

The Temptation of St. Benedict
by Father Dunstan Massey, OSB

When one has paced the same monastic cloister for half a generation, the architectural geometry begins to impose its own measure on one's pacing. A six foot interval, pillar to pillar, was traversed by three moderate steps, while the twelve foot squares in the pavement required six. As a child I did the same walking to school, measuring my steps on the sidewalk.

So once I had received permission to fresco the south wall of the cloister, my perception of space there, all two hundred and thirty-eight feet of it, became more acute. What should I do with that long vista? How should the images at the far end relate to the arched parabolas of the bell tower through which one will see them, distant, yet dominant, as through a lens?

At the time, we were looking forward to the fifteenth centenary of the birth of St. Benedict, so time itself became a theme for reflection, as David's psalm so often reminds us:

"Our life is over like a sigh.
Our span is seventy years,
or eighty for those who are strong."

If the average span of a monk's life were, say seventy-five years, how many such generations, one after the other, I asked myself, would take me back to the days of Benedict's youth? A few calculations informed me it would be twenty– twenty lifetimes to go back to fifteen hundred years! It was easy then, to imagine any procession down our 'spatio-temporal' cloister as a pilgrimage back to Benedict. Of course I had to test it – six steps every twelve feet. Though it paced out, what amazed me was the simultaneous brevity and length of our human lives.

Seeing Benedict through an historic lens, not only of monastic foundations down the ages, but also in his own personal progress, Nursia to Rome, Subiaco to Casino, made me acutely aware of a life continued beyond its appointed span. This mysterious conjunction of the changeless eternal with time flowing away from the future into the past, made possible a sort of timeless iconography. How else could moments, hours, days be rendered in a story of the ages? One needed to see all that, the whole world, as it were, in a single ray of light, as Benedict once did.

Time's length and duration became an endless perspective, continuing beyond this enclosure to some limitless horizon, where earth ends and the sky begins. This empty plain was a 'desert' in the monastic sense, a spiritual place where Benedict lived with death daily before his eyes; a retreat paved with the gravestones of solitaries who had fled the clamouring of the world as he had, to be alone with God.

With the spatial foundations laid, I began building the composition from the ground up. As I studied the terrain from the north end of the cloister, a great patriarchal figure rose up, commanding yet serene. He stood with hands raised in the gesture of prayer he would sustain to the end, standing up, even as he was dying. He does not grasp the pastoral staff nor the book of the Rule; they are now entrusted into the hands of his successors.

Benedict is flanked, on either side, by two towering rocks, like Cappadocian cliff dwellings. Subiaco on the right had a small arched opening in the face of the wall, recalling perhaps, behind the frescoed chapel within, the holy cave where the boy hermit had lived in his day, exposed to the elements. This later medieval enclosure was supported on the cliff face by two great buttresses. As I watched, water began flowing down the rock from a spring Benedict had opened with a night's vigil of prayer. It fell into a lake, all that remained of Nero's ruins. Strangely, there was a dogwood there, growing up by the lake, and flowering as they do here. It overshadowed our own tower, so far off in the distant future.

On the left was Monte Casino, crowned with the ruins of a Roman fortification. The broken tower with its small window became Benedict's cell. Through that window he foresaw the threefold destruction of his monastery, the last, even in our own 20th century. An Ionic column remains of a temple to Apollo which Benedict purified of its idol, and consecrated to the memory of St. Martin of Tours. At the bottom, from the Arms of Casino, the stump of an oak, cut down, sends out new growth into which has been grafted an olive shoot already bearing fruit. It alludes to his Master's blood stained agony in Gethsemani, so like his own in the wilderness.

But all this was seen, surely, in the perspective of history. Alone in his cave, the young Benedict knew nothing of what he would become – 'The Father of Europe'; nothing of those thousands of monasteries springing up in the dark and middle ages. When, some forty years later, he prescribed the reading of books, he could scarcely have imagined those numberless scribes copying God's word, and the wisdom of the ancient world, nor the schools that would arise, or the universities that would grow out of them. Nor is it likely he could have foreseen the succession of choirs in the great Cluniac houses, chanting both day and night the divine praises, to which, in the Rule, he allows nothing to be preferred. As a boy hermit, he knew nothing of missionary monks sent into alien cultures at the risk of martyrdom, nor of those wayside houses that became hospitable places of refuge for the sick, the poor, and the pilgrims, nor of Abbots in distant lands who became Bishops, builders of cathedrals and counsellors of Kings.

Having imagined that great figure in the distance, I began walking across our fifteen hundred years of pavement. As I approached, he was towering skyward over my head, while his robes dissolved into a tent of fragmented transparency. The flanking cliffs clarified their bases into some clear matrix, revealing beyond them, the merger of sky with horizon; the inchoate life had yet to be given its final form.

Suddenly he was there, adolescent, the youth, leaping up out of his thorny bed, stripped of his robe and the eloquence of the ages, arms flung out as if crucified! Time rushed back not by years, by seconds, in the stages of his struggle; his crushing the serpent's intended seduction; his impulsive embracing of brambles as a curse and a cure for the Fall; the calligraphy of pain etched in his flesh with lacerations and bloodshed.

At last I was face to face with the frailty of his youth and the rugged endurance of his strength. As it was said to Paul, so it was to Benedict:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
(2 Cor. 12:9)