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Looking at my New Year schedule I reflected on how St Benedict doesn't approve of his monks going outside the monastery. He even restricts them from eating on a trip without special permission. Nevertheless, he knows it happens, just as he knew monks would drink wine.

‘It is not at all proper for monks,’ he says, ‘but because monks in our times cannot be persuaded of this, let us agree, at least, that we do not drink to excess.’ He recommended a measure of one ‘hemina’ a day per monk - though no one knows just how much a hemina is - estimates vary between seven ounces and three full glasses. The hemina is perhaps an in-joke because he knew that with all exceptions to rules there must be humour.

Exceptions to the rule of stability are equally flexible. Like all sin travel contains its own punishment. At least one abbot I know travels twice as much as I do. We agreed that though this may be a source of irritation or envy for those who stay at home it is, as Irish monks of old well knew, no picnic. Actually, their open boats and barefoot pilgrimages through dangerous lands pale before the dehumanizing sordidness of modern air travel.

Benedict's principal way of maintaining the mindfulness of the travelling monk was to ensure that he continued to pray at the prescribed hours. I find this very helpful. I first realized from Fr Bede Griffiths that even a middle seat in economy can be a place of prayer. In old age he travelled the world in a supernova explosion of spiritual energy. Thinking that he must find planes terrible places I was surprised when he said he rather liked them. ‘You see, no one disturbs you, the meals come on time, and you can pray or read whenever you like.’ For Benedict the monk's basic job description is reciting the Office seven times a day.

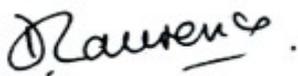
This holds life's other elements, like work and reading, in harmony. It punctuates all activity with insights into its meaning and purpose. We wouldn't need the Office, or indeed any spiritual discipline, if we didn't forget the obvious so quickly. In Western society today Muslims praying five times a day, rather than monks, are the largest witness to intertwining the secular and the sacred. These moments of God-centredness refresh the soul, deflate the stress that work can build up and can be done anywhere. You can have the Divine Offices of the day emailed to you and read them on your blackberry in between meetings in your workaday office.

Benedict however did not see the Office as the end, merely the means to deeper prayer.

Many in our 'monastery without walls' say the Office to prepare for their times of meditation morning and evening. The chief counsel of the IMF is one of these daily meditators. He gave the John Main Lecture at Georgetown University recently. People listened intently as he described how his meditation affected his work. Though, he added, 'I don't meditate just for these benefits?', indicating the difference between physical and psychological benefits and the spiritual fruits of prayer. When someone asked him the question on everyone's mind, 'how do you find time to meditate??' he gave the best answer possible and with more authority than any monk. He waved the question aside: 'time isn't the problem. If you want to do something, you make time for it.'

My travelling involves many retreats so it's easy for me to keep these set times. Central to them is the Eucharistic consecration of time. At a contemplative Eucharist, which is how I usually celebrate it now, we meditate after communion. The making present of the ritual frees us from the usual anxiety of looking at our watches and rushing on to the next thing before we have finished what's in hand? as TV programmes now advertise the next show before the one you're watching is over.

Consumerism is the false immediacy of what's coming next. Prayer is the immediacy of presence. The rush felt in buying something new evaporates with the packaging; the satisfaction of prayer drills deeper into a bottomless well of happiness. Like meditation, celebrating Mass with leisure defuses consumerism because it is the Christ-like art of giving oneself, of sharing not possessing. Taking time to break the word and share its multiple meanings unites mind and heart. Let's hope that the new Order for the Mass will help do this; but as Augustine said it is not the words but the communion of minds that makes the sacrament. Furthermore, you can fail at this while staying in the monastery and surprisingly ? occasionally - succeed at it while crushed in economy.



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The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program ? ?Meditatio? (www.wccmmeditatio.org)

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