

CONTEMPLATION AND MONASTIC ORDER IN BEDE: THE BENEDICTINE FRAMEWORK OF *HOMILIA 1,24*

CONTEMPLACIÓN Y ORDEN MONÁSTICO EN BEDA: EL MARCO BENEDICTINO DE LA *HOMILIA 1,24*

Roberto Montefinese

Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia

rmontefinese@alu.ucam.edu

ARK CAICYT: <https://id.caicyt.gov.ar/ark:/s24516821/1w8qzpk5s>

Fecha de recepción: 17/11/2025

Fecha de aprobación: 21/12/2025

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between monastic discipline and contemplative theology in Bede's *Homilia 1,24* on the Transfiguration. It argues that Bede's contemplative vision is inseparable from the Benedictine framework that structured his life at Wearmouth-Jarrow. Through close textual analysis, the article shows how Bede transforms the Gospel narrative into a program of monastic ascent: The "mountain of virtues" becomes the locus where moral purification and theological insight converge in divine illumination. Within the rhythm of the *Regula Benedicti*, *opus Dei*, *lectio divina*, and ascetic discipline, Bede develops a vision of contemplation as the culmination of monastic life. His synthesis reveals the monastery as both *scola servitii Domini* and *scola contemplationis*, demonstrating that contemplation emerges not despite but through the ordered disciplines of Benedictine life, where obedience, stability, and sacred reading prepare the soul for the vision of God.

Keywords

Bede – Contemplation - Benedictine Monasticism - *Homilia 1,24* - Spiritual Theology

Resumen

Este estudio examina la relación entre la disciplina monástica y la teología contemplativa en la *Homilia 1,24* de Beda sobre la Transfiguración. Sostiene que la visión contemplativa de Beda es inseparable del marco benedictino que estructuró su vida en Wearmouth-Jarrow. A través de un análisis textual detallado, el artículo muestra cómo Beda transforma la narrativa evangélica en un programa de ascenso monástico: la "montaña de las virtudes" se convierte en el lugar donde la purificación moral y la visión teológica convergen en la iluminación divina. Dentro del ritmo de la *Regula Benedicti*, el *opus Dei*, la *lectio divina* y la disciplina ascética, Beda desarrolla una visión de la contemplación como culminación de la vida monástica. Su síntesis revela el monasterio como *scola servitii Domini* y *scola contemplationis*, demostrando que la contemplación emerge no a pesar de, sino a través de las

disciplinas ordenadas de la vida benedictina, donde la obediencia, la estabilidad y la lectura sagrada preparan el alma para la visión de Dios.

Palabras clave

Beda – Contemplación - Monacato benedictino - *Homilia I,24* - Teología espiritual

Introduction

Bede's theological and intellectual legacy cannot be separated from the monastic environment that shaped his entire life. Within the twin monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow, study, prayer, and contemplation formed a seamless unity, reflecting the spirit of the *Regula Benedicti* that governed every aspect of daily rhythm. For Bede, contemplation was neither an abstract ideal nor a retreat from communal life, but rather the mature fruit of discipline, humility, and sacred reading, a practice through which knowledge became a means of divine encounter. At the heart of this inquiry lies a crucial question: How did Bede, a monk of Northumbria devoted to study and liturgical order, transform the Benedictine framework of prayer and obedience into a theology of vision and ascent? The answer, this article argues, lies in the dynamic interplay between the Rule of St. Benedict and Bede's exegetical writings, most notably his *Homilia I,24* on the Transfiguration, where the Gospel narrative becomes a metaphor for the monk's spiritual journey from purification to illumination.

This study therefore aims to explore the intersection of monastic discipline and contemplative theology in Bede's thought, demonstrating how his vision of contemplation emerges from the ordered rhythm of the Benedictine life. It proposes that Bede stands not merely as a transmitter of the monastic tradition, but as its creative interpreter, one who reimagines the Benedictine ideal of the *scola servitii Domini* as a living school of contemplation, in which obedience and study converge in the transformative pursuit of divine wisdom.

Bede and the Monastic Ideal

Few figures in early medieval scholarship possess the influence of Bede; his legacy endures, defined by his dual role as both monk and scholar. His contributions, spanning theology, history, and biblical exegesis, display a deep commitment to understanding the divine, a commitment intricately connected to his monastic life.¹ Characterised by a blend of erudition

¹ See Arthur G. HOLDER, *Biblical Exegesis and Mystical Theology in the Venerable Bede*, London, Routledge, 2024, pp. 15-19: Though best known today as the "Father of English History" for his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede considered himself primarily a biblical exegete, as evidenced by his placing scriptural commentaries first in his list of works. Modern scholars long neglected this exegesis as derivative, favoring his historical writings, but

and spirituality, Bede's works reflect the core monastic principles of prayer and contemplation. Scholarship, as exemplified by Bede, was not simply an academic pursuit but rather a pathway to divine encounter, demonstrating how intellectual endeavours can align with the search for spiritual depth. This joining of intellect and faith makes Bede a pivotal figure indeed in the development of Benedictine spirituality, where contemplation serves as a means of nurturing a closer relationship with God, consequently enriching the communal and personal practices of prayer within the monastic community.

Bede, born around 673 AD, remained within the Jarrow and Wearmouth monastic community throughout his life, emerging as a significant ecclesiastical scholar.² Understanding his historical setting is key to appreciating his theological approach; this era saw Christianity gradually solidify in Anglo-Saxon England, though tensions persisted between pagan traditions and the burgeoning Christian zeal. Bede's extensive work, notably his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, illuminated ecclesiastical history and emphasised the importance of prayer in spiritual development. Amidst the era's socio-political turbulence, he highlighted monastic life as a haven for reflection and piety, creating a spiritual heritage that continues to shape Benedictine traditions.³ His profound theological perspectives demonstrate a detailed grasp of contemplation as vital for the spiritual journey.

Monastic life in early medieval England was not just about religion; it offers a clear example of spiritual growth and communal togetherness. At the heart of this existence were prayer and contemplation.⁴ These weren't just rituals; they were ways for individuals and the

recent critical editions (especially in *Corpus christianorum* since 1960) have enabled proper assessment of his methods. Bede drew primarily on the four Latin doctors (Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory), plus Greek fathers like Origen, employing the Alexandrian allegorical tradition while using the Vulgate (*Codex Amiatinus*) and showing textual-critical skill. His non-speculative, practical theology aimed at spiritual edification through Christological and ecclesiological interpretation, distinguishing literal from spiritual senses (though inconsistently numbering them as two, three, or four), thus transmitting Origenist allegorical exegesis to the medieval West. Bede's exegetical work is also attested by his Commentaries.

² On Bede as one of Gregory's finest readers in early England, see John MOORHEAD, *Gregory the Great*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 17; Benedicta WARD, *The Venerable Bede*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1990; on the transmission and commemoration of Gregory's cult in seventh-century Northumbria, see Alan THACKER, "Memorialising Gregory the Great: The Origin and Transmission of a Papal Cult in the Seventh and Early Eighth Centuries", *Early Medieval Europe*, 7, 1 (1998), pp. 59-84.

³ John P. BEQUETTE, *Bede the Theologian. History, Rhetoric, and Spirituality*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 2022, pp. 14-15; George Hardin BROWN, *A Companion to Bede*, UK, The Boydell Press, 2009, pp. 1-13; Sam TURNER, Sarah SEMPLE, and Alex TURNER, *Wearmouth and Jarrow: Northumbrian Monasteries in an Historic Landscape*, Hatfield, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2013. For a more detailed analysis of this issue, see T. R. ECKENRODE, "The Venerable Bede and the Pastoral Affirmation of the Christian Message in Anglo-Saxon England", *The Downside Review*, 99, 337 (1981), pp. 258-278; T. R. ECKENRODE, "The venerable Bede as an Educator", *History of education*, 6, 3 (1977), pp. 159-168.

⁴ Sarah FOOT, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600-900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 186-191, 208-210; Alison HUDSON, *Bishop Æthelwold, His Followers, and Saints' Cults in Early Medieval England*:

community to change, allowing monks to move past everyday concerns, and connect with something divine. Monasteries functioned as educational hubs, places where knowledge and old writings were carefully copied, which helped to keep the intellectual history of the period alive, a point underscored. Furthermore, these communities encouraged virtues like humility and self-discipline, key elements for spiritual progress. The focus on living together and praying together strengthened the social links between members, encouraging a strong feeling of belonging and reason. Therefore, the monastic lifestyle not only supported personal spiritual journeys but also influenced the wider socio-cultural environment of early medieval England. Bede's monastic life provided a rich environment for considering prayer and contemplation, allowing him to blend theological ideas with practical actions. He highlighted the importance of organized prayer within this context. Indeed, regular liturgical cycles helped spiritual growth and strengthened communal bonds among the monks, encouraging a deeper understanding of divine presence. Bede did not just take an academic approach; he cleverly linked prayer with the routine of monastic life, showing that contemplation could lead to genuinely transformative moments. His writings imply that monks could achieve a kind of wisdom, similar to divine enlightenment, through disciplined prayer, and this, naturally, enhanced their spiritual paths.

The Rule of St. Benedict and the Structure of Contemplation

The monastic environment that shaped Bede's understanding of contemplation was fundamentally structured by the Rule of St Benedict, a legislative text that had emerged in sixth-century Italy and gradually established itself as the normative guide for Western monasticism. Composed around 535 by Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-550), an Italian abbot whose biography would later be immortalized by Pope Gregory the Great, the Rule represented a pivotal moment in the codification of monastic practice.⁵ Benedict's achievement lay not in absolute originality, modern scholarship has demonstrated his substantial debt to the anonymous Rule of the Master and to contemporaries such as Caesarius of Arles, but rather in his capacity to synthesize earlier ascetical traditions into a coherent,

Power, Belief, and Religious Reform, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2022. For a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of monastic rules from the fourth to the ninth century, see Albrecht DIEM and Philip ROUSSEAU, "Monastic Rules (Fourth to Ninth Century)", in Alison I. BERACH and Isabelle COCHELIN (eds.), *Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West Volume 1*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 162-192.

⁵ Francis CLARK, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*, 2 vols., Leiden, Brill, 1987; Robert Austin MARKUS, *Gregory the Great and His World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 15-16; Clifford Hugh LAWRENCE, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, London, Routledge, 2015, pp. 18-19.

moderate, and eminently practical framework.⁶ As C.H. Lawrence observes, “St. Benedict emerges then not as a solitary genius with a unique gift for monastic legislation, but rather as the representative of a school of ascetical teaching current in sixth-century Italy, which derived its primary inspiration from Egypt.”⁷ Yet Benedict’s distinctive contribution resided in his refinement of earlier sources: His language proved “terser and his phraseology more finely chiseled” than his predecessors, while his governing philosophy embodied “a more genial spirit” and “a greater tolerance of human weakness.”⁸

Central to Benedict’s vision was the establishment of a fully cenobitical community, what he termed in his prologue a *scola* for the Lord’s service, employing a term that carried both military and pedagogical connotations.⁹ This monastery was conceived as “a spiritual family living under one roof” under the paternal authority of an abbot, bound together by three solemn vows: stability, conversion of life, and obedience. The principle of stability proved particularly significant, as it countered the problematic phenomenon of the *gyrovagi*, or wandering monks, whom Benedict condemned with uncharacteristic severity for their restlessness and exploitation of monastic hospitality. By requiring permanent commitment to a single community until death, Benedict fostered an environment of continuity and depth that proved essential for contemplative development. Moreover, his insistence on a written legislative code reflected deeply Roman sensibilities: The Rule was sovereign, and “even the abbot is allowed no discretion to depart from it.”¹⁰ During the *novitiate* year, candidates were instructed to have the Rule read to them repeatedly, with the admonition: “Here is the law under which you wish to fight; if you can observe it, enter; if you cannot, depart freely.”¹¹ This juridical framework, emphasizing written law over arbitrary custom, established monasticism as what would come to be known as the “regular life,” life governed according to a Rule (*regula*).

⁶ DIEM and ROUSSEAU, op. cit., p. 176; William E. KLINGSHIRN, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; David KNOWLES, *Great Historical Enterprises and Problems in Monastic History*, London, Nelson, 1963, pp. 137-195; Marilyn DUNN, “Mastering Benedict: Monastic Rules and Their Authors in the Early Medieval West”, *English Historical Review*, 105, 415 (1990), pp. 567-583.

⁷ LAWRENCE, op. cit., p. 22.

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 22-23; Christine MOHRMANN, “La langue de Saint Benoît”, in P. SCHMITZ (ed.), *Sancti Benedicti Regula Monachorum*, Maredsous, Éditions de Maredsous, 1955, pp. 9-39.

⁹ LAWRENCE, op. cit., p. 27. See also Albrecht DIEM, “The Carolingians and the Regula Benedicti”, in Rob MEENS, Dorine van ESPELO, Bram van den HOVEN van GENDEREN, Janneke RAAIJMAKERS and Irene van RENSWOUDE (eds.), *Religious Franks Religion and Power in the Frankish Kingdoms: Studies in Honour of Mayke de Jong*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 243-261.

¹⁰ LAWRENCE, op. cit., p. 24.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 24.

The daily rhythm prescribed by Benedict's Rule created the structural conditions within which contemplative practice could flourish. At the heart of this rhythm stood the *Opus Dei* (Work of God), the communal celebration of the eight canonical hours that provided "the basic framework of the day," around which "everything else was fitted"¹². Beginning with the night office of Vigils at approximately 2 a.m., followed by Lauds at first light, and continuing through Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and concluding with Compline at sundown, this liturgical cycle ensured that the monk's consciousness was continually oriented toward divine reality. Benedict's detailed instructions for these offices, which mandated the complete recitation of the Psalter each week alongside readings from Scripture and the Fathers, reflected his conviction that regular, structured prayer was fundamental to spiritual formation. Yet the Rule was characterized by moderation rather than excessive austerity. Benedict explicitly declared his intention to "ordain nothing that is harsh or burdensome," describing his legislation as "a little Rule for beginners" that allowed adequate sleep, sufficient food, and even a measure of wine though he noted with some ambivalence, "We read that wine is certainly not for monks."¹³

Beyond the liturgical offices, the Rule prescribed a carefully calibrated balance between manual labor and *lectio divina* (sacred reading), with the summer schedule allocating approximately seven hours to work and three to reading, adjustments being made for winter.¹⁴ The purpose of this reading time was explicitly contemplative rather than merely intellectual. Benedict's recommendations were restricted to Scripture, the Catholic Fathers, the Lives of the Desert Fathers, Cassian's works, and the Rules of Basil, what one scholar has aptly termed "the ascetic's quintessential library."¹⁵ Each year at the beginning of Lent, every monk received a codex from the library "which he was expected to read in its entirety, without skipping pages," a practice maintained centuries later at Canterbury where monks who failed to complete their assigned reading confessed their fault publicly. This emphasis on sustained, meditative engagement with sacred texts rather than broad intellectual inquiry reflected the Rule's fundamentally contemplative orientation: Reading was intended "to acquire food for meditation" rather than to cultivate erudition for its own sake.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 28.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 28

¹⁴ On the monastic character of Bede's exegesis and its rootedness in Benedictine spirituality, see Scott DEGREGORIO, "Bede, the Monk, as Exegete: Evidence from the Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah", *Revue bénédictine*, 115, no. 3-4 (2005), pp. 343-369; Scott DEGREGORIO, "Bede and Benedict of Nursia", in Stephen BAXTER, Catherine KARKOV, Janet L. NELSON, David Pelteret (eds.), *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2008, pp. 149-163.

¹⁵ LAWRENCE, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

The contemplative character of Benedictine monasticism was further reinforced through the Rule's emphasis on silence, humility, and obedience. "Silence," the text stated, "was enjoined at all times, but especially during the night hours," creating an atmosphere conducive to interior recollection.¹⁶ The teaching on obedience, articulated most powerfully in the Rule's opening exhortation, "Hear, O son, the precepts of the master: so that by the labour of obedience you may return to Him from whom, through the sloth of disobedience, you fell away," established the monastic life as a deliberate reversal of Adam's primordial disobedience.

It was within this Benedictine framework, liturgical, legislative, and ascetical, that Bede lived his entire monastic life at Jarrow and Wearmouth. The Rule's emphasis on *lectio divina* as meditative engagement with Scripture directly informed Bede's exegetical method, while its structured balance of prayer, work, and study provided the daily rhythm within which his theological reflection matured. Moreover, Benedict's vision of the monastery as a *scola* for spiritual formation, where intellectual endeavor served contemplative ends rather than mere academic curiosity, resonated profoundly with Bede's own synthesis of scholarship and spirituality. Thus, to understand Bede's teaching on contemplation requires first appreciating the Benedictine context that both enabled and shaped his theological vision, a context in which prayer, study, and communal life were integrated into a unified quest for divine encounter. As A. G. Holder has shown, Bede's exegetical method remains profoundly rooted in the patristic tradition, which he adapts to the monastic context of Wearmouth-Jarrow.¹⁷

The Contemplative Vision in *Homilia* 1,24

We will now analyze a passage from Bede's Homilies on the Account of the Transfiguration, in which there are important insights related to the contemplative life:

Hence if it has happened to someone that, as a consequence of his guilt, he never sees the face of his Creator, it is proper to suppose of such a one that he has never had any true good. If when blessed Peter had contemplated the glorified humanity of Christ, he was affected by such joy that he did not wish to be separated from sight of him, what, dearly beloved brothers, may we suppose is the blessedness of one who will be found worthy to see the heights of his divinity? And if seeing the transfigured form of the man Christ on the mountain, with only two of the saints, namely Moses and Elijah, led to the greatest good, what word is capable of explaining or what sense is capable of comprehending how great will be the joy of the just when they

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Arthur G. HOLDER, "Bede and the Tradition of Patristic Exegesis", *The Anglican Theological Review*, 72, no. 4 (1990), pp. 399-411.

come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, Jerusalem, and to the throng of many thousands of angels, when they look upon God, the producer and maker of this city, not through a glass darkly as now, but face to face? Concerning this vision Peter himself, speaking of the Lord, says to the faithful, Even now when you do not see him, you believe in him. When you do see him, you will exult with a gladness that is indescribable and glorified.¹⁸ (*Homilia I,24*).

We know, as the Apostle says, that if our terrestrial house in which we dwell should be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made by hands, eternal in heaven. Because they longed to perceive the resplendent face of the Son of man, the Father was present in his voice, teaching that this was his beloved Son, in whom he was well-pleased. From the glory of his humanity upon which they were looking, they were to learn to long to contemplate the presence of his divinity, which was equal to (the Father's) own.¹⁹ (*Homilia I,24*).

In *Homilia I,24* on the Transfiguration, Bede moves from the literal Gospel narrative to a deeply spiritual exegesis that reveals his monastic understanding of contemplation. The homily opens with a reflection that clearly situates contemplation as the highest good attainable by the human soul: “hence if it has happened to someone that, as a consequence of his guilt, he never sees the face of his Creator.”

Here, “he never sees the face of his Creator” functions as a theological metaphor for the beatific vision, but also for the monastic ideal of contemplation attained through purity of heart and detachment from earthly desires. The contemplative ascent becomes both an eschatological promise and a present vocation.

Bede’s description of Peter’s reaction to the vision on Mount Tabor reinforces this interpretation: “If when blessed Peter had contemplated the glorified humanity of Christ, he was affected by such joy that he did not wish to be separated from sight of him.”

Peter’s desire to remain on the mountain is read allegorically as the spiritual longing of the monk for the stability and silence of contemplation, a state that mirrors, in this life, the eternal vision of God promised in the next.²⁰

¹⁸ Bede, VENERABLE, *Homilies on the Gospel. Book One. Advent to Lent*, Piscataway, Georgias Press, 1991, pp. 240-241.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 241-242.

²⁰ See Paul BLOWERS, “Mystics and Mountains”, *Phronema*, 30 (2015), pp. 1-18. This study provides comprehensive analysis of the multi-sense interpretation of the Transfiguration and the symbolic role of the mountain in patristic and medieval exegesis. On Bede’s conception of the monastery as a center of pastoral instruction and spiritual formation, see Alan THACKER, “Monks, Preaching and Pastoral Care in Early Anglo-Saxon England”, in John BLAIR and Richard SHARPE (eds.), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1992, pp. 137-70. See also Alan THACKER, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform”, in Patrick WORMALD et al. (eds.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, pp. 130-153.

This passage resonates deeply with the Rule of Saint Benedict, particularly with the tension Benedict describes between the active and contemplative dimensions of the monastic life. In *Regula Benedicti* 7 (on humility) and 48 (on manual and sacred reading), the monk is called to ascend, step by step, “the ladder of humility” toward perfect charity, an ascent analogous to Bede’s “mountain of contemplation.”²¹

Both Bede and Benedict employ the mountain as a spiritual *topos*: It symbolizes elevation above worldly concerns and the purification necessary to approach divine light.

²¹ *Regula Benedicti*, 7,7: Holy Scripture, brethren, cries out to us, saying, “Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11). In saying this it shows us that all exaltation is a kind of pride, against which the Prophet proves himself to be on guard when he says, “Lord, my heart is not exalted, nor are mine eyes lifted up; neither have I walked in great matters, nor in wonders above me.” But how has he acted? “Rather have I been of humble mind than exalting myself; as a weaned child on its mother’s breast, so You solace my soul.” Hence, brethren, if we wish to reach the very highest point of humility and to arrive speedily at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made through the humility of this present life, we must by our ascending actions erect the ladder Jacob saw in his dream, on which Angels appeared to him descending and ascending. By that descent and ascent, we must surely understand nothing else than this, that we descend by self-exaltation and ascend by humility. And the ladder thus set up is our life in the world, which the Lord raises up to heaven if our heart is humbled. For we call our body and soul the sides of the ladder, and into these sides our divine vocation has inserted the different steps of humility and discipline we must climb. From <https://archive.osb.org/rb/text/rbejms3.html#7> (Accessed 30-10-2025).

Regula Benedicti, 48, 1: Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the sisters should be occupied at certain times in manual labor, and again at fixed hours in sacred reading. To that end we think that the times for each may be prescribed as follows. From Easter until the Calends of October, when they come out from Prime in the morning let them labor at whatever is necessary until about the fourth hour, and from the fourth hour until about the sixth let them apply themselves to reading. After the sixth hour, having left the table, let them rest on their beds in perfect silence; or if anyone may perhaps want to read, let her read to herself in such a way as not to disturb anyone else. Let None be said rather early, at the middle of the eighth hour, and let them again do what work has to be done until Vespers. And if the circumstances of the place or their poverty should require that they themselves do the work of gathering the harvest, let them not be discontented; for then are they truly monastics when they live by the labor of their hands, as did our Fathers and the Apostles. Let all things be done with moderation, however, for the sake of the faint-hearted.

From the Calends of October until the beginning of Lent, let them apply themselves to reading up to the end of the second hour. At the second hour let Terce be said, and then let all labor at the work assigned them until None. At the first signal for the Hour of None let everyone break off from her work, and hold herself ready for the sounding of the second signal. After the meal let them apply themselves to their reading or to the Psalms. On the days of Lent, from morning until the end of the third hour let them apply themselves to their reading, and from then until the end of the tenth hour let them do the work assigned them. And in these days of Lent they shall each receive a book from the library, which they shall read straight through from the beginning. These books are to be given out at the beginning of Lent. But certainly one or two of the seniors should be deputed to go about the monastery at the hours when the sisters are occupied in reading and see that there be no lazy sister who spends her time in idleness or gossip and does not apply herself to the reading, so that she is not only unprofitable to herself but also distracts others. If such a one be found (which God forbid), let her be corrected once and a second time; if she does not amend, let her undergo the punishment of the Rule in such a way that the rest may take warning. Moreover, one sister shall not associate with another at inappropriate times. On Sundays, let all occupy themselves in reading, except those who have been appointed to various duties. But if anyone should be so negligent and shiftless that she will not or cannot study or read, let her be given some work to do so that she will not be idle. Weak or sickly sisters should be assigned a task or craft of such a nature as to keep them from idleness and at the same time not to overburden them or drive them away with excessive toil. Their weakness must be taken into consideration by the Abbess. From <https://archive.osb.org/rb/text/rbemjo3.html#48> (Accessed 30-10-2025).

Yet, while Benedict emphasizes stability within the community, Bede presents the same ascent in the language of scriptural contemplation, as a vision of the glorified Christ that transforms the believer.

Thus, in Bede's exegesis, the Transfiguration becomes not merely a Christological revelation, but also a monastic paradigm: To ascend the mountain with Christ is to pursue the contemplative life; to descend with Him afterward is to return to the duties of charity and community. We now turn to an analysis of the final part of Bede's first Homily:

Now that the reading about the Lord's transfiguration has been explained to us, dearly-beloved brothers, let us return to our conscience and, if it delights in seeing the Lord's glory, let us ascend the mountain of virtues when we have passed beyond our fleshly desires. If we wish to attain the Lord's whitest of garments, let us make ourselves clean from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting (our) sanctification in the fear of God. If we desire to hear the voice of God the Father, (and) if we desire to look upon the majesty of his consubstantial Son, let us eagerly strive to turn away from perverse and unprofitable mortal things, and let us strive to avert our eyes from the pointlessness of this deceiving world. Then, as the glory of our resurrection glistens, we also may be worthy (to do) what we are now unable to do, to see as well as tell of the wonders of our Maker, as he himself grants us, who lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ages and ages. Amen.²² (*Homilia I,24*).

In the concluding section of his *Homilia I,24*, Bede offers a moral and spiritual application of the Gospel narrative, transforming the Transfiguration from a historical event into a program of inner ascension. His exhortation begins with a turn from the biblical scene to the conscience of the believer: "now that the reading about the Lord's transfiguration has been explained to us, dearly-beloved brothers, let us return to our conscience and, if it delights in seeing the Lord's glory, let us ascend the mountain of virtues when we have passed beyond our fleshly desires."

This appeal marks a deliberate shift from exegesis to moral exhortation. The ascent of the apostles up Mount Tabor becomes a symbolic ascent of the soul, guided by virtue and detached from corporeal desires. The "mountain of virtues" (*mons virtutum*) thus represents the spiritual elevation necessary for contemplation, a theme deeply resonant with the monastic ideal articulated in the *Regula Benedicti*.

Benedict, too, envisions the monastic journey as an ascent, the "ladder of humility" (*scala humilitatis*) that leads the monk toward the love of God through progressive purification of heart. Bede's language of surpassing "the desires of the flesh" and purifying "body and spirit"

²² Bede, VENERABLE, *Homilies on the Gospel. Book One. Advent to Lent*, Piscataway, Georgias Press, 1991, pp. 243-244.

mirrors this Benedictine path of ascesis, where virtue is both the means and the expression of spiritual elevation.²³

The reference to “whitest garments” evokes baptismal imagery and the transfigured Christ’s shining raiment, symbolizing purity of life and participation in divine glory. Bede interprets this not as a distant eschatological hope but as a present moral imperative. The following line brings together moral purification and mystical theology: “if we desire to hear the voice of God the Father, and if we desire to look upon the majesty of his consubstantial Son, let us eagerly strive to turn away from perverse and unprofitable mortal things.” Here, Bede identifies contemplation as the goal of moral discipline. The ascetic struggle against vanity and corruption becomes the gateway to divine vision. This progression, from detachment to contemplation, reflects a structure that will become central in later Western mysticism. Holder observes that Bede’s theology of salvation is profoundly sacramental and mystical, framing contemplation as participation in the divine mysteries of redemption.²⁴ Finally, Bede concludes with a distinctly anagogical perspective: “Then, as the glory of our resurrection glistens, we also may be worthy (to do) what we are now unable to do, to see as well as tell of the wonders of our Maker.” The ascent culminates not in an isolated mystical experience but in the eschatological vision of God, shared in community and perfected in the resurrection.

Thus, in Bede’s exegesis, Mount Tabor becomes a moral and mystical *topos*: The soul’s progressive ascent through virtue, purification, and divine contemplation. His interpretation bridges Patristic theology and monastic spirituality, translating the Gospel event into a program of inner transformation consistent with the Benedictine ideal of a life ordered toward God through humility, discipline, and contemplation.

Bede’s invitation to “ascend the mountain of virtues” finds a rich interpretive parallel in Scott DeGregorio’s analysis of the contemplative dimension of Bede’s theology. As DeGregorio argues, Bede’s commentaries and homilies present a spirituality of prayer that aims to adduce from Scripture practical examples of true prayer and urge that they be put into action, treating prayer not as an idea to be understood but as an ideal to be actualized in the lives of all Christians.²⁵ This ascent, symbolized in *Homilia 1,24* by the disciples’ climb to Mount Tabor, embodies what DeGregorio identifies as Bede’s fundamental exegetical approach: A

²³ *Regula Benedicti* 7,7.

²⁴ Arthur G. HOLDER, “The Venerable Bede on the Mysteries of Our Salvation”, *The American Benedictine Review*, 42, 2 (1991), pp. 140-162.

²⁵ Scott DEGREGORIO, “The Venerable Bede on Prayer and Contemplation”, *Traditio*, 54 (1999), p. 16.

governing tropological orientation whereby “what Scripture said had to find fulfillment on the existential level of the present lives of his audience.²⁶” In this light, Bede's “mountain of virtues” (*mons virtutum*) becomes more than an allegory for ascetic effort: it is the locus of transformation where virtue leads to vision. As DeGregorio demonstrates, contemplation in Bede's thought is never severed from moral praxis; rather, the “lives,” though inseparable, were to be distinguished temporally, the active life being the period of our earthly existence, the contemplative our future beatitude in heaven, “yet even in this life contemplation remains intrinsically bound to righteous action.²⁷” The monk's life, therefore, mirrors the rhythm of the Transfiguration itself: Illumination follows purification, and vision perfects virtue.

Thus, Bede's homiletic exhortation aligns seamlessly with the Benedictine spiritual ideal, wherein the monk's ascent through the active life prepares the way for the contemplative, forming what DeGregorio calls a “unity of prayer and life,” a “unity of ‘prayerful’ living.²⁸” Both Bede and Benedict envision this ascent not as an escape from human frailty but as its sanctification, the transformation of earthly weakness into the strength of divine vision.²⁹ Bede's theological and exegetical formation was profoundly shaped by the writings of Gregory the Great, whose works occupied a position of singular prominence in the Jarrow monk's intellectual world. Of the four Church Fathers whom Bede most revered, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory, it was Gregory whose influence proved most pervasive and consistent across Bede's exegetical corpus.³⁰ As M.L.W. Laistner observed, Bede demonstrated constant indebtedness to the pope's writings, with traces of the *Moralia in Job*, the homilies on the Gospels and Ezekiel, and the *Regula pastoralis* appearing throughout nearly every Bedan commentary.³¹ Gregory's works had likely reached Anglo-Saxon England quite early, perhaps even arriving with the missionaries Gregory himself dispatched, and by the late seventh century they were accessible at major centers such as Lindisfarne and Whitby.³² The Wearmouth-Jarrow library appears to have possessed all of Gregory's works save two: The commentary on the Song of Songs and a

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 15-16.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 27.

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 16-17.

²⁹ On Gregory's synthesis of contemplation and pastoral action, see Bernard MCGINN, *The Growth of Mysticism* vol. 2, New York, Crossroad, 1994, pp. 34-79; Robert A. MARKUS, “The Sacred and the Secular: From Augustine to Gregory the Great”, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 36, 1 (1985), pp. 84-96. See also Carole STRAW, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 4-12.

³⁰ On Augustine's influence on Bede, see Alan THACKER, *Bede and Augustine: History and Figure in Sacred Text*, Jarrow Lecture, 2005, Jarrow, St. Paul's Church, 2008; on the stylistic influence of Jerome's later exegesis on Bede's prose, see Richard SHARPE, “The Varieties of Bede's Prose”, in Tobias REINHARDT, Michael LAPIDGE, and J. N. ADAMS (eds.), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 339-356.

³¹ Scott DEGREGORIO, “The Venerable Bede and Gregory the Great: Exegetical Connections, Spiritual Departures”, *Early Medieval Europe*, 18, 1 (2010), pp. 44-46.

³² Ibidem, p. 46.

complete collection of papal letters. More significantly, Bede's reliance on Gregory extended beyond mere citation to what Paul Meyvaert aptly termed a "spiritual affinity" a shared approach to Scripture rooted in monastic sensibility and pastoral concern.³³ Like Gregory, Bede wrote primarily as a pastor seeking to foster right behavior, consistently asking of scriptural texts not merely what they meant literally or allegorically, but "how its messages can be translated into a script for our actions."³⁴ This fundamentally Gregorian orientation, whereby each biblical *mysterium* contained an agendum to be enacted, shaped Bede's exegetical method throughout his mature works and aligned his scriptural spirituality with the contemplative and practical emphases of Benedictine monasticism.³⁵

Conclusion

The analysis conducted throughout this study demonstrates that Bede's theology of contemplation cannot be understood apart from the Benedictine matrix that structured his spiritual and intellectual life. The monk of Jarrow emerges as a creative heir of the *Regula Benedicti*, not simply reproducing its prescriptions but interiorizing and reinterpreting them within an exegetical and theological vision that transforms the discipline of monastic life into a theology of divine ascent. The Benedictine framework, characterized by stability, obedience, *lectio divina*, and the rhythmic alternation of prayer and work, provided Bede with the categories through which he articulated the contemplative vocation as both a personal journey and a communal ideal. In his synthesis, the monastery becomes a living *scola servitii Domini*, where study, prayer, and humility converge in the pursuit of the beatific vision.

In *Homilia 1,24* on the Transfiguration, Bede translates the structure of monastic life into the language of biblical mysticism. The mountain of Tabor, the shining garments of Christ,

³³ Ibidem, pp. 52-53. On the contents of the Wearmouth-Jarrow library, see Max Ludwig Wolfram LAISTNER, "The Library of the Venerable Bede", in A. Hamilton THOMPSON (ed.), *Bede: His Life, Times and Writings*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1935, pp. 237-266, 248; on the formation of Bede's patristic canon, see Bernice KACZYNSKI, "Bede's Commentaries on Luke and Mark and the Formation of a Patristic Canon", in Siân ECHARD and Gernot WIELAND (eds.), *Anglo-Latin Literature and Its Heritage*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2001, pp. 17-26. On the limited presence of Ambrose at Jarrow, see Dabney Anderson BANKERT, John WEGMANN, and Charles WRIGHT, *Ambrose in Anglo-Saxon England*, Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, 1997; Michael LAPIDGE, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 194-195.

³⁴ DEGREGORIO, op. cit., p. 55.

³⁵ On the early transmission of Gregory's works to England, see Robert G. BABCOCK, "A Papyrus Codex of Gregory the Great's Forty Homilies on the Gospels (London, Cotton Titus C. XV)", *Scriptorium*, 54, 2 (2000), pp. 280-289. See also Bertram COLGRAVE (ed. and trans.), *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 53; Bertram COLGRAVE, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 12, 14; DEGREGORIO, op. cit., pp. 55-57.

and the voice of the Father become symbols of the monk's interior ascent from purification to illumination. This symbolic layering reflects Bede's characteristic fusion of allegory and history, a hermeneutical strategy explored in depth by Holder.³⁶ The homily's tropological movement, from narrative to exhortation, reveals a deliberate pedagogical design: the Gospel event is transformed into a moral and spiritual itinerary. As the apostles climb the mountain, so the monk ascends the "mountain of virtues," leaving behind the desires of the flesh to attain the purity necessary for contemplation. Bede's exegesis thus mirrors the stages of the Benedictine spiritual path: Humility, obedience, and purification lead to wisdom, vision, and divine intimacy. This dynamic reveals the essentially integrated nature of Bede's spirituality, in which the active and contemplative lives are not opposed but sequentially ordered. The daily observance of the Rule, with its emphasis on liturgical regularity and meditative reading, becomes the foundation upon which the soul is elevated toward divine contemplation. In this respect, Bede's interpretation aligns closely with that of Gregory the Great, whose influence he absorbed profoundly. Like Gregory, Bede conceives of Scripture as both revelation and moral guide: Each mysterious entails an agendum, a truth to be lived as well as understood. Contemplation, therefore, is not a passive vision but a disciplined participation in divine life through moral transformation.

Moreover, Bede's synthesis marks a distinctive moment in the Western monastic tradition. By embedding the Benedictine ethos within an exegetical framework, he bridges the patristic and medieval worlds, transmitting to later monastic and scholastic authors a model of theological reflection grounded in spiritual practice. His reading of the Transfiguration, far from being a mere moral allegory, articulates a theology of transformation: The soul, purified by virtue and enlightened by Scripture, is conformed to the image of Christ's glory. This movement from the historical to the mystical, from the visible to the invisible, encapsulates Bede's vision of contemplation as the culmination of monastic discipline and the foretaste of eternal beatitude.

Ultimately, Bede stands as both interpreter and innovator of the Benedictine ideal. He demonstrates that contemplation is not an escape from the world but its sanctification, the transfiguration of human weakness into the light of divine wisdom. Through his homiletic voice, the Rule's *scola servitii* becomes a *scola contemplationis*: A training ground for vision, where humility becomes illumination and obedience becomes freedom. In Bede's synthesis of Scripture, monastic order, and theology, the Benedictine path attains its full spiritual and

³⁶ Arthur G. HOLDER, "Allegory and History in Bede's Interpretation of Sacred Architecture", *The American Benedictine Review*, 40, 2 (1989), pp. 115-131.

intellectual maturity, a path in which the ascent of Mount Tabor continues in the daily rhythm of prayer, study, and love of God that defines the contemplative life.