‘You Can’t Just Stick with Those You Like’: Why Friendship Practices Threaten Fraternal Life in Cistercian Monasteries

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Abstract
Tensions between different relationship forms exist in every organisational setting. Catholic monasteries – as archetypical examples of voluntary total and greedy institutions – provide strategic cases of inquiry for understanding relational conflicts owing to the significance they assign to exclusively fraternal relations, resulting in explicit tensions regarding personal forms of relationships, such as friendship. Based on a multi-sited, qualitative case study of Cistercian monasteries in France, the present article pushes theorising on fraternal relations forward. Fraternal relations as a social form is membership-based and characterised by collectivism, egalitarianism and an imposed level of intimacy. In the monastic setting, it takes the form of prescribed impersonal love. The ideals of fraternal relations pose normative constraints for establishing friendship, but the ambition to minimise verbal interaction, perceived differences between members and the severe limits on joint, extra-organisational activities constitute additional constraints for friendship to form in monasteries.

Keywords
fraternal relation, friendship, monastery, total institution

Introduction
Tensions between different forms of relationships are evident in every organisational setting, and there is often a potential conflict involved when personal relationships develop alongside member relations. As archetypical examples of voluntary total and greedy institutions, Catholic monasteries provide strategic cases of inquiry owing to the significance they assign to maintaining fraternal relations exclusively, thereby inhibiting
more personal forms of relationships. Simultaneously, this makes such monasteries fruitful cases for conceptualising fraternal relationships, and how they differ from friendship, in an organisational context.

Total institutions are geographically delimited places of residence and work, where people live separated from the outside world (Goffman, 1961). Certain voluntary total institutions, like monasteries, are ‘greedy’ in that they exercise pressure on members to avoid ties with other institutions or persons that make claims in conflict with their own demands (Coser, 1974). This requires regulation of relations both to outsiders and insiders. On the inside, the promotion of a fraternal spirit, emphasising collective identity and solidarity at the expense of individualised relationships, is one way of accomplishing this (Sundberg, 2015). Yet monastic members live and work together for decades, and it therefore seems inevitable that some individualised and personal relations will nevertheless develop, alongside the fraternal.

The aim of the present article is to investigate fraternal relationships in comparison to friendship, as an example of a personal relationship. Are fraternal relations and friendship compatible in the monastic setting or in what ways do they conflict? What practices of friendship can possibly emerge and persist in the monastic setting, and what are their consequences? By answering these questions on the basis of a multi-sited, qualitative case study of monastic communities, the present article makes two contributions. First, the article contributes to research on friendship inside organisations (French, 2007; Grey and Sturdy, 2007) and to our understanding of under which conditions personal relationships, in general, and friendship, in particular, can form. Second, the article pushes theorising on fraternal relationships forward and provides empirical insights into the make-up of these relationships, specifically in contrast with friendship. Conceptualising fraternal relations is crucial to improving our understanding of social relations and interactions within the monastic setting, but variants of fraternal relations exist in many other arenas. A more lucid conceptualisation is therefore of relevance beyond research on the monastic or religious sphere.

**Fraternal Relations and Friendship in a Voluntary Total Institution**

Because total institutions are the central, if not exclusive, social setting for their members, they profoundly shape the possibilities for members’ personal relationships. Sociological studies of monasticism have paid limited attention to concrete relationship practices, however. Recent work on monasticism has focused on changes, for example those related to asceticism (Jonveaux, 2018) and socialisation (Clot-Garrell, 2016). Central rituals and practices, like reading and meals (e.g. Irvine, 2010, 2011), have also been analysed. Hillery’s (e.g. 1971, 1984) extensive studies of male monasteries of the Cistercian Order of Strict Observance in the USA provide important insights into ideas of community, freedom and love related to Catholic monasticism. Hillery (1984: 319) claims that *agape* – a spiritual, sacrificial and universal form of love that is ‘explicitly intentional, an act of disciplined will’ – is of central importance in monastic life. McGuire (2010) addresses the difference between universal love and preferential love to specific others in his historical exposé on how views on friendship developed within medieval
monasticism. The focus is on monks’ ‘spiritual’, impersonal forms of friendship with people outside their community, both monks and others. In sum, the literature offers limited insights into friendship inside contemporary monastic communities, and the role of fraternal relations in relation to this.

Fraternal forms of relationships have only been fragmentarily explored and conceptualised in the research literature. For example, ‘brotherhood’ is a popular metaphor in different collectivist organisations or groups such as the armed forces, biker clubs and prison gangs (e.g. Rostami et al., 2012; Wolf, 1991), but the conceptualisation remains limited to the mentioning of a few key characteristics of the relationship, notably loyalty and love. If only these characteristics are emphasised, brotherhood becomes indistinguishable from friendship, and effectively, brotherly relations have sometimes been conflated with close friendship (Grundvall, 2005). In research on occupational environments and leisure time activities (e.g. Fundberg, 2003; Olofsson, 2013), ‘brotherhood’ is mentioned in relation to homosociality in terms of the strengthening of male cohesion for power purposes, relative to women (Lindgren, 1996). Focusing on homosociality in this way neglects the internal dynamics among ‘brothers’ and reduces brotherhood to a male phenomenon. In contrast, Mahmud (2014) analysed the ‘brotherhood’ of Freemasonry sisters in Italian masonic lodges. While Freemasonry sisters’ membership is often predicated on kinship with Freemason brothers, nuns are not auxiliaries to monks in the same way. In the present article, I consider fraternal relations as a social form that both women and men can maintain, and I focus on the internal dynamics of fraternal relations in monastic communities, where brothers and sisters are separate.

What, then, are fraternal relations? Fraternal relations are exclusive relationships with a collective, and relationships between brothers or sisters are hence based upon their mutual membership – not upon personal ties (Sundberg, 2019). Fraternal relations are, therefore, related to a form of mechanical solidarity, resulting from intense group belonging and homogeneous beliefs and sentiments common to all the members of the group, rather than from an ethos of individualism and ties that link individuals with intersecting loyalties (Durkheim, 1902: xxviii, xxix, 101). Fraternal relations are egalitarian, also promoting equality at the level of affection. In the monastic setting, brotherly love is even a form of duty (cf. Cregård, 2013: 76), a central feeling rule (cf. Hochschild, 2003).

Although fraternal relations and friendship share certain similarities in their substantial content, I will highlight crucial differences in their form. Friendship is a spontaneously formed personal relationship involving two individuals, or a group of people, who have chosen for themselves with whom they will become friends (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). This does not mean that friendship is a pure expression of individual choice, unconditioned by class, culture or locality: friendship is restricted by and takes place in a context (Adams and Allen, 1998; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). There is great variation in how friendship is, and can be, practised, for example, regarding how intimate friends are and what activities they are involved in (e.g. Pahl, 2000). The central point here is that friendship involves attunement to (cf. Scheff, 2006), and an exclusive relationship with, specific persons. Yet relationships to certain individuals may also suffuse, so that, for example, neighbours or more or less extended family members are considered friends (e.g. Pahl and Spencer, 2004). While it is empirically possible for a brother or sister (in a fraternal relation) to be considered a friend, the categories of brothers and sisters are
analytically distinguishable from friends. These relationships may also conflict, especially in an organisational context.

Organisational context impacts friendships in ways that distinguish intra-organisational friendships from other friendships (Sias and Cahill, 1998). Scholars have also identified tensions related to defining features of friendship and elements of organisational life (Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018) and differences in role expectations related to friends and work associates in particular (Bridge and Baxter, 1992). Loiselle’s (2014) historical analysis of Freemasonry in France illustrates tensions between fraternal relations and friendship in a different organisational setting. Membership in the Freemasons involved ‘ritualised friendship’, a formal and objective bond based on a shared moral vision, unconnected from any personal exchange (Loiselle, 2014: 72ff.). Yet masonic life also facilitated development of deep ‘unritualised friendship’ ties between individual members, and these ties posed a threat to the harmony of masonic life because they provoked undesirable behaviour during meetings and exclusive socialising outside the lodge (Loiselle, 2014: 195ff.). In other words, friendship is born out of a collective, but also formed against this collective (Alberoni, 1985: 77), and Blatterer (2014) argues that one of the reasons why sociologists have paid such sparse attention to this form of relationship, especially in its dyadic form, is the fact that friends turn away from the public. At the same time, this is one of the reasons why friendship is sociologically important: disentangling views on friendship is a way to understand the values of the collective it is embedded in. In addition, turning to an extreme setting allows us to make more incisive points about the general case of relational tensions in organisations. In the present article, I zoom in on the conflicts between fraternal relations and friendship in monasteries, exploring the possibilities for and consequences of friendship (cf. Cronin, 2015; Morgan, 2011), against the background of fraternal ideals and practices.

**Methodology**

Extreme cases facilitate theory building because the mechanisms and dynamics are more transparently observable than in other settings (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989), and monasteries are therefore ideal for studying relational tensions. Regardless of their old history and perhaps presumed marginality in contemporary society, there are still a considerable number of Catholic monasteries around the world. Focusing on one specific monastic order, but collecting data from several communities with different characteristics, generates sufficiently targeted and rich data. Because the study concerns Catholic monasteries as total institutions, the limitation to a cloistered, contemplative order is a given. The Cistercian order was founded in 1098, but divided into two orders in 1892. Cistercians of the Common Observance remained loyal to the original form, whereas the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), commonly known as Trappists, detached itself to follow the Rule of Saint Benedict more strictly. Nowadays, OCSO is a larger order than the order of Common Observance, and variation between individual communities can be greater than differences between the orders. Regarding the topic of the present analysis, the orders are sufficiently similar to be dealt with as one case. Due to decisions taken along the way, the analysis is primarily based on material on OCSO.
In a preparatory study, I interviewed three monks and one nun during weeklong visits to two monk monasteries within the Cistercian order of Common Observance and one OCSO monastery for nuns. The visited monasteries were located in France, and I took notes during the interviews. I also interviewed a former monk, who had spent 10 years in one of the visited monk monasteries, and recorded and transcribed the interview verbatim. Based on this preparatory work, I decided to focus on OCSO in France, because France is the country with the largest population of OCSO communities. Notwithstanding the so-called vow of stability, urging the member to stay in one community for the rest of his/her life, there is some inter-monastery mobility, mainly nationally. On a national level, superiors are also in regular contact. Focusing on one country therefore facilitates selection and access, because members, especially superiors, can share useful information and offer helpful recommendations regarding other communities. The choice of France maximised the available options in line with this principle.

The final design is the result of a step-wise choice of communities to contact, aiming for variation in gender, size and strictness. Consequently, I have visited one large nun monastery, one average size nun monastery and two average size monk monasteries. All the visits lasted for almost a week each, and I have visited the large nun monastery four times. At all but one of my monastic visits, I have stayed at the monastic guesthouse and focused primarily on interviewing. This has resulted in interviews with 20 nuns (between 35 and 87 years old, with eight to 68 years of experience of Cistercian monastic life) and 15 monks (between 39 and 78 years old, with nine to 51 years of experience of Cistercian monastic life). I interviewed four members twice and one member three times. The members held different positions and were involved in various types of work in the monastery. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim, except in three cases when I took notes. The interviews were semi-structured, including questions on entrance, work, relations and contact with other members, as well as contact with outsiders.

Surprisingly, superiors experience that they receive too many requests from photographers, documentarists and social scientists. My study has been accepted because I promised anonymity and because superiors have expressed their appreciation of my visit and recommended other superiors to accept my request. It is also likely that my personal characteristics played a role. Making the effort to travel from Sweden to remotely situated communities in France and to conduct interviews in a foreign language appear to have signalled my sincere interest, as did my certification that my goal was to ‘understand’ rather than to ‘criticise’. It is also notable that my own religious affiliation has never been brought up during ‘negotiations’ with the superiors. Although less than a handful of members have asked me about it during interviews (to which I have replied that I am a non-practising Protestant), this has primarily been to probe my knowledge of Catholicism, rather than to certify my faith.

As a woman, I would never have been admitted to stay within the cloistered spaces of a monk monastery, but during one of the visits to the large nun monastery, I stayed four days within the community. I slept in their dormitory and joined the community in all activities (meals, work, offices, meetings, etc.), from the first office in the morning until the last at night. Cistercians gather seven times in church each day for the Liturgy of the hours, including the offices of Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline.
Throughout my fieldwork, I have attended 83 such offices. Although the silent atmosphere of monasteries significantly reduces opportunities for the informal chats that are typical ingredients of ethnographic research, staying at the monastic guesthouses enabled me to talk to other guests. This provided valuable information and ‘gossip’ about the communities. I have also studied documents including the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Constitutions of the Order, books on Cistercian spirituality and websites of the order and individual communities.

The monks and nuns form one single monastic order, and from a constitutional viewpoint, there are very few differences at the community level. My original intention was not to compare monks and nuns, but data collection revealed differences regarding personal relationships and social interaction among monks and nuns at an early stage, not least considering that nuns were generally less comfortable with talking about personal relations than monks were. I address some of these differences here, but the analysis has not been strictly comparative. For the present article, I started by looking into material that has been sorted broadly into dealing with fraternal relations and friendship, respectively. After further close reading of the material on fraternal relations, I sorted this material thematically in more detail, based on codes labelled ‘ideals’ (what fraternal relations should be like), ‘practices’ (practices and activities that manifest fraternal relations) and ‘risks’ (what threatens fraternal relations). The material sorted into a broad friendship category included, for example, descriptions of explicit talk of ‘friends’ in the community as well as more indirect mentions of members who ‘talked a lot’ with each other. In a more detailed round of coding, I sorted this material into descriptions of acceptable as well as problematic friendship, both concrete and hypothetical instances thereof. The presentation is based on my interpretation of the sorted material, using the analytical lenses of fraternal relations and friendship sketched above.

The issues I discuss here are sensitive from a general monastic perspective. I have been careful to protect the identity of quoted members and only inform about gender (nun or monk), except when quoting superiors. Precisely because of their position of power, it is less sensitive to reveal their standpoints, and their position cannot be neglected when interpreting their accounts. Interviewees, and their monastic affiliation (M1–M7), are identified consistently with randomly assigned numbers (e.g. M1-1, M2-3). I have translated the presented quotes from French.

The Characteristics of Fraternal Relations in Everyday Monastic Life

In Cistercian monasteries, members spend most of their time in the presence of other members. The community as a whole gathers seven times in church every day, spends about two hours of divine reading in the scriptorium, shares meals in the refectory (when they typically listen to the reading aloud from a book) and meet to listen to a chapter from the Rule of Saint Benedict read aloud. During most hours of the morning and the afternoon, members perform individual duties. OCSO is a contemplative order, but manual labour plays an important role from a spiritual, practical and economic perspective. For example, French OCSO monasteries typically produce biscuits, confection, fruitcakes, honey, chocolate or liqueur. Members also run a guesthouse and perform household duties like gardening,
laundry and cooking. Managerial positions include the abbot/abbess, the prior (the deputy), the novice director (in charge of educating new members) and the cellarer (in charge of economic responsibilities).

Within the Cistercian tradition, the primary purpose of monastic membership is to deepen members’ relationship with Christ, within the context of a monastic community with a common purpose and a common vision. From an organisational viewpoint, a Cistercian monastery is an organisation for its members that should serve as an example of a Christian utopia (cf. Séguy, 1971), where members love each other and live in peace. Entering a monastery is supposed to be the starting point of a journey of conversion, meant to involve growing out of a life centred on the ego, moving to a life centred on Christ and living the monastic life, in all its aspects, as described by the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Constitutions of the Order. Membership is stepwise, and the process towards full membership typically lasts seven to 10 years. The process involves formal education as well as successive integration into the community. The novice lives apart from the rest of the community until giving his/her temporary vows, and becomes a professed (full) member first after the final vows of stability, obedience and conversion. In the present article, I focus on relations among temporary professed and professed members.

How do monks and nuns characterise fraternal relations and fraternal life? Love is at the heart of fraternal relations. ‘We are called by fraternity, so, universal. It’s the love of Christ that will start in our hearts, the love of all our brothers’, as one monk (M4-7) said. This love has a spiritual basis in Christian charity and should ultimately embrace everyone the members meet (cf. Rule of Saint Benedict, Chapter 53). In practice, the request to love is most significant relative to other monastic members, who are prescribed to accept and love one another. According to one nun (M2-13), love gives the community a purpose:

*When everyone is together and you haven’t chosen each other... you really have to accept each other like a gift [...] If I’m outside the others, I don’t have any reason to be here. If the community doesn’t shine, it serves nothing, it’s a closed milieu and that’s all.*

Members frequently mention that they have ‘not chosen’ each other. On the one hand, this refers to the understanding that monastic membership derives from a call. On the other, it positions fraternal relations oddly in relation to the analytical distinction between given and chosen relations (cf. Pahl and Spencer, 2004). Most important here is that the relationship is not based on ties to specific persons, but to a collective that is effectively generating a ‘kinship of choice’ (cf. Mahmud, 2014: 93). Mahmud (2014: 86ff.) suggests how affective ties *develop* among Freemasons through counsel and comfort, but in the monastic setting, the fact that brothers and sisters are expected to love each other comes more to the fore. Consequently, monastic members describe how their strivings to ‘welcome’, respect, accept and tolerate one another require work and enduring efforts, even if it becomes easier with time.

Regarding concrete practical expressions of fraternal relations, they are characterised as involving ‘small gestures’ and ‘small details’. For example, when I stayed with the nuns in the closed area of one monastery, it was striking how much they smiled at each other (and at me). Members should be at the service of other members who need a hand, and some gestures are framed as instances of everyday ‘sacrifice’: one nun (M2-11) gave
the example of offering the last piece of cake to someone, when one would actually like to have it for oneself. If there is a dispute or if someone has spoken brusquely to or hurt another member, it is important to apologise and forgive. Although the traditional Chapter of Faults, where members accused other members of shortcomings and transgressions, was abolished, some, notably nun, monasteries practise a modified version of this ritual. This involves a public apology in front of all other members for having destroyed community property, disturbed the others or acted aggressively or otherwise inappropriately towards some other member. One nun (M2-13) explained the importance of a ceremony like the Chapter of Faults: ‘It allows us to ask the community itself for forgiveness. Because if one hurts a sister… the sister, she is a member of the community, so if one hurts a sister, one hurts the whole community.’ The forgiveness ceremony is thus a significant manifestation of this collectivist view and the focus on unity.

‘You Have to Keep a Certain Distance’ – Prohibiting Closeness

While the content of fraternal relations is reminiscent of friendship in terms of love and care, these sentiments are supposed to be universal rather than personal. A certain distance between members of a community is cherished, and it is maintained through restrictions on speech, in general, and more personal communication, in particular. The official aim of fostering an atmosphere of silence is to facilitate continual prayer. Members are allowed to talk to carry out work efficiently, but there is a general prohibition against ‘superfluous’ small talk and gossip. Work-related talk aside, Cistercians should only speak when engaging in a community discussion or when discussing spiritual progress with a superior or confessor. Conversations between nuns are especially limited. Nuns should ask their abbess for permission to have private conversations with another nun, and it is up to the abbess to decide whether or not it is a ‘good thing’. These permissions are temporary. One nun (M1-6) described the situation candidly when claiming there should be no ‘horizontal relations’ in nun monasteries at all and no ‘sharing’ of stories or personal details. The situation among monks is somewhat more relaxed. One abbot (M3-1) explained that:

any monk can go and talk with whomever he wants, but not wherever or in whatever way. If I want to exchange with a brother I ask him ‘hey, I would like to talk to you regarding this question or…’ And you spend a moment together and talk. That could happen.

Monks are allowed to talk to whomever other member they want if they have specific concerns, but this happens only rarely – the abbot (M3-1) recalled one single instance before becoming an abbot.

On a more everyday basis, members are expected to care for one another, but a discrete, sympathetic smile or a tap on the shoulder is a more appropriate way to express concern than is asking a brother (or sister) about how he (or she) is doing, which could be viewed as intimidating. Because of the time spent together, members usually get to know the idiosyncrasies of individual members; who has a bad temper or who likes to be left alone, but there are also risks associated with such familiarity. One monk (M4-2) often reminded
himself of the phrase ‘familiarity is a burning fire’, signalling the risk that members may become too relaxed around one another and, for example, joke about someone in a way that could be insensitive. Keeping a distance is a way of respecting each other, protecting members from conflicts and avoiding hurting one another. When describing his idea about what it meant to be a brother, another monk (M3-4) emphasised the role of solitude:

You can’t live community life without living in solitude. […] When you can’t live alone, you need the support of someone else, but if you don’t know how to live alone, in fact, either you attract the other person to you to comfort you, or you get caught up with someone who reassures you. On the one hand, you have to be able to live alone, take responsibility for your life. On the other, choosing fraternity means having […] relations that are equal… The word ‘brother’ it’s because it plays out at a different level than just simply the sociological, but at the level of faith. […] I can talk to a brother who is 50, 60, 70 years old without taking into account the social category [of age], or his intellectual level, cultural level… I consider him a brother, that is, equal in dignity and in ability to change and communicate.

According to this monk, seeking comfort or attention from other members signals maladaptation to monastic life. This also implies the inappropriateness of friendship, as such ties often include expectations regarding emotional support. A second point to highlight is that if there is some form of interaction, it should be as equals, disregarding traditional status markers. As mentioned in the research overview, part of the reason for conflating brotherhood and friendship has to do with their similarities regarding love and loyalty. Another is related to egalitarianism. Status differences and inequalities are commonly assumed to threaten friendship, and although there is a monastic hierarchy of positions with unequal authority tied to them, fraternal relationships are egalitarian. Ultimately, ‘the abbot, even if he is called “abba”, father… he is above all himself a brother and under the authority of the rule [of Saint Benedict] and one sole father who’s our God’, the monk (M3-4) cited above explained to me.

The expectation regarding relatively homogeneous relations among brothers or sisters, however, contrasts more sharply with friendship than egalitarianism. Nevertheless, members frequently mentioned ‘liking’ some members more than others, and that this variation is ‘natural’. Among monks, this was spoken of as something positive. ‘When there are brothers who get on well during work or things like that, that’s also part of fraternal life. The goal is to have good relations, if they are natural, they should be encouraged’, said one monk (M4-7). This suggests that some variation in relations among members was unproblematic, even if the monk (M4-7) also emphasised that ‘kernels that are not open’ should be avoided. Nuns, however, saw the potential consequences of personal attunement in more exclusively negative terms. One nun (M2-8) proclaimed:

You can’t just stick with those you like. If I wanted to do that, I would leave. To welcome someone like a sister isn’t friendship; it isn’t spontaneous. It’s with the sisters I don’t get along with so well that monastic life plays out.

This nun’s account makes two significant points: the difference between fraternal relations and friendship and the fact that community is primordial. First, whereas an initial
appreciation of someone (one ‘likes’ the person) may be the starting point for friendship, 
the order is reversed in fraternal relations. One is first a brother or a sister, which implies 
an obligation to love. Second, and related to the first point, is the fact that community and 
the fraternal bonds it should maintain are primordial. Monastic members should make an 
effort to accept members they do not feel attuned to or get along with, but also resist 
temptations to deepen or establish personal relationships with more appreciated mem-
bers. Another nun (M2-14) related to me:

You have to make an effort. Because the sisters that get on well etc. desire to know more about 
the other person and vice versa. But in our life, you don’t… go any further. […] If you get to 
know each other a bit too much, that will, even only two will make a small clan, in relation to 
the community […] So you have to keep a certain distance.

This quote emphasises that members should make an effort to keep a ‘certain distance’ 
and avoid getting to know more about members they like, which is a central part of 
becoming friends. The nun explicitly states that the primary danger of getting to know 
one another is the risk of group formations, based on personal affection, within the com-
munity. Reminiscent of Freemasons’ condemnation of friendship beyond ‘ritualised 
friendship’ (Loiselle, 2014: 193ff.), there is consensus among both monks and nuns that 
there should be no groups of friends among monastic members, where grouping is seen 
as the antonym of universal fraternal relations.

Friendship Practices: Possibilities and Constraints

Although several members proclaimed the ‘beauty’ of friendship, and some referred to 
the tributes to friendship made by Cistercian ancestor Aelred of Rievaulx in the 12th 
century, it is clear that exclusive relationships between members are seen as threatening 
to monastic unity. The only normatively appropriate ‘friendship’ is therefore one that is 
open to everyone and serves the community.4 Such a ‘promiscuous friendship’ is, in fact, 
not friendship at all, but from the point of view of total loyalty, it serves the same func-
tion as having no friends at all (cf. Coser, 1964: 885).

While social interaction and personal relations are more accepted among monks than 
among nuns, only one of the monks I interviewed described having a relationship that he 
referred to as a form of friendship. ‘I live a form of friendship in the community’, the 
monk (M3-6) said. When asked about how this took place, he described how a specific 
fellow monk acted towards him, making him feel that there was attunement:

Often he calls me to ask for advice. […] ‘What would you do in my place?’ So I feel that I count 
for him, if he asks for opinions regarding this or that thing […] There are small things like that, 
simple. And we do an office together because Terce in the morning, it’s in small groups, it’s not 
in church.

There are two aspects of this monk’s account to highlight. The first concerns the role of 
activities. Terce is the third office of the day and one of the less important, so-called 
minor hours. In some monasteries, Terce is celebrated outside church, together with 
members who work in the same group or others who are close by. This disrupts work less
than celebration in church does. By choosing to do Terce together, these two monks, who both worked individually, managed to differentiate themselves from the group, in contextually appropriate ways. These (mandatory) activities became a form of, or substitute to, an intra-organisational friendship activity in the monastic context. ‘Extra-organisational socialising’ is important for workplace friendship (cf. Sias and Cahill, 1998), but opportunities for such activities in the monastic setting are extremely few. For example, when asked about the possibility to spend some time in private with another nun, one nun (M5-1) mentioned that one could ask the superior for permission to go for a walk together, but as if it was a possibility only in principle. I have never heard about any concrete instances of such activities in practice. Members occasionally get the opportunity to spend some extended time in private in a car, if a member has a medical appointment, for example, but the designated community driver(s) performs this as a duty, it is not a favour to ask a specific member one would like to spend time with.

Second, the monk with a friend talked about this relationship as if it were unproblematic, and somewhat unanticipated. A couple of other, fairly junior monks (M4-7, M4-5) said that it would have been ‘desirable’ to have a friend in their community, but that they did not have one. In addition to the constraints discussed so far, perceived differences are likely to play a role here: the importance of similarity is very well established in the research on friendship (McPherson et al., 2001). Although monastic members supposedly share their mission to develop their relationship with God and create a community based on love and charity, I have often heard members refer to differences in age, class, education and geographical background as a reason for their difficulties in relating to and understanding certain other members. For example, one monk (M3-2) who called himself a ‘city-dweller’ mentioned the difficulty he had relating to the other ‘farmers’, whereas another monk (M4-4) differentiated between educated monks like him and the ‘scouts’ who entered in their early 20s. Consequently, social differences/inequalities were more present than the brotherly discourse suggested they should be (cf. Mahmud, 2014: 108ff.). The point here is that greater possibilities to communicate, and thereby to sort out commonalities and compatible dissimilarities, would be necessary for friendship to form (Blatterer, 2014: 117).

What opportunities members, especially nuns, have for social interaction and for more personal relationships to evolve depends on whether they work together or alone. Certain duties require members to work on their own, and this could lead to almost a total absence of spontaneous interaction – something one nun (M2-10), who used to work in a group, complained about. Although work carried out in individual offices facilitates meetings in private, this is most important for those with more administrative duties, who interact more regularly. For example, when I shadowed a nun in one of the administrative positions for a few hours, she went to speak with several different nuns all over the community. Working alongside or near others and/or having a shared task are important for developing friendship in workplaces (Sias and Cahill, 1998), and members have often mentioned that they get to know the members they work with a bit better than the other members. Members who work together as a group, for example in production, naturally spend time together, but this provides limited room for (illicit) small talk that could lead to more personal bonding. When I helped out with packing products during three different work sessions, the nuns rarely spoke. If they did, they engaged in brief
dialogues of immediate relevance to working tasks, using a low voice close to whispering. On a different occasion, I helped six nuns to peel apples. When one of the nuns made a couple of remarks to me regarding how to do it, one of the others stared at us, as if she were watching to ensure the interaction did not deviate.

Peer surveillance is an evident feature of monastic interaction. One nun (M2-9) described how she got to know another nun through extended work-related interaction. When they changed positions, they maintained frequent contact, but other nuns had complained about their interaction to the abbess. ‘Recently, I was informed that it is not accepted’, the interviewed nun (M2-9) said. Without revealing names, it was clear that it was this relationship that the abbess (M2-3) referred to when mentioning how she had to intervene in a relationship that had taken on such ‘proportions’ (the nuns went to see each other twice a day). The abbess was nevertheless pleased that she only had to mention ‘the problem’ to the two nuns for them to suggest a solution:

One of them [said]… ‘It could be that we only meet at this time of the day, once a day.’ I said ‘it’s very good like that’. And it’s good that […] I just mentioned the problem and then they suggested a way it could work. […] I try to trust as much as I can, because otherwise it’s not possible. But at the same time, you shouldn’t close your eyes.

Unlike voluntary total institutions such as the military, where extensive monitoring and punishment regimes are legitimised by conceiving of members as troublesome (Sundberg, 2015: 128), monastic control is ideally based on internalised discipline. At the same time, this abbess did not ‘close her eyes’ and also expected reports, for example, if meetings between nuns who had been permitted to speak with each other did not go well. In fact, this was taken into account when deciding whether to permit the meetings in the first place:

If I see that the sister [the nun] wants to speak more freely with a sister that is sensible, that won’t say whatever, well then, and who will talk to me if there is a problem, well, then I say yes, maybe.

This form of ‘snitching’ reflects how interaction between members is subject to peer surveillance, which follows from the internalisation of fraternal ideals and related interactional rules (cf. Scott, 2011: 50f.) rather than from positions as guards that force members to do so even when it conflicts with their loyalty to other members (Sundberg, 2015: 154). Members have also spontaneously related to me, in an agitated manner, how problematic it has been when other members have formed ‘a small group in the big group’. One nun (M2-14) criticised a relationship between three nuns:

We, on the outside, have suspected ‘look, they are about to say something about the community again’. […] They were about to destroy the communion because they put themselves on the side, they were no longer inside the community, because they discussed among themselves.

Although the quoted nun criticised how the three nuns formed a clique within the community, the point is that this division also pitted the rest of the community against the clique. This is a general, and double, downside of friendship inside organisations (Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018).
Discussion and Conclusions

The present article set out to explore fraternal relations and friendship in monasteries as a case of how different forms of relationships conflict in an organised setting. Monastic life may seem an odd case owing to its ‘simplicity’ in terms of severely reduced opportunities for conflicting roles, deriving from the organisation’s greediness and totality. Yet it is precisely because we would expect members to strive for compliance that the monastic setting is an informative case for exploring the struggles involved in maintaining specific types of relationships. It is also an archetypical case for illustrating my conceptualisation of fraternal relations as collectivist, membership-based, egalitarian ties that prescribe equal affection. This concept is useful for studies of relations in other more or less collectivist groups, like service clubs, secret societies, biker clubs and kibbutzim, not least because the concept enables a comparative lens for analysing mechanisms in social groups that share important features, but which rarely come under joint scrutiny. Studies of other settings would also help us to understand how typical, or extreme, the monastic variant of fraternal relations is, reveal important variations in how this social form manifests itself; and in turn, to further develop the dimensions of the concept of fraternal relations. These are important steps towards more generalisable theorising on fraternal relations.

In the monastic setting, fraternal relations have a ‘sacred’ connotation and the way they are prioritised creates normative constraints on ‘profane’ friendship. The norms regarding distance and emotional homogeneity are not the only constraints on friendship or friend-like relations, however. Friendship is an interaction-based relationship, where talk and communication are important ingredients. The ambition to foster a silent atmosphere and minimise verbal interaction in Cistercian monasteries poses an additional normative constraint on the formation of personal relationships, especially among nuns. Even if monks have better opportunities to communicate, the pool of potential friends is highly limited. Despite the relatively shared motif of entering a monastery, members experience that differences in, for example, age and educational background limit their understanding of one another. At the same time, the fraternal discourse underplays such differences because everyone is equal and the emphasis is on acceptance, rather than understanding. The total institutional context also impacts friendship: opportunities to meet outside the monastery or join in extra-organisational activities are severely limited, and the observability of any form of transgression is great. Finally, members spend much of their time involved in various collective rituals, with limited opportunities for individual exchange. While research on friendship in context explains the situated expressions of friendship, studying friendship, or the absence of it, is also a way to understand the fundamental conditions a context or group provides for friendship.

Because monastic life assumes great stability, avoiding close individual ties is a way to avoid the trouble they can lead to. Personal relations increase the risk of conflicts (Pettinger, 2005: 47ff.) and stronger bonds have more potential to be troubling and personally destabilising (Smart et al., 2012). In this sense, distance between members is functional for close and persistent cohousing, which monastic living is a special case of. In the monastic setting, fraternal relations imply universal instrumental support and care, but discouraging spontaneous disclosure has implications for horizontal emotional support. The limits on disclosure in monasteries are also important for understanding the observed difference
between nuns’ and monks’ conceptions of friendship in relation to fraternal life. In addition to differences in how nuns and monks are allowed to interact with each other, another reason why friendship and fraternal relations are considered more compatible among monks than among nuns is conceivable, but not directly derived from the data: a common folk conception is that male friendships are based on activities rather than disclosure (e.g. Blatterer, 2014; Nardi, 1992). Prohibiting disclosing intimacy (cf. Jamieson, 1988) can therefore be viewed as less inhibiting for generating friendship between men compared to such relationships among women. Nevertheless, exclusivity and clan formations are also unacceptable among monks. The blending of fraternal relations and friendship therefore only concerns the interactional, and not the structural, level.

The different opportunities for and consequences of fraternal relations among women and men in less total settings deserve further research attention, for example, to understand the need for organisational greediness, or homosociality, to sustain this form of relationship and the consequences it has for the (co-)existence with friendship. For example, a comparative analysis of male, female and mixed branches of service clubs, such as Odd Fellows and Rotary, would be illustrative here. For the conceptualisation of fraternal relations, it should also be clarified that my point is not that fraternal relations are necessarily distant; they may also involve promotion of closeness (see, for example, Jackson, 2012). The critical issue here is that the form and level of intimacy between members are universally imposed. What and how they are imposed is a significant factor for understanding how overlaps and tensions between friendship and fraternal relations play out in different arenas. For example, imposed universal disclosure and openness or ‘promiscuous’ use of the term ‘friend’ may conflate members’ understanding of fraternity and friendship within a group. However, certain events, such as member exits, may bring the latent distinction to the surface. Because fraternal relations are decided relationships based on collectivist bonds, exit means that one is no longer a brother or sister, and does not deserve to be treated as one. This consequence is potentially greatly surprising for the former member who confused the fraternal relation with friendship, a spontaneous relationship between individuals.

Acknowledgements
I wish to thank Göran Ahrne, Lovisa Näslund, Birgit Pauksztat, Andrew Sturdy and Maria Törnqvist for valuable comments and criticisms. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers and Andrew Balmer for thoughtful remarks.

Funding
This research has been supported by the Swedish Research Council under grant number 2017-2261.

Notes
1. I use (monastic) member as the generic term for both monks and nuns.
2. There are currently 178 OCSO monasteries in the world. Ninety-two are situated in Europe, and 27 in France. In total, there are 76 monasteries for nuns and 102 for monks (2017). On average, French monk monasteries have 24 members and French nun monasteries 26 members.
3. Although I do not attempt to explain why regulatory practices differ, it is notable that they do not derive from constitutional differences for monks and nuns.

4. Relationships with family and old friends outside of the community seem less contested than personal relations within, yet contact is strictly limited. For example, only a few visits per year are permitted and telephone calls often require abbatial permission.

5. This is not to say that men’s and women’s friendships differ as much in practice, even as concerns disclosing intimacy (see Goedecke, 2018: 29ff. for an overview).

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Date submitted October 2018
Date accepted February 2019