” must develop the relationship between love’s working and prayer’s glimpse of God.

*The establishment of a monastery at the fortress of Cassino signifies full stability in “self-seeing.”*

HERE, WHERE ONE would expect the narrated theology to introduce “self-seeing,” Gregory states:

The holy man, departing elsewhere, changed his place [*locum*] but not his enemy. For he endured graver conflicts, as he found the Master [*magistrum*] of evil fighting openly against him. Now the fortress [*castrum*] called “Cassino” is sited on the side of a lofty mountain that shelters [*recipit*] this fortress in its slope. (Di 2.8.10)<sup>60</sup>

In what follows, Benedict does not leave the monastic fortress until he spends a night outside the walls in conversation with his sister Scholastica (Di 2.33).

I argue that, in the narrated theology, Benedict’s physical stability in the monastic “fortress” (*castrum*) signifies the firm *stabilitas* of “self-seeing.” I base this association on Gregory’s theme of the heart or mind as “stronghold” (*arx*).<sup>61</sup> Gregory introduces the *arx* in a passage on the imagery of Isaiah 33:16–17. He explains that, in the *arx*, one ascends to “heights of contemplation” by “the steps of active life.” To “dwell in the heights” is to “set our heart on heavenly things.” Then we find our “loftiness [*sublimitas*]” in “fortifications [*munimenta*] of the rocks” when we “separate ourselves from base [*infima*] thought” and turn instead to the “precepts and examples” (*praecepta et exempla*) of the saints, who loved God and neighbor (Mo 31.51.102).<sup>62</sup> This fortified activity builds up to contemplation:

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*sanctae operationis exercent*) to “spread his mind in holy deeds” (*mentem per santa opera dilatat*) before ascending to contemplation.

60. Gregory I, Di 2.8.10 (OGM 4:160; Zimmerman 74; Costello 64).

61. Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection* 25–26, 75, 198, 213. Straw explains that Gregory has taken up the Stoic concept of the “stronghold of the mind” (*arx mentis*)—the insular soul detached from bodily passions and external stimuli—and transformed it by a Christian *stabilitas* in love, a love ordered to a desire that “pants” (*anhelat*) for God (Hiez 2.1.16; also Eu 1.12.1; Hiez 2.8.17). Straw’s view differs from that of Leclercq, who describes *stabilitas* as a thoroughly Christian patristic concept although without addressing Gregory in particular.

62. Gregory I, Mo 31.51.102 (OGM 1/4:336).

Our loftiness is the fortifications [*munimenta*] of the rocks [also], when we are joined in mind to the choirs and hosts [*choris castrisque*] of heaven, and, standing in the stronghold of the heart [*stante in arce cordis*], we expel—as though placed beneath us—the malignant spirits that lie in wait. Then also bread is given to us; because our intention, raised to things above, is refreshed with the contemplation of Eternity. . . . [T]he King is seen by the elect in his beauty [*decore*] because, rapt above themselves, they fix the eyes of the heart on the very brightness of his Godhead. (Mo 31.51.102)<sup>63</sup>

The activity of love, therefore, fosters an interior cognitive transformation that brings us toward contemplation—thus linking the “stronghold of the heart” to “self-seeing.” This active life is the “exercises of holy working.” By these exercises, one moves through the stages that join cleansing to contemplation (Mo 6.37.56).<sup>64</sup> The form of this exercise—battle with the devil and intensified outward love of neighbor—recalls also Gregory’s introduction to Benedict’s life in the “fortress” of Cassino. If we see Cassino as a symbol of the “fortifications of the rocks” upon which the spiritual “stronghold” rises by love and knowledge toward the “hosts” of heaven, then we can resolve de Vogüé’s mild puzzlement over Benedict’s geographical fixity during this period.<sup>65</sup> By emphasizing his place at Cassino, the narrated theology communicates the *interior* stability of the “self-seeing” *arx mentis* as it grows toward contemplation.

I test my interpretation by attending to moments when Benedict’s physical position is challenged by the devil. This happens often as the devil retaliates against Benedict’s flock after the man of God routes paganism at Monte Cassino (Di 2.8.10–12).<sup>66</sup> One thinks of the *arx cordis* from which demons must be expelled. Here an attack on Benedict’s flock is an attack on *Benedict’s* own *stabilitas*.<sup>67</sup> But Benedict is unmoved: he neither interrupts his prayer nor leaves his cell in the face of these provocations. In the narrated theology, his control over his bodily disposition

63. Gregory I, Mo 31.51.102 (OGM 1/4:336).

64. Gregory I, Mo 6.37.56 (OGM 1/1:528).

65. de Vogüé, *Life—Commentary* 108–9.

66. He first casts out the devil’s cult and commandeers his former followers. This functions symbolically as a cleansing of the soul as *arx* from all demonic influence. It also echoes Lk 11:21–22.

67. Symbolically, we might even posit that Gregory has translated the physical attacks sustained by Antony into the spiritual attacks made on Benedict’s flock, so that the monks are like the body of the abbot.

signifies the *stabilitas* of the *arx*. As an example of sanctity, his immobile body is not a beaten foe but a reconditioned instrument that manifests his soul's fixity in God. Two confrontations show this phenomenon.

*Narrating "self-seeing": The devil attacks Benedict's prayer; Benedict resurrects a dead monk*

IN THE FIRST bout between Benedict and the devil, the other monks have gone out to work on strengthening a wall, but Benedict has "remained behind in zealous prayer within the enclosure of his cell [*cellulae suae claustra*]" (Di 2.11.1).<sup>68</sup> The devil bursts in to announce that he is about to "pass on" (*pergeret*) to the working brethren, as if hinting that Benedict ought to interrupt his prayer to hurry out of his cell lest some harm befall his charges. Benedict sends a messenger with a warning, but he does not move. When the monks return, he is still in his cell (Di 2.11.1–3).

As an *exemplum*, Benedict's prayer illustrates Gregory's advice that *rectores* "lay aside at intervals" their "earthly business[,] for the love of God, lest . . . the heart . . . fall away wholly from the highest" (Mo 5.11.19).<sup>69</sup> So too his refusal to go forth. If one is blown from task to task, fearful in reaction to every assault of evil, one will erode *stabilitas* and one's ordering to contemplation. We also see here a spiritual progress. Earlier, Benedict left the unruly monks so as not to lose *stabilitas*. Now he is unfazed by the devil's onslaught. But he does not neglect his flock; rather, he secures their stability by issuing instruction and continuing his prayer. Thus, inner withdrawal to loving prayer also facilitates rather than impedes one's effective response to outer threats.

As a feature of the narrated theology, Benedict's *cellulae claustra* (itself within the *castrum*) recalls "self-seeing" soul as *arx*. His immobility therein betokens *stabilitas* in opposition to diabolical "scattering," and his prayer the cultivation of love by which the soul rises toward God (Mo 15.53). With respect to scattering, the typology is clear: the devil would interrupt the spiritual pilgrimage not by temptations to sin but by legitimate temporal concerns. When Benedict stays in the "enclosure of his cell" (*cellulae claustra*), we are reminded of Gregory's warning against be-

68. Gregory I, Di 2.11.1 (OGM 4:164; Zimmerman 76; Costello 65).

69. Gregory I, Mo 5.11.19 (OGM 1/1:400–2).

ing “led outside” (*extra nos ducimur*) of the “enclosure of [one’s] thought” (*cogitationis claustra*) through lax discernment midst temporal affairs (Di 2.3.5, 9).<sup>70</sup> The threat here is precisely the *interruption* of prayer and the re-ordering of stability—the soul driven by exterior threats rather than by love of God. Benedict’s perseverance typifies the “holy men” who, when “hard pressed without,” fight not in worldly wise but “fall back within into the stronghold of the mind [*in arcem mentis*],” whence they look securely on “all things passing far below them” (Mo 6.16.24).<sup>71</sup>

Yet while the connections of Cassino and Benedict’s cell to the pre-contemplative *arx cordis* are plain enough, does the narrative really signify anything more than “self-gathering”? Where is the analogy of soul-body with God-soul that characterizes “self-seeing”? Where is love’s up-building in “holy working”? These are to be found in the latter part of the narrative. The threatened brethren “build up one of the walls [*parietem*] a little higher.” The devil overturns this wall, which crushes “the body of a very young monk.” When word is brought, Benedict, who still has not left his cell, orders the slain boy placed “on the reed matting where [Benedict] was accustomed to pray,” after which he dismisses the others, closes his door, and offers “even more earnest prayers to God.” He sends the boy “back to his work” that very hour, “as sound and healthy as he had been before.” The monk “was able to rejoin his brethren and help them finish the wall” (Di 2.11.1–3).<sup>72</sup>

Let us consider first the diffusion of *stabilitas* in this intermingling of narrated theology and hagiographical example:

*The prayer.* Benedict’s interior prayer in the enclosure of his cell is correlated with the work of strengthening the monastic fortress’s wall (recall the “fortifications of rocks”), as if to signify that the *rector*’s prayer inwardly strengthens his soul as *arx* and outwardly builds up the body of his flock against demonic threats to *stabilitas*. The monks’ stability under their *rector* is undisturbed because he maintains his own prayer and so repulses spiritual and physical assaults. Both Benedict’s warning and his miracle of healing indicate such a diffusion of *stabilitas* to others.

*The healing.* Here, too, physical movement gives a similar message.

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70. Gregory I, Di 2.3.5 (OGM 4:146).

71. Gregory I, Mo 6.16.24 (OGM 1/1:496).

72. Gregory I, Di 2.11.1–3 (OGM 4:164; Zimmerman 76–77; Costello 65–66).

Benedict has the youth brought into the abbot's cell. Then Benedict himself moves only to close the door before praying alone. Thus, the soul does not "go out" to worldly dispersion but rather draws its duties into the security of its *stabilitas* (the cell), where, anchored by love (prayer), it can—as Gregory elsewhere writes—address such matters with a mind "not disordered but regulated" (Mo 18.43.70).<sup>73</sup>

*Obedience.* The episode shows also the diffusion of *stabilitas* by way of the obedience that characterizes the *rector's* relationship with God and the community's stance toward its *rector*. Benedict does not desert the Lord in prayer. The community obeys Benedict's instructions concerning the boy's remains; finally, the healed boy obeys Benedict; his obedience enables the completion of the wall, a type of the upbuilt *arx*. Monte Cassino is, therefore, an image both of the *arx* and of Christ's ecclesial Body, which, in spite of its travails, follows Christ the Head and so is strengthened and built up in his image. Benedict's own stability founds this harmony of obedience and love; his bodily acts transmit it throughout the community.

But in the narrated theology, Benedict's moments of prayer bring us also to the analogical leap of "self-seeing": In "self-seeing," the stronghold-soul discovers its own spiritual attributes by reflecting on its life-giving relationship to its own body. Then, by analogy with its own nature, the soul glimpses "something of the nature of almighty God," who, also immaterial, mysteriously sustains the soul in existence (Hiez 2.5.9).<sup>74</sup> Prayerful Benedict in his cell represents the soul as *arx*, receiving its life from God. Now, are not the *rector* and the community like a soul and its body? Therefore, when Benedict prays over his monk's body and it lives, what is suggested but the life-giving relationship of soul (Benedict in the cell) to its body (the monks under their *rector*)? This is the first half of the analogy. Benedict's dependence on prayer (that is, the soul's dependence

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73. Gregory I, Mo 18.43.70.

74. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.9 (OGM 3/2:130; Tomkinson 340). "[T]he soul in the body is the life of the flesh, but God who gives life [*uiuificat*] to all is the Life of souls. Then, if the [soul's] enlivened life [*uita uiuificata*] is of such magnitude that it cannot be comprehended, who avails to comprehend with his understanding how great is the majesty of [God], the enlivening Life? But to consider and discern this is, to some extent, to enter [vision] already, because from its appraisalment [of itself], the soul gathers what it perceives [*sentiat*] of the unbounded Spirit that incomprehensibly rules those things which he incomprehensibly created."

on God)<sup>75</sup> is likened to his care for the community (that is, the soul's administration of the body), and the focus on the gift of *life* especially recalls the stable soul's apprehension of its "measure" in "self-seeing" (Hiez 2.5.11).

What of the exercise of love that must accompany "self-seeing"? We have seen that the monastic community and its *rector* can signify the body and the soul. Therefore, just as the stable soul exercises its love bodily to build up the interior *arx*, so too does Benedict (that is, the soul) send his monks (that is, the body) back to build up the wall of the fortress (the *arx*). The narrated theology teaches here the interior building up (the wall) that is the fruit of love's bodily service (the monks). Moreover, that this should take place within the story of a miracle is to be expected. Sherry Reames points out that Gregory does not "[feed] his audience on trivial wonders instead of solid instruction"; rather, "[o]f Benedict's actual miracles . . . nearly all are acts of mercy." In Gregory's text, the miracle is first and foremost an act of *love*.<sup>76</sup> For, as Gregory says, "wonders by prayer and . . . by power" are worked by "those who adhere to God with a devoted mind" (Di 2.30.2).<sup>77</sup>

Spiritually (prayer), physically (immobility), and symbolically (the completed wall), this episode intermingles hagiographical *exempla* with narrated theology to emphasize both the underpinnings of Benedict's successful shepherding of the community as *rector* and the theology of victory as founded on the security of the self-seeing soul's *stabilitas* in the life of prayer. Bold love operates throughout: it secures the *arx* by aiming vertically toward God and horizontally to order one's own body; it orders the Christian community according to the steadfastness of charity that forms the heavenly society of love (compare Hiez 2.5.22). By such love, the stronghold—whether the individual Christian or the community of Christians under a *rector*—anticipates in microcosm the perfected *stabilitas* of the heavenly city of Christ.

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75. After all, the body is laid on the mat on which Benedict was accustomed to pray!

76. Sherry L. Reames, *The Legenda Aurea: A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 76–77.

77. Gregory I, Di 2.30.2 (OGM 4:196; Costello 141).



*Narrating "self-seeing": The devil attacks Benedict's upward journey*

I ARGUED THAT Benedict's raising of the young monk could signify the "self-seeing" soul's understanding of its own life-giving relationship to the body. What of God's life-giving relationship to the soul? This second half of the analogy is narrated in Benedict's final confrontation with the devil. This time, the old adversary attempts not to draw him out but to turn him back—for Benedict is uncharacteristically in motion. As he "went [*pergeret*] to the Chapel of Saint John, at the highest point of the mountain [*in ipsa montis celsitudine*], the old Enemy was exposed to him in the guise of a veterinarian [*mulomedici*]." When interrogated, the devil explains: "I go [*uado*] to give . . . a drink" "to your brethren." Benedict, however, "went on [*perrexit*] to prayer." Only afterwards does he return to exorcise the devil's victim (Di 2.30.1).<sup>78</sup>

As a hagiographical *exemplum*, this episode again shows that the devil first attacks the *rector's* prayer, the root of the whole community's stability in God. By completing his journey and his prayer on the mountaintop, Benedict literally dramatizes Gregory's recommendation that *rectores* periodically "put aside the tumults of temporal activities" to ascend the "summit [*uertice*] of their contemplation," there to learn God's will as if Moses receiving the law "on the mountain [*in monte*]" (Mo 23.20.38).<sup>79</sup> Descending from the mountain, he communicates *stabilitas* in his community.

Taken as a stage in the narrated theology, we may see in the excursion from cell to peak the "self-seeing" soul's ascent from an understanding of itself to an understanding of God. How? In its every prior appearance, the verb *pergere* refers to some shift of location, but it describes Benedict's own motion in only two earlier instances—when he first journeys into the wilderness, fleeing worldliness (Di 2.1.4), and when he goes forth spiritually, appearing in a dream, to direct the building of a new monastery at Terracina (Di 2.22.1–5). The typology of *stabilitas* in these events is obvious. However, when Benedict goes (*pergeret*) to pray but meets the devil on the road (Di 2.30.1), we are reminded instead of when Benedict remained (*morabatur*) to pray while the *devil* went (*pergeret*) to the breth-

78. Gregory I, Di 2.30.1 (OGM 4:194; Zimmerman 97–98; Costello 126–27).

79. Gregory I, Mo 23.20.38 (OGM 1/3:316).

ren (Di 2.11.1). In that episode, Benedict gave life to a dead body. Now, it is the devil who appears as a life-giver, but as a veterinarian, who carries the “triple-shackle” (*tripedicam*) of physical bondage and brings a draught of spiritual possession (Di 2.30.1).<sup>80</sup> Aping the spiritual Life-giver (God), the devil brings only a bond of spiritual death that reduces human beings to brute beasts. Moreover, the devil attacks the monks—typologically, the “body” of the *rector*—to invert *stabilitas*; but where does Benedict go? Earlier he stayed behind; now he goes forth, to God. As the “self-seeing” soul, he has grasped how he gives life to the body; now he looks upward to grasp somewhat the uncreated Creator, who alone gives life to the soul and who is met in a journey that mounts upward by love: “The eternal things are [said to be] ahead of us . . . because we discover them as we journey onward [*illa inuenimus pergentes*]” (Hiez 1.3.17).<sup>81</sup>

Now the narrated theology has begun to enter the stage where, as Gregory says, one must “prevail by the great force of love [to] contemplate the Being that is one and incorporeal” (Mo 23.21.42).<sup>82</sup> My interpretation draws strength from Gregory’s positioning of Benedict’s vision shortly after this episode. Gregory has already explained to Peter that there are two ways to be led out of oneself (*extra nos ducimur*): one that destroys self-gathering by exteriorizing thoughts (*sub se reliquit*), and another wherein one is caught up (*rapuit*) by ardor into the heights (*culmine*) of contemplation (Di 2.3.9).<sup>83</sup> Here the soul does not go (*pergeret*) down to the body like the devil but has gone (*perrexit*) beyond “self-seeing” (the cell) in pursuit of a still higher prayer (up the mountain). This ascent is still *within* the monastic complex, signifying the journey’s interior nature. Benedict’s loving desire for God (the mountain) shelters the self-seeing stronghold (the monastery) (compare Di 2.8.10), and one ascends that desire to contemplation by “the force of love . . . which, while it draws [the soul] . . . out of the world, lifts it on high” (Mo 6.37.58; compare 15.47.53). Gregory expounds this prayer of love more deeply in the next episode I consider, which finally links “self-seeing” to contemplation.

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80. Gregory I, Di 2.30.1 (OGM 4:194).

81. Gregory I, Hiez 1.3.16–17 (OGM 3/1:148; Tomkinson 69–70). *Ante nos enim aeterna sunt, post nos temporalia, quia et illa pergentes inuenimus, et ista recedentes quasi post dorsum relinquimus.*

82. Gregory I, Mo 23.21.42 (OGM 1/3:322).

83. Gregory I, Di 2.3.9 (OGM 4:146–48; Zimmerman 64).

*From self-seeing to contemplation by way of love**Preparation for contemplation by love—Benedict and Scholastica*

AS A PIECE of the narrated theology, the story of Benedict and his sister Scholastica shows that the love of neighbor is necessary to the “self-seeing” soul that would contemplate the God who himself is Love. When Benedict would leave his sister and return to his monastery for the night, he is imprisoned by a rainstorm brought on by her prayer.<sup>84</sup> Benedict is initially offended, but, Gregory tells us, Scholastica “was able to do more because she loved more” (Di 2.33.5);<sup>85</sup> hence “they prolonged the whole night in vigil [*peruigilem*] and each fully satisfied the other with holy talk on the spiritual life” (Di 2.33.4).<sup>86</sup>

We have here, especially for *rectores* in ecclesiastical authority, an *exemplum* that speaks to a potential weakness in one's exercise of *stabilitas*—for *stabilitas* is anchored by love. In previous stories, Benedict's refusal to disturb his regimen of prayer demonstrated the proper *stabilitas* of a contemplative *rector* in obedience to and love of God; it underwrote his success as a spiritual leader. Now, however, an unnecessary rigidity shows his cloudy view of the basis for that stability. One whose *stabilitas* is more in his cell than in the Lord is one who cannot live perfectly the active life of love. As Gregory tells us elsewhere, he will be unable to remain on the heights without abandoning his usefulness to others through good works (Hiez 1.3.11–12). Moreover, as Terrence Kardong remarks, Benedict needs by love “to become more human so that he [will] better enjoy the company of God in heaven.”<sup>87</sup> Mistakenly, Benedict has placed obedience to an exterior rule above the interior law of love that the rule is supposed to cultivate.<sup>88</sup> But, as Gregory tells us, “the branch that is our good works

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84. This scene opposes the earlier scene when Benedict, drawn by *lust* for a woman, yet remained in solitude. Now, wishing to return to solitude, he is taught that he ought to have remained (temporarily) outside for the sake of *love* of neighbor amidst their shared love of Christ.

85. Gregory I, Di 2.33.5 (OGM 7:202; Costello 155).

86. Gregory I, Di 2.33.4 (OGM 4:202; Costello 155).

87. Kardong, *Life of Saint Benedict* 128.

88. See similar comments in John C. Cavadini, “A Note on Gregory's Use of Miracles in the Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict,” *The American Benedictine Review* 49, 1998): 115–17.

has no sap unless it remain attached to the root of love”—and this of both God and neighbor (Eu 2.27.1).<sup>89</sup>

Scholastica does not rise to restrain him but gives him a wordless lesson. She lowers her head to touch the table in prayer, as if resting more deeply in true *stabilitas* than does her restless brother. In answer to her prayer, the natural exterior tumult of a storm compels Benedict to interior spiritual repose. Benedict now rests with his sister in a dialogue of love that is free of the anxiety that had given rise to his unnecessary rigidity.

Here is another lesson for *rectores*. On the one hand the *rector's* ability to bring a situation to happy resolution issues from his communion with the Lord: “[When] affairs of business make a din without, within the most peaceful repose is maintained in love” (Mo 18.43.70). On the other hand, the *rector* must learn that, whether he be at prayer or in action, in motion or at rest, he must attend in love to the business that the Lord appoints. For practice of the love of neighbor heightens communion with God. Benedict’s time with Scholastica does not compete with but builds up his *stabilitas*. This the narrated theology shows by its ordering of events:

Gregory may have re-positioned historical events in a way that aids the narration of his spiritual theology.<sup>90</sup> Three days after Scholastica “returned to her own cell and the man of God to his monastery,” Scholastica “leaves her body and penetrates the secret places of heaven” (Di 2.34.1).<sup>91</sup> Then, *after* her death, Gregory describes Benedict’s contemplative vision, linking it in time to the death of Bishop Germanus of Capua (Di 2.35.3–4) in 541. Here we have a mystery: the date of Scholastica’s death is unknown, but all proposed dates come not before but *after* 541; tradition assigns her death to 542 or 543, while at least one scholar has proposed 547, close to Benedict’s own death.<sup>92</sup> Whatever the case, matters are already out of historical order in that Benedict’s conversation with the bishop of

89. Gregory I, Eu 2.27.1 (SC 522:164; Hurst 212).

90. Kardong also senses a rearrangement, although he proposes a different reasoning behind it: *Life of Saint Benedict* 134.

91. Gregory I, Di 2.34.1 (OGM 4:202–4; Costello 155).

92. The date of 547 is proposed by Ildephonse Schuster, *Saint Benedict and His Times*, trans. Gregory J. Roettger (London: Herder, 1951) 341. De Vogüé notes that Benedict’s vision is placed far too late, but posits that Gregory wished to make it a “magnificent conclusion” to cap off Benedict’s “spiritual career” amidst the deaths of great saints. Benedict’s discussion of Totila with the bishop of Camosa “seems to have taken place in 547.” See *Life—Commentary* 167.

Camosa (Di 2.15.3), recounted even earlier, took place in 547—long after Benedict's vision in 541. In the present ordering, Scholastica's miracle and death precede Benedict's vision and death—a lesson in the power of superior love (Di 2.33) is interposed between Benedict's prayer (Di 2.30) and his earthly vision (Di 2.35), directly followed by his entrance into the face-to-face vision of heaven (Di 2.37).

Gregory's other writings illuminate how this rearrangement narrates his theology. Benedict has "come down" (*descendebat*) to meet Scholastica "not far outside the gate [*extra ianuam*] on the monastery property" to "devote the whole day to the praises of God and to holy conversation." The soul comes forth from its *arx* not in dispersion but in the outward communal exercise of love of God and neighbor. But when Scholastica bids him prolong their "holy talk" (*sacra conloquia*) and not "leave" her (*deseras*) that night, he objects: "It is completely impossible for me to remain outside my cell" (*manere extra cellam nullatenus possum*) (Di 2.33.2).<sup>93</sup> This impatient desire to return to his enclosure recalls a zealous self-guard of the ingathered *arx* in "self-seeing." Yet here it also typifies the soul that, out of fear of scattering or even out of contempt for activity, *mistakenly* demurs from exercising love of neighbor. Such a lapse in *discretio*, Gregory hints, stems from an antecedent deficiency of love that impairs one's knowledge of God: Benedict misjudges himself under God because he neglects the implication of the fact that God *is* love (Di 2.33.5)! By refusing to love, one withdraws from heaven's threshold (Hiez 2.5.14). Therefore, they who, "in their eagerness to pursue contemplation, decline to be of service to the neighbor by preaching," will "lose such goods in desiring to retain them for themselves" (Past 1.5).<sup>94</sup>

But by Scholastica's greater love, followed by Benedict's vision, Gregory narrates the theology that elsewhere he gives explicitly: the *rector* who "reaches the heavens in contemplation" must "in his piety . . . be weak with those who are weak" because "charity surges to great heights, when it is compassionately drawn to the lowly needs of neighbors" (Past 2.5).<sup>95</sup> One's very *capacity* for contemplation is prepared by one's cultivation in the breadth of the love of neighbor:

93. Gregory I, Di 2.33.2 (OGM 4:200; Costello 154).

94. Gregory I, Past 1.5.5 (OGM 7:18; Demacopoulos 36).

95. Gregory I, Past 2.5.16 (OGM 7:50; Demacopoulos 60).

[E]ach soul will be so high [*alta*] in knowledge of God [*cognitione Dei*] as it is broad [*lata*] in love of neighbor [*amore proximi*]. For while it broadens itself [*dilatatur*] through love it exalts itself above by knowledge [*per cognitionem*] . . . Let us be broad in the affection of charity [*in affectu caritatis*] that we may be exalted in the glory of highness. Let us through love have compassion [*compatiamur per amorem*] on our neighbor that we may be joined together by knowledge of God [*coniungamur per cognitionem*]. (Hiez 2.2.15)<sup>96</sup>

This passage, which agrees so well with Gregory's tale of Benedict and Scholastica, is what the narrated theology teaches by re-positioning the meeting with Scholastica between Benedict's prayerful mountain ascent and his vision. Onward, then, by love to vision!

### *Contemplation—Benedict's Vision*

WHILE GREGORY HAS long before mentioned Benedict's contemplation as historical fact (Di 2.3.5), it is only now (Di 2.35) that the narrated theology marks the soul's arrival at vision. As we have seen, Gregory teaches that love broadens the soul. The *arx* that practices neighborly love will be better prepared to be rapt by God into contemplation. As if to emphasize this principle, the story of Benedict's vision echoes while it adjusts the pattern of his encounter with Scholastica.<sup>97</sup> Benedict converses with Servandus, a visiting abbot. But this time, he does not interrupt the colloquy; they part only "when indeed the hour of rest was already far spent" (*cum uero hora quietis exigeret*). Speaking together the words of life, they have been "able to taste by longing [*suspirando gustarent*] the food of the heavenly homeland, which was not yet fully theirs to enjoy" (Di 2.35.1).<sup>98</sup> When at length they part, Benedict goes to his cell, set high in the watch-tower above the gate, looking inward over the monks' dormitory. Like the soul at love's peak, he retires not, but, with desire enflamed by conversation, he waits in urgent prayer:

96. Gregory I, Hiez 2.2.15 (OGM 3/2:64–66; Tomkinson 291–92). The Tomkinson translation reverses the relationship between height and breadth and is therefore misleading.

97. De Vogüé remarks that "the two accounts follow the same outline almost exactly," but he does not remark upon the import of their relative ordering in connection with a movement from love to vision. See *Life—Commentary* 165–66.

98. Gregory I, Di 2.35.1 (OGM 4:204; Zimmerman 104; Costello 164). This taste, Gregory's other writings show us, is the fruit of the love that they exercise in conversation. See Mo 15.47.53.

Benedict went to the upper part of the tower . . . There was a large building, facing the tower, in which the disciples rested [*quiescabant*]. While the brethren were resting, the man of God, pressing his vigil [*instans vigiliis*] long before the time of night prayer, [*was*] standing at his window [*ad fenestram stans*] and entreating the Lord. Suddenly, in the dead of night he looked and beheld light spreading down from above and night's darkness put to flight. It brightened with such splendor that it surpassed the light of day, although it shone amidst the darkness. A wonder followed in this vision [*speculatione*]: according to his own description, the whole world was gathered up before his eyes as if in a single ray of the sun. (Di 2.35.2–3)<sup>99</sup>

Let us consider each detail of this miniature narrative. *His conversation*. Instead of withdrawing at some set hour, he has cultivated his love like the soul that broadens itself in the active love of neighbor. The interlocutors' partial taste of heaven by desire exemplifies the teaching of the *Homilies on Ezekiel*: “[T]he hearts [*corda*] of the saints, which chant their yearning [*desiderium*] to Almighty God with great ardor through love [*amorem*] . . . are already inside [heaven] through desire [*intus sint per desiderium*] though not inside through full effect” (Hiez 2.10.5).<sup>100</sup>

*His vigil, looking over the monastery interior*. Prepared by love, Benedict does not sleep but watches for God with urgency of desire (*instans vigiliis*). His gaze, in passing over the monastery, apprehends the *castrum* at a glance. This recalls to us the “self-seeing” soul that elevates its gaze from itself and toward God, by catching the analogy of creature and creator. The *rector* sees his *arx*—shaped by the love of neighbor (i.e., the dormitories)—in preparation for seeing God.

*He stands*. Benedict looks out over the monastery while “standing” (*stans*) at the window (*ad fenestram*). His physical position is here described for the first time by the verb *stare*. What can this mean? In the

99. Gregory I, Di 2.35.2–3 (OGM 4:204–6; Zimmerman 104–5; Costello 164).

100. Gregory I, Hiez 2.10.5 (OGM 3/2:270; Tomkinson 442–43). See also Hiez 2.5.14 (OGM 3/2:138; Tomkinson 345). This passage seems to summarize the narrated theology of Benedict's interactions with Scholastica and with Servandus: “[P]erfectly to love God and our neighbor is already to stretch [*tendere*] toward the entrance to the Kingdom. So the more each loves, the closer he approaches [*propinquat*] the entrance. But as much as he neglects to love, so much does he refuse [*recusat*] to enter, because neither is he zealous to see what he seeks [*nec studet uidere quod appetit*]. . . . [F]rom the breadth of charity [*latitudine caritatis*], we already enter by desire [*per desiderium intramus*] into the heavenly life that we cannot yet lay hold of [*contingere*]. . . . Then the hope [*spes*] for the heavenly strengthens [*solidat*] the mind lest it be shaken by the turbulence of earthly tumults.”



first miracle of his second abbacy, Benedict discerned that a monk “could not stand at prayer” (*ad orationem stare non poterat*) because a demon had clouded his “wandering mind” (*mente vaga*) with excessive attention to temporal concerns (Di 2.4.1).<sup>101</sup> As a device of the narrated theology, we find a contrast to such scattering in Benedict, who, having passed through “self-seeing,” now “stands” in contemplation.

But this “standing” is a high point of the representative role of physical position in the narrated theology. For, in Gregory’s use, “standing” (*stare, stans, standum*, etc.) denotes in the first place God’s own life. He “stands” in that he does not change; but he “stands” also in that, as a consequence of his constancy, he exercises an unceasing care for rational creatures, illuminating them with the grace of contemplation, which uplifts them to participate in his life (Mo 5.34.63).<sup>102</sup> This participation is also called “standing.” This, the very height of “stability,” participates in God’s life by *constant* contemplation, embracing him in a love that echoes his own. The angels “stand” in forever seeing God (Hiez 1.8.11). Adam possessed “steadfastness of standing” (*soliditas standi*) as an inborn gift—a constant contemplation and interior “stability” that made him the consummate *rector* (Mo 8.10.19; 25.3.4). Christ brought contemplative stability anew (Mo 3.16.30). As his members (Mo 8.30.49), Christians journey by love (Mo 10.8.13) in steadfastness of charity (Hiez 2.5.22). By this journey, they grow toward the contemplative likeness of God’s “standing.”<sup>103</sup>

Now, the narrated theology completes that journey. Appearing just at the moment of contemplative vision, the verb *stare* suggests that, through Christ, Benedict participates fully in the life of God. For even in this life, ascending by love to contemplation, the soul echoes Adam’s angelic pre-lapsarian life.

*Looking over the dormitory.* Benedict stands while his monks sleep. I have read his relationship to his monks as a typological echo of the soul’s relationship to the body. Therefore, if vigilant Benedict in his cell is the

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101. Gregory I, Di 2.4.1–3 (OGM 4:150; Costello 41). One is reminded of the “gyrovague” monks of Benedict’s *Rule*, who lodge in region after region, “ever wandering and never stable, and ever serving their own wills and the allurements of their bellies” (*semper vagi et numquam stabiles, et propriis voluntatibus et gulae illecebris servientes*); Benedict of Nursia, Reg 1.10–11 (RB 1980 170–1).

102. Gregory I, Mo 5.34.63 (OGM 1:1:446).

103. See a complementary discussion in Bernard McGinn, “Contemplation in Gregory the Great,” in *Gregory the Great: A Symposium*, ed. John C. Cavadini (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1995) 146–8.

Christian soul as *arx*, then the sleeping monks (as the body) recall Gregory's exegesis of Song of Songs 5:2, wherein to sleep with a waking heart denotes full *stabilitas*, in which fleshly desires are at rest even as the mind remains vigilant in contemplation (Mo 5.31.55).<sup>104</sup>

*At the window.* We have already seen Gregory's teaching that the mind will taste heaven by desire (Hiez 2.5.14; 2.10.5) and, moreover, that it will be "so high in knowledge of God as it is broad in love of neighbor" (Hiez 2.2.15). We have seen those geographical adjectives (*high, broad*) literally illustrated as Benedict was stretched beyond the monastery in love for Scholastica, and now he goes up the high tower to see God while looking out over the breadth of the monastic enclave. Here the narrated theology gestures toward *how* a greater capacity for love permits greater height in vision. Benedict's windowed tower, joined to the gate-house and facing inward,<sup>105</sup> recalls the setting of Ezekiel 40:16,<sup>106</sup> on which Gregory composed a homily not long after completing the *Dialogues*. It strikingly elucidates the narrative-theological significance of Benedict's gaze through the gate-house's inward-facing windows:

In slanting [*obliquis*] windows, . . . the light enters . . . a narrow portal but the inner part that receives the light is wide because . . . , although they only catch a faint glimpse of the true light . . . [yet] from this trifle the fold of their minds is opened into the increase of fervor and love . . . . This greatness of contemplation, because it can only be conceded to those who love, is described as splayed windows in the chambers. (Hiez 2.5.17)<sup>107</sup>

The soul's capacity for seeing God is determined by the breadth of love with which it is able to respond to the influx of his light. Apparently, Benedict has so broadened in love that he can receive not only the light of God but also the whole universe gathered in that light (Di 2.35.6–7).

The fact that Benedict's windows face over the courtyard rather than

104. See further discussion of this exegesis in McGinn, *Growth* 61–62.

105. According to Gregory, Benedict's room is in the "upper" chamber (*superior*) and "facing the tower was a large dwelling in which their disciples slept"; thus Di 2.35.2 (OGM 4:204; Zimmerman 104–5). The window through which Benedict receives his vision has its prospect over the monastery interior. Zimmerman specifies that this is the "watchtower just inside the gate of the ancient fortress", thus *Dialogues* 104 n. 64.

106. Ezk 40:16: "And [He made] splayed windows [*fenestras obliquas*] in the little chambers [*thalamis*], and in their fronts, which were within the gate on every side round about . . ."

107. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.17 (OGM 3/2:140; Tomkinson 347).

outward recalls another dimension of spiritual development. Gregory explains that, in Ezekiel's temple, the windows are "not outside [*extrinsecus*] . . . but inside [*intrinsecus*]" to signify that the soul's detachment from corporeal images prepares for the loving expansion whereby one receives God's light. The windows in the chamber's fronts

were built within [*intra*] the gate . . . , because one who has one's heart within [*intus*] also receives the light of contemplation. For those who still think too much on externals are ignorant of the eternal light . . . [through] the [inward-facing] chinks of contemplation. (Hiez 2.5.17–18)<sup>108</sup>

Applying this to the narrated theology in Benedict's vision, we see that his gaze over the monastery is entirely opposite the mental wandering of the monk who could not stand in prayer. Benedict found him "standing outside" (*stantem foris*) and upbraided him for "blindness of heart" (*caecitate cordis*) (Di 2.4.3).<sup>109</sup> But standing "within," the *rector* sees himself (the *arx* of the monastery) and then elevates his gaze to God. This overall correlation of architecture with "self-seeing" and contemplation supports my interpretations both of Benedict's gaze and of the narrated theology in general. The journey of love brings the soul at last to "stand" in contemplation.

### THE WAY OF BENEDICT

TO SUMMARIZE THE narrative thus far, Monte Cassino marks the soul's progress in *stabilitas* by three situations. First (Di 2.11), the soul retains its "self-seeing" *stabilitas* in the cell of prayer when the devil threatens the Christian with exterior concerns beyond his or her control. Maintaining *soliditas caritatis* with God by prayer, the Christian is able to withstand the Adversary's attack. Second (Di 2.30), when the soul would ascend through the stronghold of "self-seeing" to the threshold of contemplation, diabolical machinations in worldly threats must not turn aside the intention of prayer; for these threats can be resolved only in union with

108. Gregory I, Hiez 2.5.17–18 (OGM 3/2:140–42; Zimmerman 347).

109. Gregory I, Di 2.4.3 (OGM 4:150; Costello 41).

God. Third (Di 2.33), if the soul would complete its ascent through love to vision, the *rector* must be willing to broaden himself, going out from repose in the active love of neighbor. Finally (§35), the love-broadened soul must wait in prayer—without relaxing his love of neighbor—to be rapt into contemplation. One begins by seeing oneself as the creature of God, sustained by God, and then one turns upward toward God himself. The narration of Benedict's life translates Gregory's theology exactly.

Concluding the Prologue to his *Rule*, Benedict himself writes that he wishes "to establish a school for the Lord's service" (Reg Prol.45).<sup>110</sup> Gregory's dialogue is itself a sort of school. From various accounts (Di 1.Prol.10), Gregory selects for emphasis details that exemplify the *rector's stabilitas* and guide the reader through the spiritual life. Even so, Gregory does not *reduce* Benedict's life to an idealized spiritual progression. As we have seen, each episode teaches valuable lessons that complement the narrated theology of his whole life.

How, then, is the reader to follow Benedict's example? The school of the *Dialogues* makes an important theological point that transcends Benedict's monastic milieu. Gregory does not intend that every reader become an abbot. Rather, by aligning Benedict's life with Gregory's theology of the Christian spiritual journey, the dialogue universalizes this life, so that the *principles* of Benedict's "cleansing," "self-gathering," "self-seeing," love, and contemplation can be models for *every* person. For Christians are not called to imitate Benedict so much as they are to imitate Christ. Gregory indicates this Christological substrate just before Benedict's entrance into the fortress of Cassino: "Actually . . . Benedict—that man of the Lord!—possessed the spirit" not of Moses, or the Prophets, or the Apostles; he possessed the spirit "of but one": Christ, "who by the grace of lawful redemption fills the hearts of the elect" (Di 2.8.9). By implication, all the elect whose hearts are filled by Christ can reach the end that Benedict reached.

Gregory elucidates this Christological universalization in his arresting depiction of the abbot's passing. Benedict, who has reached the first Adam's "standing," is shown to be re-created in the image of the last Adam by configuration to the Passion. The Savior offered to the world the sign of his Passion and Resurrection, which only the humble can discern and

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110. Benedict of Nursia, Reg Prol.45 (RB 1980 164–65).

which only they will inherit (Di 2.8.9). Humble Benedict fulfills this sign. On the sixth day after he has ordered his tomb prepared, Benedict is carried “into the chapel, where he received the Body and Blood of our Lord to gain strength for his approaching end.”<sup>111</sup> Let us analyze this scene.

*The sixth day.* At least twice in his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, Gregory likens the number ‘six’ to the six days of creation as an image of active life (Hiez 1.3.10–12, 2.2.7–8). The temple measures six cubits and a hand-breadth because active life—like the Lord’s work of creation—can be completed in this life, but one can enter only a hand’s breadth into contemplation, the fullness of which is reserved for the post-mortem seventh day of rest (Hiez 2.2.7–8). Benedict, dying on the sixth day as Adam was created on the sixth day, has completed perfectly the re-created *rector’s* life: six days of activity and also the hand’s breadth of contemplation. The new life of rest in the beatific vision awaits.

*The Eucharist.* No longer before the splayed windows but now directly before the Lord’s Body, Benedict again “stood erect” (*erectis . . . stetit*) supported “on the arms of his brethren” with “his hands raised to heaven.” Thus, “among words of prayer, he breathed his last” (Di 2.37.2).<sup>112</sup> Upright, he is Adam, set upright in *soliditas standi* upon receiving the breath of God on the sixth day. Giving *back* this breath, Benedict pays by death the debt of Adam’s misuse of life (compare Mo 17.30.46). Benedict’s final “standing” is conformed also to Christ, who was crucified on the sixth day. He bodily upraises his hands in cruciform death; spiritually, he has received the Eucharist, which Gregory elsewhere powerfully identifies with participation in Christ’s Passion (Di 4.59–62; Eu 2.22.7).<sup>113</sup> The passion of Benedict is his transit from this life to its fulfillment in the next; Christ’s Passion, which Benedict encounters eucharistically, is like God’s breath enlivening Benedict’s clay. Previously, we saw Benedict still or walking; then we saw him stand in contemplation like the first Adam; now, by his eucharistic configuration to Christ’s Passion, he stands as he

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111. Gregory I, Di 2.37.2 (OGM 4:208). Coherent with my reading in light of *stabilitas*, De Vogüé calls Benedict’s foreknowledge evidence of a “sovereign mastery” in the “depths of his being”; thus *Life—Commentary* 178.

112. Gregory I, Di 2.37.2 (OGM 4:208; Zimmerman 107–8).

113. Straw discusses this topic but not the imagery of Benedict’s death; see *Perfection in Imperfection* 70–71, 180–81.

passes on into eternal union with the divine “standing” of Christ, the last Adam.

Benedict's death shows the meaning of redemption. The flesh is cleansed and made free by suffering with Christ—willingly renouncing its lower attachments through asceticism to become an instrument of prayer and love. Before Adam fell, “the love of God” was the “true stronghold of his standing [*stationis arcem*]” (Mo 8.10.19).<sup>114</sup> And so Benedict, also a great lover of God and neighbor, ends his life standing. As a further sign of *stabilitas* under God, his death is a last corporeal act of humility: the saint allows his body to collapse to the floor, knowing that it will rise once more to reflect the glory of the gleaming stronghold of his soul, joined in love with the other saints who are the bright stones of the city of God.

Humbly to imitate Christ in love is the most *fundamental* rule by which Benedict stood in such contemplative stability—and by this Gregory universalizes his narrated theology. Two monks see “a magnificent road,” richly carpeted and lit as if liturgically by lamps that stretch “from his monastery . . . eastward in a straight line until it reached up to heaven.” Christ, as an unnamed man of “majestic appearance,” stands at its summit and explains that “blessed Benedict, beloved [*dilectus*] to the Lord,” “ascended [*ascendit*] to heaven” “by this way [*via*]” (Di 2.37.3).<sup>115</sup> Such words call to mind another passage on the “way,” from the Prologue of Benedict's *Rule*: “[A]s we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run the way [*via*] of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with an unspeakable sweetness of love [*dilectionis*]. . . . [K]eeping his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall by patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen” (RB Prol.49–50).<sup>116</sup> If the monastery represents the mind as *arx*, then the *via* of Benedict is the road of *stabilitas*, leading from the *arx* of Cassino to the vision of God by way of obedience in the expansion of love. The narrated theology dovetails with the *Rule*.<sup>117</sup>

114. Gregory I, Mo 8.10.9.

115. Gregory I, Di 2.37.3 (OGM 4:210; Zimmerman 108). De Vogüé infers a reference to Christ atop Jacob's ladder; *Life—Commentary* 181. Compare Gen 28:10–19; Jn 1:51.

116. Benedict of Nursia, Reg Prol.49–50 (RB 1980 164–67).

117. Gregory hints as much in offering the *Rule* as a sure guide to Benedict's “life and character”; “for his life”—which Gregory has just described—“could not have differed from his teaching.”

Carole Straw has argued that Gregory's teaching universalizes the monastic path: "If the true stronghold of virtue is the mind and heart, and not simply the cell, then a kind of ascesis can become accessible to all levels of Christians." So long as one dwells in *stabilitas*, "no part of life need necessarily be excluded from the Christian."<sup>118</sup> The narrated theology of the second dialogue illustrates while expanding upon Straw's comment: the "way" to heaven is this way of *stabilitas*; one knows it by humbly fulfilling Christ's commandments concerning the love of God and neighbor. Herein one participates in the sufferings of Christ, so to rise (even if only after death) to contemplation of his glory. Echoing the lesson that Benedict learned from Scholastica, Gregory later credits Benedict with having told the hermit Martin, who had chained himself physically within his cave, "If you are a servant of God, possess yourself not by a chain of iron but by the chain of Christ" (Di 3.16.9).<sup>119</sup> To reach this point himself, Benedict learned from Scholastica to forsake the last false notions of autonomy, becoming in love the full servant of God and *rector* of Christians. In imitation of him, Gregory's readers—whether monks or not—may in love of God and neighbor recover *stabilitas* and, running with unspeakable sweetness of love, draw the whole world up with them as they ascend at last to eternal vision.

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See Di 2.36 (OGM 4:408; Zimmerman 107). Indeed, we are reminded of the twelfth step of humility, perhaps the source for the vocabulary that Gregory enriched with more universal meaning (RB 7.62–67): "[A] monk always manifests humility not only in his heart but also through his very body, so that it is evident at the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery or the garden, on a journey or in the field, or anywhere else. Whether he sits, walks, or stands, let his head always be bowed and his eyes cast down, judging himself always guilty on account of his sins . . . Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at the charity of God which, being perfect, casts out fear (1 Jn 4:18)." See Benedict of Nursia, Reg 7.62–67 (RB 1980:200–1).

118. Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection* 25.

119. Gregory I, Di 3.16.9 (OGM 4:272).