Role and Quality of Monastic Community Life Challenged by Societal Transitions. An Ethnographic Case-Study of the Trappist Community of the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus

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Abstract
The religious landscape of present-day Western-European society is characterized on the one hand by a high level of secularization and on the other by an increased religious plurality (Berger 2000). The values intrinsic to a religiously oriented life in community are often diametrically opposed to the dominant Western-European thinking patterns such as individualism, utilitarianism and scientism. It is in this context not self-evident to consciously choose monastic life and it is moreover difficult to remain committed as a monk or a nun to a life characterized by a quasi-linear continuity and by exceptional obligations and limitations (Merkle 1992).
This article starts out by focusing briefly on an ethnographic study describing the physical and social environment of a specific contemplative Trappist community, the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus in Westvleteren (Belgium), thus contributing to the creation of a more objective image of contemplative orders in today’s society. It concludes with an analysis of the societal transition that challenges the role and the quality of present-day monastic community life.

**Keywords:** secularization, religious plurality, monastic life, Trappist community, contemplative orders

**Context**

The religious landscape of present-day Western-European society is characterized on the one hand by a high level of secularization and on the other by an increased religious plurality (Berger 2000; Dobbelaere 1999). The values intrinsic to a religiously oriented life in community are often diametrically opposed to the dominant Western-European thinking patterns such as individualism, utilitarianism and scientism. It is in this context no longer self-evident to consciously choose monastic life and it is moreover difficult to remain committed as a monk or a nun to a life characterized by a quasi-linear continuity and by exceptional obligations and limitations (Merkle 1992; Moulin 1966; Strahan 1988). In addition, the rapidly ageing population in Western-Europe increasingly chal-
lenges the quality of both religious life and community life within monastic communities (Vandewiele 2014 & 2015).

Within Roman Catholic monastic orders, a distinction is made between active and contemplative orders (Wortelboer 2008). Outside of prayer, monastics of an active order devote their time to the fulfillment of a specific task in society, for example in the fields of education, healthcare and special youth care. A contemplative order, however, focuses almost solely on prayer, worship and contemplation. The life of the religious is in this case dedicated to community prayer and not in the first place to the fulfillment of a specific task in society.

The social services provided by active orders might be preferred in a dominant thinking pattern like utilitarianism. In Western-European society, a paradoxical attitude is adopted toward contemplative orders in particular. On the one hand they come up against a wall of societal incomprehension (Vandewiele 2014), on the other hand the high level of visitor participation indicates an increased interest in the mystique and spirituality of abbeys. The image society creates of the social environment of contemplative orders relates to this paradoxical attitude. This image is marked by a very persistent and conservative representation of the ‘medieval’ monk. As such, this ‘medieval’ representation is being
both reproduced and enforced in e.g. commercials for beer and cheese products connected with abbey life (Abdij Maria Toevlucht 2000).

The abovementioned social context was the starting point for the ethnographic PhD research “Contemplative monasteries in the 21st century. An ethnographic study of present-day contemplative community life” (2014) conducted by Vandewiele in the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus in Westvleteren (Belgium). The first part of this conference paper will focus briefly on this ethnographic study that aims to contribute to the creation of a more objective image of contemplative orders in today’s society of the 21st century. The empirical fieldwork suggests that the quality of monastic community life is seriously challenged by the lower number of young monks in the past decade that entered the community and stayed on. Consequently, the second part of this paper will further examine the question whether or not the weakened attachments formed by a younger group of monks become exclusively apparent in the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus. Shouldn’t the cause partly be sought within the abbey walls themselves?

**Added value of the ethnographic study**

Scientific literature has also played its part in the simplification of the image of contemplative orders. Someone like Ervin Goffman, for instance, placed the monastic in his frequently cited work ‘Total Instit-
tions’ (1961) in a specific psycho-physiological framework, without basing this on empirically acquired data. In his view, the monastic is a psychological weakling, seeking solace and a safe haven to shield himself from a turbulent society he cannot deal with (Vandewiele & Weyns 2006). Since the ‘70s, however, the focus within the social sciences has shifted towards the study of new religious movements, secularization and religious plurality (Berger 2000).

Ever since, literature on Catholic monastic orders is mainly characterized by a subjective or at the most journalistic approach. A good example of this subjective perspective is Henri Nouwen’s work ‘Vreemdeling in het paradijs. Zeven maanden in een trappistenklooster’ (1983). Specific anthropological and sociological scientific literature on monastic community life is virtually non-existent, this in stark contrast to the many works written from a spiritual, theological and esoteric point of view. The need for a more contemporary image of the way of life of contemplative communities comes to mind, both societally and scientifically.

In one of the rare ethnographic works, ‘The Monastery. A Study in Freedom, Love and Community’ (1992), Hillery describes his research into a specific and anonymized Trappist community in the United States through participant observation in the guest house, individual conversations with monks and several surveys that were conducted in the en-
closed community. This study consists of three sub-studies on the monks’ perception of freedom, power and love. Because Hillery’s central focus is on these sub-studies, the reader gets but a very general description of their environment and their life in community. Moreover, his focus remains limited to an observation that starts from the perspective of the guest house and not from the environment of the enclosed community (Dudley & Hillery 1979; Della Fave & Hillery 1980).

Compared to Hillery, the added value of the ethnographic study conducted by Vandewiele (Vandewiele 2015) lies in the opportunity the researcher received to live together with the monks inside the enclosure of the non-anonymized Abbey of Sint-Sixtus in Westvleteren, thereby focusing his attention on the study of the day-to-day operations of the enclosed community as such. Although this approach is less specific and has a wider focus, the observation time during the participant observation phase was used maximally for the study of the world of the enclosed community and the exploration of its external relation with the wider community. The data acquired from the field observation translated into a detailed ethnographic description, which constituted the main focus of the PhD study. The ethnography aims to give the reader ‘an’ image of present-day contemplative community life, admittedly limited to a certain time and place. Furthermore, this view is also coloured by the
extent to which the researcher got field access to the different facets of monastic community life.

**Ethnographic research in Abbey of Sint-Sixtus in Westvleteren**

**Method**

The empirical and ethnographic\(^1\) exploration of the field is more than imperative, as there is little valid social-scientific information available on monastic life. If we are to obtain a more accurate picture of this religious form of living together, we had best study monastic community life on-site. Within the field of anthropology, a connection was found

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\(^1\) The central aim of the ethnographic study was to contribute to the creation of a more objective image of contemplative orders in today’s society. A first subsidiary goal was to introduce the reader to the life of the monks by treading in the footsteps of the postulant, paying maximum attention to the detailed description of both the physical architecture in which the monks are living, praying and working together and the social architecture of the community with the different key role players the postulant encounters in those places. A second subsidiary goal was to broaden the ethnographic description of the physical and social architecture by using a central reading key. Erving Goffman’s work ‘Totale Instituties’ (1975) was chosen as a reading key. Within the framework of this study, the central reading key offered on the one hand the possibility to address some neglected aspects of community life, and on the other hand to enrich the description with a more analytical and critical reading of the acquired data.
with the ethnographic tradition, more specifically with Karen O’Reilly’s critical definition of what she considers to be ‘ethnography’:

“Ethnography is a practice that: evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories” (O’Reilly 2012).

O’Reilly builds her critical definition of ethnography from the eclectic approach adopted by Paul Willis and Mats Trondman (Willis & Trondman 2000). Willis and Trondman argue that ethnography should on the one hand be based on methods that have a direct and lasting relation to social contact with representatives of the host culture, and on the other hand that the ethnography should be theoretically founded. (O’Reilly 2012) This critical approach to ethnography was also adopted in this research study, more specifically in the study of monks in the context of their every-day life over a longer period of time. In the ethnographic account, we report on the daily life of the enclosed community within the abbey walls. The choice of participant observation is prompted by the possibility this technique offers to provide a better description of the details, dynamics and nuances of monastic life. (Emerson 1995; Wolcott 1999) Apart from participant observation, many conversations
took place in the field and several in-depth interviews with monks were conducted.

**Case study Abbey of Sint-Sixtus**

The field observations were made in the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus in Westvleteren (Belgium), this in the period between end 2005 and beginning 2008. The Trappist community consisted of some twenty-five monks at the time, of whom the age varied between 30 and 96 years old. The process of getting access to the abbey for research purposes has taken one year, this through active mediation of a contact person enjoying the confidence of the monastic community and of the abbot in particular. In the phase before the actual observation period in the abbey, two preliminary studies were carried out.

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2. In a first phase before the actual observation period in the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus, two small preliminary studies were carried out. The first was an explorative study of the topical value of Erving Goffman’s theoretical framework in ‘Total Institutions’ (1963). This preliminary study was titled ‘Totale Instituties Herbekeken. Een Participatieve Observatie’ (2006)/(‘Total Institutions Revised. A Participant Observation’). In a second preliminary study, an observation period of four weeks was spent in the Benedictine Abbey of Sint-Andries in Loppem (Belgium). This study showed on the one hand that the initial premise to make a comparative study between two abbeys of the same Benedictine family would bring little added value from a spiritual and theological point of view, and on the other hand that the limited amount of observation time would have to be distributed between the two monastic communities, which would immediately imply a loss of
In the actual observation period in the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus, 180 observation days were spent in the enclosure of the abbey, spread over a period of two years. This actual observation period resulted in the collection of diverse data: field notes, exclusive photo and video material, ten in-depth interviews, secondary internal source material (for example, travel diaries of the Abbot General) and legislation (Rule of St. Benedict, Canon Law, Constitutions and Statutes of the Order of Strict Observance et cetera). All data were digitalized and processed with NVIVO (Mortelmans 2011; Richards 2006).

**Quality of monastic community life challenged**

During the field research, some elements were pointing to an internal rigidity that could possibly put a brake on the future-oriented dynamism within the monastic community of the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus. In the past decade, there have been fewer young monks that entered the community and stayed on. A singular answer to the question why a monk leaves may uncover some causes, but is in any case difficult to determine and remains very person-specific. After all, it doesn’t answer the depth and added value. As a result, the actual observation time was used to make an in-depth study of only one monastic community.
wider question of why it is mainly a younger group of monks that decides to leave the community prematurely.

In the older group, there may also be some monks that have played or still play with the thought of leaving, but practical and future-oriented impediments might have played or might still play a role in preventing them from proverbially throwing in the towel. The younger monks are not unlikely to see more chances to easily reintegrate themselves into society: finding a job, building a financially stable future, finding housing and perhaps starting a family. Obviously, the weaker attachment of the younger group of monks places heavy demands on the future dynamism or even continued existence of the Trappist community in Westvleteren.

“I asked brother H. if he wasn’t worried about the future of the monastic community in Westvleteren, because there had been quite some fellow brothers that had left the community lately. He told me that he would of course regret it if the monastery ceased to exist in this particular place, but that he is heartened by the knowledge that their way of life continues in other places in the world. With a smile, he told me that there are even Third World Trappist monasteries where they have to refuse candidate monks.” (field notes, 16/11/2006)
Transition in ideological thought and action

This second part deals with the question whether we should seek the cause of the weaker attachment of a younger group of monks inside or outside the walls of the monastery, and whether this problem exists exclusively in the abbey of Westvleteren. The cause can only partially be sought inside the monastery walls, and is rather situated in a wide societal development which goes far beyond specific elements inside the abbey walls. Clearly, the nature of the cause is cultural and is connected to the societal phenomenon of the rigid inter- and intra-ideological discourse in Flanders.

Framework of analysis of the cohort model

The cause of this rigidity may be found in the rapid societal changes that Flanders has been undergoing since the second half of the twentieth century. The unique and extremely fast evolution in the ideological field in Flanders results today in the distinction of three ideological cohorts (Marshall 1998; Vandewiele 2012 & 2014). Flanders has evolved in seventy years’ time from a monistic Roman Catholic society, over a conflict between Roman Catholicism and organized Freemasonry, into a religiously pluralist society. From a socio-religious perspective, this paper will look further into the specific phasing of this transition, and will distinguish three ideological cohorts. Elaborating shortly on
this, the analysis will be tested against the presence of internal dynamism in a monastic community.

**Mass church cohort**

Until the end of the ‘60s of the twentieth century, Flanders was ideologically characterized by an almost omnipresence of Roman Catholicism, which kept, despite the division of Church and State, a firm influence on society through the Roman Catholic pillar. Apart from this Roman Catholic pillar, socio-religious compartmentalized society is also comprised of a socialist and a smaller liberal pillar. This ‘pillarization’ created a homogenous and efficiently structured society. It meant that you were born inside a denominational or ideological group or ‘pillar’, were raised in it, shared joys and sorrows in it and eventually also died in it. The influence of such a pillar worked within almost all aspects of life and society. The choice of your school, the hospital when you were ill, the home for the elderly in your old age and even the organizations you voluntarily spent your free time in: all of them were largely predestined (Davie 2013; Dierickx 2007; Dobbelaere & Laeyendecker 1974).

Before and just after the Second World War, parish life around the many church towers in Flanders was flourishing. Church participation and church attendance were massive and did not only have a religious but also a strong social function. The parish priests often fulfilled
the role of provost in many local organizations. Consequently, the moral authority of the Church was not limited to weekly and Sunday services. The cultural blueprint that people within this cohort not only consciously, but also unconsciously received through birth, upbringing and habits is denominated ‘mass church cohort’. Ideologically, this cohort is characterized by a strong normative framework with regard to rituals, liturgical calendar, symbolism and conception of God. The strictly normative framework was rarely questioned and the socialization was facilitated by the Roman Catholic pillar with its many organizations that literally and figuratively speaking embraced the life and interactions of people. Freedom was therefore regarded as something belonging to the collective rather than to the individual. (Vandewiele 2012)

Baby boom cohort

At the end of the 1960s, a major turning point in the context of society and ideology was reached. Authors such as Van De Pol (1967) and Inglehart (1971) pointed at the time already to the growing shift in the conception of conventional Christianity and of the Western set of values between people born before the Second World War and what Inglehart calls the ‘post-war cohorts’. Later on, Inglehart empirically confirmed that the transformation of values between these cohorts had taken place in the political culture of the industrially advanced societies, and more-
over, that this shift is not a merely Western European phenomenon (Inglehart 2008, 145). With respect to religion and ideology in particular, smaller and larger shifts between both cohorts are also supported by findings from the larger European Values Study (Davie 2013; Dob bellaere & Voyé 2000; Dob bellaere 2003; Halman & Draul ans 2006, 269; Singleton 2014; Voas & Doebler 2011, 44-45).

The struggle for emancipation and the resulting movement in the 1960s sparked a revolution in which, among other things, the strictly normative framework of institutions such as Church and State were questioned and tested against the underlying values. This created new and alternative dynamics, movements and factions that did not automatically seek to join the classical pillars and acted more autonomously: the ‘baby boom cohort’ (Alwin 1990, 347-348, among others).

Ideologically, this period is characterized in Belgium by a sharp divide between Roman Catholics and organized Freemasonry. In this context, the baby boom cohort particularly questions the normative character of the rites, symbols and conception of God. It marked the time in which the Church wished to read the signs of the times and laid down new guidelines to bring liturgy closer to the people again. There were quite some experiments to redefine faith in the light of new individual and collective expectations, bringing about the birth of alternative religious communities. The baby boom cohort experienced freedom in the
constant questioning of the tension between the individual and the collective.

**Digital natives cohort**

In the margin of this tension between the mass church cohort and the baby boom cohort, the newest cohort gradually emerged: the ‘digital natives’ cohort (O’Bannon 2001; Sanchez 2011). This cohort adopted the blueprint of an individualized society and saw the emergence of a digital world, constantly using the perspective of the individual, also in the field of ideology. The cohort of ‘digital natives’ goes shopping in the ideological supermarket and fills trolleys of their own with what gives them meaning, describing this in various terms such as ‘God, energy or something’, in which they entirely or partially – either temporarily or permanently – believe. Therefore, this cohort grows up ideologically in a religiously pluralist society. The cohort of digital natives is used here as a catch-all term for the entire youngest cohort in Flanders, but may in fact be more diversified. Unfortunately, no sufficient empirical research data are available to refine this youngest cohort (Vandewiele 2014).
Cohort model and monastic community

Let us return here to the original question and focus again on the monastic community of Westvleteren. The reason for the weaker attachment of a younger group of monks is connected to the nature of the different cohorts that also cause the rigid inter- and intra-ideological discourse in Flanders.

The entire monastic community of the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus consisted during the observation period mainly of representatives of the first two cohorts, indicating the absence of the cohort of digital natives apart from two exceptions. In 2014, there were no representatives of the digital natives left. The cohort model can really be applied here, because the period after Vatican II marked a ‘revival’ in the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus.
In this context, there was a peer effect that attracted young baby boomers to the liturgical renewal started by a group of young monks. They distanced themselves from the old liturgy at the time and also attached more importance to community formation within the monastery. One of the pioneers from that time reminisces about those years:

“I entered the community a few years after Vatican II. At the time, there were quite some younger fellow brothers. We distanced ourselves from the older generation and introduced some changes, especially liturgically. We also wanted more focus on community formation. Actually, when I come to think of it, today’s younger generation could in fact find fault with the way we do things as well, because we’ve become the older generation now and we’re stuck in our way of thinking.” (field notes, 04/02/2007)

New forms of liturgy were experimented with, questioning the then very normative and stringent old liturgy and symbolism and testing it against the underlying values. Additionally, more importance was attached to the internal group dynamics within the monastic community, which led to the continued use of a dorm instead of individual bedrooms. Many monastic communities did make the switch, Westvleteren didn’t until 2007.
Compared to the other two cohorts, the digital natives grew up in a completely different societal context, that put more stress on the personal development of the individual than on the collective needs of the community. This is not unimportant, since the effort that monks from the digital natives cohort have to make to adapt to the group dynamics of Westvleteren is very great. They have to compromise substantially on their room for self-development. The quotation below illustrates the high price they pay to adapt.

“Today I had a conversation with Father Abbot in his office. The conversation turned to the plans for the new monastery buildings that could be consulted by the brothers in the scriptorium. I told him that the change from a dorm to individual bedrooms was a huge step. He agreed and hoped it might have a positive influence both on the monks and on the community. I said with a smile that the younger brothers must certainly have been happy to be able to sleep in a bedroom of their own again. I was amazed to hear Father Abbot claiming otherwise. It had been the younger monks that resisted somewhat, since they had paid a higher price for entering the monastery by having to change over from an individual bedroom in their home environment to a dorm in the monastery. They were not used to that! Conversely, most of the older brothers, Father Abbot told me, had never known anything different. He gave the example of his own situation: in his childhood home he used to share one bedroom, this was also the case afterwards in boarding school and eventually in the monastery as well. The change the younger brothers had to make was big.” (field notes,
The digital natives’ room for development is also restricted in other fields. The individual capacities or ‘human resources’ are being addressed less frequently, because the community takes priority over the individual. 

A monk that left the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus indicates it has been very heavy on him personally that he couldn’t develop his own talents anymore, because he had to devote himself entirely to the chores of the community and he thought there was little room for innovation.

“I couldn’t use my talents to the full anymore. This makes me especially vulnerable now that I have left the community, because I haven’t updated my skills. I have often asked permission to do so, but I first had to share in the tasks of the community. How unfortunate! It hurt, because there is another monastic community in Flanders that makes the most of the individual talents of its members for the development of its own economy. This, of course, results in making them more attractive for young people, because they still use people’s talents there, apart from asking them to do the normal community chores that every member has to do. They’ve already had to expand their building twice to accommodate the amount of candidates. I had hoped to see this happening here as well.” (interview with X, 2007)
The above quotation mentions that another Flemish monastic community of Trappists does take greater account of the room for self-development that is important to the cohort of digital natives. Considering the fact that the grass for this former monk may have looked a little too green on the other side, this does serve to remind us, however, of the fact that other interpretations of monastic community life and the attraction of candidates from the digital natives cohort are definitely possible.

Future challenges drawn from the cohort model

By applying the framework of analysis of the cohort model to the ethnographic description, a threefold challenge can be deduced for monastic community life in the near future, within what Habermas calls post-secular society. Habermas argues that religion and, by extension, more specifically also religious movements and monastic communities, has indeed lost some societal influence because of secularization, but that, in his view, this doesn’t mean that religion has lost its meaning (Habermas 2008; Loobuyck 2013; Vandewiele 2010).

Monastic baby boomers

Based on the ethnographic description, we first of all conclude that in the past decade, the influx in the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus has been limited to monks from the baby boom cohort. This can be attributed to
the current trend of men and women choosing more and more often to enter a monastic community later in life. Consequently, they now have a solid basis to rely on that was built in the outside world. This base of experience is not infrequently religiously rooted in a different active congregation or in being a priest dedicated to parish life or to education. As indicated by most monks in the in-depth interviews, this base of experience is essential for the maturity that is required today to engage in life as a cenobitic monk in the 21st century (Abdij Maria Toevlucht 2000).

This base of experience serves as a touchstone, as it were, for the choice of an exclusive orientation of religiousness on the life of prayer in community, but acts moreover as a facilitator to maintain the psychosocial balance when disruptions occur in times of crisis and the monk seriously questions his choice of monastic life, dwelling on the opportunities (for example, starting a family, perception of sexuality et cetera) he misses out on. The question that arises with the influx of monks from the baby boom cohort is whether this base of experience offers a sufficient guarantee that it can function as a lifelong touchstone and facilitator. After all, human lifespan continues to lengthen and the base of experience from the outside world is limited to the time before one entered the community. Will that base be sufficiently flexible to keep adapting to future intra-monastic, ecclesiastical and rapid societal changes?
Quality of religious (community) life

Another question is whether it isn’t a form of palliative sedation of a community when the active contingent of a monastic community is limited to monks from the baby boom cohort? ‘Après nous le deluge?’.
To put it differently: isn’t a monastic community dozing off in the comforting knowledge that the limited influx of baby boomers effectively helps the aged community to survive, all the while sensing that this is but a temporary and artificial prolongation of community life? It is a disconcerting and challenging question, but it incorporates a major concern for the quality of religious (community) life.

An influx of new monks from the digital natives cohort may not be possible anymore for every community, but in any case, the demand for quality remains crucial for those that are still part of the monastic community. Every monk follows his own individual vocation and consciously and radically chooses a life in community in which prayer is central. By doing so, the monk abandons certain acquired rights in the outside world and excludes a substantial number of potential opportunities, but instead he expects an environment in which this conscious and radical choice of monastic life can take shape fully and in which the discrepancy between monastic life and other life choices in the outside
world is considerable. That is, however, where the proverbial shoe pinches.

In the monastic communities that are ‘poor in digital natives’, a lot of management and care tasks today end up with the remaining group of baby boomers. The full range of operational tasks that are necessary to run a monastic community and the increased care needs of the aged fellow brothers create an increasing pressure on a decreasing number of shoulders to rest the burden on. From the observation of and contacts with other abbeys showed that time for a qualitative religious life and religious life in community is rather limited.

As a result, the above question concerning the flexibility of the baby boomers’ base of experience becomes more pertinent. How much could and would a monk be willing to compromise on the quality of his individual expectations of religious life in community and how flexible is his maturity in offering resistance to the increasing pressure? Even though mainly younger monks from the digital natives cohort leave the abbey, in recent years there still have been monks from the baby boom cohort that left the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus and that had nevertheless acquired a great monastic and religious maturity.
Monastic digital natives

In the Abbey of Sint-Sixtus, the influx of candidate monks from the cohort of ‘digital natives’ has been extremely small during the past two decades. Most of the ones that still entered the community, have eventually left it. They did not infrequently do so at the moment they had to decide whether or not to take solemn vows, when the community expects them to profess their final commitment.

If the remaining group of active baby boomers is already a serious cause for concern with respect to their coping ability and their expectations regarding the quality of religious life and community life, then that is all the more valid for the digital natives, so to say. Compared to the baby boomers, the cultural discrepancy between digital natives and the aged group of monks from the mass church cohort is even bigger. The baby boomers, after all, have consciously and actively rebelled against the mass church cohort in their younger years, which gave them greater knowledge of that cohort. For baby boomers, the connection to not only the worldview and self-image of the mass church cohort, but also to their thinking and way of life is bigger than for monastic digital natives.

As illustrated earlier by the cohort model, we are at a juncture where representatives of the three cohorts live together anyhow, but
have - due to their different cultural blueprint - at the same time different expectations regarding themselves, society and the outside world. In a closed community, it can be expected that these differences are more striking, because monks in an enclosure rely more on each other and have fewer chances to avoid one another.

**Synthesis: challenges offering opportunities for the future**

A monastic community faces some significant challenges nowadays. Monastic communities cannot shirk from societal developments: they, too, are confronted with the fact that living together with the three cohorts is not optional; it is a definite challenge for the future.

These challenges, however, could be translated positively into a course that offers monastic communities opportunities for the future. Monastic communities are to be considered, due to their closed character, as a microcosmos, lab or practice zone (Sloterdijk 2013) in which living together in community or – as Saint Benedict of Nursia puts it – in the ‘School of love’, is reflected more clearly (Baud 1998; Louf 1996 & 2003; Rollin 2008; Van Hecke 2012). As such, interactions – both conflictual and non-conflictual – between monks in an enclosed community are not only to be explained in terms of the individual or the character, but also societally, due to the different blueprint that monks received.
Hence, monasteries are interesting labs or practice zones in which living together in community is being practiced intensively. Herein lies a potential external societal challenge for monastic communities with regard to their future: in the unique cultural position they occupy in society and on that account, the signalling function they fulfill in it.

If we regard monastic communities as a lab with its own character or as a microcosmos in which living together is being practised as a latent function of monastic community life, then both the virtually absent influx of monastic digital natives and the quality of religious life and community life constitute a significant internal challenge for their lab function and eventual survival.
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