CHAPTER TWELVE

CRUX A CRUCIATU DICITUR:
PREACHING SELF-TORTURE AS PASTORAL CARE IN
TWELFTH-CENTURY RELIGIOUS HOUSES

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When the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot, Aelred of Rievaulx, lay on his deathbed he requested the Gospel of John, Augustine’s *Confessions* and a wooden cross for reading, prayer and meditation. During his dying days he often gazed on this wooden cross and begged to depart this mortal life. In Aelred’s last hours, Walter Daniel wrote that he himself exhorted the abbot to look at the cross to which Aelred’s heart was attached. In response to this admonition, Aelred drew his monks’ attention to the suffering Lord on the cross and said, “You are my God and my Lord, You are my refuge and my Savior. You are my glory and my hope for evermore. Into your hands I commend my spirit.”

A dying monk’s contemplation of a wooden cross, to which monastic statutes testify, demonstrates the importance that the cross played as an object of devotion in medieval monastic communities. While this wooden cross was intended to bring consolation to the dying, during the twelfth century, monastic preachers used the image of the cross to describe the physical and mental anguish of the religious life as an imitation of the crucified Christ. In fact, Gottfried of Admont (d. 1165) linked the individual monk’s crucifixion of the flesh and spirit through spiritual disciplines with this tradition of holding a wooden cross before a dying brother.

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2 On the practice of giving a dying monk a wooden cross for contemplation, see Peter the Venerable, *De cruce in uncionte monachorum infirmorum, Statuta Petri Venerabilis Abbatis Cluniacensis* 9, ed. Giles Constable, *Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum*, vol. 6 (Siegburg, 1963), pp. 93–95. See Gottfried of Admont, *In festum inventionis crucis prima*, PL174:858. On Gottfried see Ulrich Faust, “Gottfried von
This article will examine how primarily monastic and canonical preachers explained taking up the cross of Christ as the torture of the flesh and soul through physical adversities and spiritual activities associated with the ascetic life. While these preachers borrowed from numerous biblical and patristic sources, many of them referred particularly to Gregory the Great’s Gospel homilies on taking up the cross and following Christ. In these sermons Gregory stated that the Latin word, *crux*, derived its name from the Latin term for torture, namely, *cruciatus*. Gregory taught that Christ’s disciples should punish their flesh through the physical cross of abstinence and afflict their souls through the spiritual cross of compassion for one’s neighbor. However, Gregory warned that one’s intention determined whether one truly bore these crosses. For instance, he noted that some practice abstinence for worldly glory.

Gregory’s identification of bodily discipline and spiritual compassion as bearing the cross in imitation of Christ reflected developments in late antique Christianity. As Christianity gained legal Roman acceptance martyrdom gave way to monasticism as the example of Christian perfection. Patristic writers, such as Jerome, Augustine, and especially Gregory equated the ascetic life with spiritual martyrdom. According to Gregory, spiritual martyrdom took place in an individual’s formation of virtues and eradication of vices through asceticism. Gregory identified the right intention of love for Christ as the inner condition

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4 I have chosen to translate this word, *cruciatus*, and its verb form, *cruciare* as “torture” or “to torture.” Although Edward Peters argues for a limited legal use of the word torture, I believe the term is appropriate in this context. The word’s meaning clearly has a connection to the act of crucifixion, which I believe was Gregory’s main point. Giles Constable described certain ascetic practices as “self-inflicted suffering.” See Edward Peters, *Torture*, Expanded Edition, (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 1–10; and Giles Constables, *Attitudes toward Self-Inflicted Suffering in the Middle Ages* (Brookline, MA, 1982), pp. 7–23.