CHAPTER THREE

STABILITY AND CARE: THE RECLUSES

Many monks of the tenth and eleventh centuries explored and amended the idea of the spiritual life to which they were committed. This exploration pulled them toward active involvement with the world in a variety of ways. This impetus moved out into the dangerous world of the missionary. It also, in a seeming paradox, moved many to a life of reclusion as the best means to serve their neighbors.

The time has come to examine more closely the models of behavior that motivated monks, both those holding to traditional norms and those who became more active in the world. Central to the arguments of all parties, as we have seen, was the issue of stability, usually physical stability as vowed by each monk upon profession.\(^1\)

In the last chapter, we have seen monks fighting or finding ways to justify the restraints of stability. What adds to the puzzle is the meaning of stability and the meaning of separation itself for the men and women involved. (It is possible to speak of women here, because when people reached the highest ranks of spiritual perfection, gender ceased to be an issue.) In my research, the most paradoxical evidence I encountered is that recluses—the order of society most strictly bound to perpetual stability—also appear to have been a very important model for monks eager to act among the laity. These recluses were also the “holy people” par excellence of their society, living a life of virtue that empowered them for service to others more than could the life in even the most rigorous monastery. I first questioned the role of recluses years ago, when I discovered a *Rule for Recluses* whose author had drawn heavily on Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care* for inspiration. This author, Grimlaicus, had packed his *Rule* with advice on how to deal with various sorts of people as a spiritual advisor, how to remain pure while active in the world, and so on.\(^2\) It soon became plain to me that my definition of “recluse”

\(^1\) RB 58.17.

\(^2\) This work, discussed at length in this chapter, is Grimlaicus’ *Regula solitariorum*, PL 103: 573–664.
was much too limited for the phenomenon as it existed in the tenth century. Thus began a hunt that led in the end to a definition of stability alternative to that of most monks of the time of my study, and to an attitude toward personal holiness that not only allowed but compelled care of the laity. These recluses provide, I believe, a vital clue to the shift in attitude that made the diversification of Benedictine monasticism not only possible but necessary.

The reformed monks of the tenth century could talk about their paradise on earth, their angelic nature, and even their superior prayer powers compared to those of the laity. The tenth-century literature includes much to make one feel that these monks, whether those in the cloister or the few who ventured into worldly activity, actually thought of themselves as “super monks,” since their prayers were so powerful and their lives so withdrawn from the world. Recluses for their part could well have claimed (although prevented by humility) to be super-super monks or nuns. In this period recluses were usually professed monks or nuns, who took their vows of separation from the world one step further by vowing permanent residence in a small cell, normally attached to a monastery or a church. Thus far they fit ideally with the Benedictine ideology in place by the early ninth century. Still, recluses were different from ordinary monks. Almost every one mentioned in the extant sources is praised as a spiritual advisor, often with prophetic powers, who was a center of religious instruction and empowerment for an entire region. Physical contact was impossible because of their vows, but verbal contact with the laity and other religious appears to have been part of their daily lives. This stands in stark contrast to monks of the reformed houses, whose customaries urged them to avoid contact, including speech, with the laity, for fear of the pollution with which even such well-regulated monks could become tainted.3

3 The earliest extant customary after the period of the Carolingian reforms is the Regularis Concordia Anglicae Nationis Monachorum Sanctimonialiumque, most recently attributed to Aethelwold, trans. and ed. Thomas Symons (London, 1953). It dates to the reign of the English King Edgar (959–75). Since the revitalized monastic institute in England was based on the reforms of both Gorze and Brogne, as well as Cluny, it is reasonable to take this document as a reflection of reformed monasticism on the Continent. It is in basic agreement with the Consuetudines Floriacenses Antiquiores, ed. Anselmus Davril and Linus Donnat, CCM VII.3, pp. 3–60, written sometime in the tenth century, and with the tenth-century Consuetudines Germaniae: Redactio sancti Emmerammi, dicta Einsidlenis (E), in the same volume, pp. 187–256, as well as with eleventh-century customaries.