Work practices, normative control and ascetic responsibilization in Cistercian monasteries

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ABSTRACT
How is work organized and experienced in monasteries? Based on a multi-sited, qualitative case study of Cistercian monasteries in France, this article brings an archetypal setting of normative control into the purview of sociological research on work and organization. It reveals a tension between the hierarchical organization of work and the ideology of all forms of work as "services" of equal importance and shows how the ideology affects the experiences of member differently depending on their position. Whereas those who feel recognized become spokespersons, less privileged members are not only discontent, but this experience also constitutes a failure to obey "gladly." Because members have chosen to enter a monastery, it is up to them to reach a state of acceptance regardless of the work position they have. The notion of ascetic responsibilization conceptualizes the mechanism behind this reasoning, which serves to maintain a status quo in monastic power relations.

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Introduction

Contemplative Catholic monasteries are examples of voluntary total institutions where members lead a regulated life within bounded areas, sharing residence and work for an extended period of time (cf. Goffman 1961). In Cistercian monasteries, work and especially manual labor are considered to be integral parts of the monastic experience and members devote approximately 5 h per day, six days a week to different forms of work. The organization and economy of the community have to be managed, there is a multitude of household duties to be performed, and fabrication of food products for sales, typically confection, cheese and the like, support the economic survival of the community. The religious and total institutional character of monasteries suggests that they are highly idiosyncratic as work organizations, at the same time as their extreme features make mechanisms and dynamics more transparently observable than elsewhere (cf. Eisenhardt 1989). Addressing monasteries as workplaces are therefore not only a way of bringing this archetypal setting of normative control into the purview of research on work and organizations in general, and on spiritual organizations in particular, but it also has the potential of generating key analytical insights regarding these questions.
Monasteries, supposedly, involve control of both body and soul to a larger extent than in most other organizations. Foucault (2010, 170ff.) uses monasteries as examples of pastoral power, discussing how monasteries institutionalize a relationship of submission through the relationship with the superior, where obedience does not have a purpose, but the condition of obedience is an aim itself. Foucault (2010) draws on the Rule of Saint Benedict, the precept according to which Cistercians and Benedictines live, and other religious writings when discussing monastic control. Although the Rule remains salient in contemporary Benedictine and Cistercian monasticism, we risk breeding a static and schematic image that neglects practices and experiences if such more or less ancient, religious documents remain exclusive sources for understanding monastic power and control. This is not least the case since monastic orders and monasteries “have continually been inventing themselves” (Tredget 2002, 2) along with the wider society, in medieval times (e.g., Kieser 1987; Weber [1934]1978) as well as in present times (e.g., Irvine 2016; Jonveaux 2018).

Many recent studies of monasticism focus on contemporary changes, some of which concern power and obedience. Hervieu-Léger (2017, 145–192) discusses how the symbolic importance and respect of the abbot office has decreased, whereas Clot-Garell (2016) focuses on how apprenticeship during the novitiate, the principal formative period of monastic members, has changed from passive acceptance and self-renunciation, to more active cooperation and self-fulfillment. Other studies show tensions between the religious and organizational aspects of monastic life, primarily related to the economy. For example, the economic activities and rational work organization in medieval monasteries led to an accumulation of immense wealth which was incompatible with the ideal of an ascetic life (Kieser 1987). Jonveaux (2011a) provides a more contemporary example, showing how Carmelite nuns deny the economic dimension of the production of a sacred product (the altar bread). At the same time, the economic activities the nuns engage in prove that the dimension is accepted in practice.

This article addresses the potential tensions between religious ideals and organizational practices with regard to work and obedience. Inspired by Kunda’s (2006 [1992]) seminal analysis of normative control in a high-technology company, this article explores Cistercian monasteries and the interplay between the organization and ideology of work in relation to members’ experiences. What meanings do members give their experiences of work? What conflicts between religious ideals and concrete organizational reality do they face in the work domain? Depending on the position of members, the ideology of all-encompassing obedience and work positions as “services” of equal importance affects the experiences of member differently. Whereas those who feel recognized become spokespersons for the ideology, less privileged members are not only discontent, but they also have to deal with that this experience itself constitutes a failure to obey “gladly.” The monastic ideology of obedience seems to be at play when these members “succeed” to blame themselves, rather than any external condition, for this failure and to accept that it is their own responsibility to accept whatever work situation they find themselves in. I introduce the notion of ascetic responsibilization to conceptualize the mechanism behind this reasoning.

The article is structured as follows. After presenting the theoretical framing of normative control and responsibilization which guides the analysis of the article, I present the case and the study’s methodology. The analysis begins with a brief overview of the organization of
monastic work, including the different positions of members and how they are allocated, and the ideals of obedience. In the subsequent sections, I analyze the ideology of work and the consequences of the combination of practical and ideological conditions for members’ experiences. The concluding section summarizes the primary findings of the article.

**Normative control and ascetic responsibilization**

Normative control refers to the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their action (Kunda 2006 [1992], 11). Consequently, it is not just the behavior of a member which is specified, evaluated and sanctioned, but also their internal commitment. Normative control requires members to internalize cultural values and “assess their own worth in these terms” (Willmott 1993, 522), ultimately making members direct themselves, by means of having adopted the “right” mind-set.

Numerous studies associate normative control with corporate culture management, typically in knowledge-intensive firms (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Costas and Kärreman 2013; Willmott 1993), but normative control is not limited to corporate settings. Monasteries may appear as both too peculiar and obvious cases of normative control to be worth studying, but analyzing the organization of work in monasteries adds valuable analytical insights to discussions on workplace spirituality in secular settings. In addition, it may be well-established that monks are supposed to internalize demands and watch over themselves (Hillery 1969, 146) and that nuns “want to be as good nuns as possible” (Cregård 2013, 78), but little is known about the “experiential transaction” (Kunda 2006 [1992]) that happens in the intersection between ideals, concrete practices, and experiences in monasteries.

To capture this experiential transaction in a corporate setting, Kunda (2006[1992]) presents a detailed analysis of the organizational culture of a tech company, mapping the organization of work, the ideology, and how these features affect the experiences and the self of the members. Ideology, as an authoritative system of meaning offered in the name of those with claim to authority, consists of images of organizational reality – publicly articulated and logically integrated “reality claims” (Kunda 2006 [1992], 52), which makes it appropriate to the study of spiritual (Cunha, Régo, and D’Oliveira 2006) and religious management. In relation to normative control, the central questions are how ideology is constructed and used, what it means to members, and what “forms of experiences that are shaped in the glare of this ideological spotlight” (Kunda 2006 [1992], 161).

By balancing the significance of organization of work, ideology, and experiences, Kunda’s strategy enables analysis of how these phenomena interplay, avoiding the pitfall to see discourse as determining the relationship between organizational phenomena (cf. Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). Consequently, the present article does not apply discourse analysis, but it nevertheless draws upon Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self” as a way of capturing the forms of self-control that we would expect to find among monks and nuns, thereby moving towards a more specific way of conceptualizing the “experiential transaction” involved in normative control.

Technologies of the self include the various operations on souls, thoughts, and conduct that people make in order to transform themselves to reach a state of, for example, purity or perfection (Foucault 1988, 18). In the present article, I focus on the specific technology of
responsibilization to address what monks and nuns do to attain a desirable state of humility and obedience. Responsibilization has been identified as a key element of new forms of self-governance and subjectivity (e.g., Rose 1996; Shamir 2008), often assumed to be related to the rise of neoliberal governance (Biebricher 2000). In this form of governance, uniform top-down command has been replaced by a more commodity-like system of authority, which requires a moral capacity to reflexively choose among available alternatives (Shamir 2008, 7). Responsibilization involves a transfer of responsibility from systems to individuals, turning them into subjects that consider themselves as free and responsible for their own actions and the respective outcomes (Biebricher 2000, 471), whether it is related to corporate social responsibility (e.g., Shamir 2008) and social risks (e.g., Lemke 2002) more generally, or work (e.g., Grey 1997; Rasmussen 2011), for example.

I suggest that responsibilization hints at a more generic mechanism of power and control that can be disconnected from the “macro-discursive” perspective (cf. Alvesson and Kärreman 2000) on neoliberal governance. More precisely, I propose that the monastic setting is characterized by a form of responsibilization which presumes that internal reflection is the key to solve the problems that the members experience, while external circumstances remain unaltered. I refer to this form of responsibilization as ascetic responsibilization, drawing upon the meaning of ascetic as an exercise to develop and transform into a certain mode of being (Foucault 1997, 282). Because monasteries are voluntary total institutions which monastic members have chosen to enter, they become responsible for embracing and accepting the conditions set for their journey of conversion and spiritual progress, attributing any obstacles they experience along the way to themselves and their own insufficiencies. In relation to work, ascetic responsibilization involves the effort to dislocate the origin of negative experiences of work conditions, whether they are related to the position, tasks, or practices of collaborators and superiors, to oneself. The present article focuses on monastic work organization, but previous findings on characteristics of spiritual management (e.g., Bell and Taylor 2003, 2004) suggest that the concept of ascetic responsibilization is transferable to analysis also of other work organizations. I return to the more general applicability of the concept in the concluding section of the article.

**Case and method**

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 Cistercians are some of the strictest cloistered and contemplative orders of the Catholic Church, they are excellent examples of a total institution of the monastic kind. In addition, given the focus on normative control in relation to work, Cistercians are suitable because of their emphasis on manual labor. 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 and the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), commonly known as Trappists, grew out of the Cistercians 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 for being dealt with as one case, but due to precisions made along the way
the analysis is primarily based on material on OCSO.

In a preparatory study, I interviewed three monks and one nun during 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. There are currently 178 OCSO monasteries in the world, 76 for nuns and 102 for monks (2017). About half (92) of the communities are situated in Europe, and there are 27 in France, making France the country with the largest population of OCSO-communities. On average, French monk monasteries have 24 members and French nun monasteries 26 members. 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 maximized available options along this principle.

The final design is the result of a step-wise choice of communities to contact, aiming for variation concerning gender, size and strictness. I visited one large nun monastery, one average-sized nun monastery and two average-sized 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. I interviewed four members twice. The members held various positions (e.g., abbess or abbot, novice director, nurse, gardener, guest master) and were involved in various working tasks (e.g., sewing, production, sales). The interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h and they 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, and contact with outsiders.

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, and throughout my fieldwork, I attended 94 such offices. Although the silent atmosphere of monasteries significantly reduces opportunities for informal chats, staying at the monastic guesthouses enabled me to talk to other guests. These conversations provided valuable information and “gossip” about the communities which helped both in selecting which members to ask for an interview and which communities to contact. I also studied documents including the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Constitutions of the order, books on Cistercian spirituality, and webpages of the order and individual communities.
This data collection took place within a larger study on social relations within monasteries. Originally, my reason for asking questions about member’s work was to initiate discussion about the practicalities of monastic life, but it soon became clear that members cared more about their work than expected. In the following interviews, I continued to ask similar questions and engaged in the topic more extensively, for example, by asking more follow up questions on distribution of work, reasons for changes, and how they were experienced (cf. Charmaz 2006: 96, 100). For the purposes of this article, interview transcripts and field notes were coded in N-VIVO thematically, first in line with broad interests (positions, activity, and obedience), adding more specific codes in a later round of more detailed coding (ideology of work and problems related to work) (cf. Boyatizis 1998).

This coding constitutes the backbone of my analysis of the organization of work on the one hand, and the experiences of work, on the other. To capture the ideology, I also analyzed public representations, primarily the Rule of Saint Benedict and the webpage of OCSO. The presented analysis is based on the interpretation of sorted material from the analytical lenses of normative control and responsibilization.

The issues discussed in this article are sensitive from a monastic perspective. To protect the identity of quoted members, more precise information on cited monks and nuns (e.g., what they work with) is excluded, and revealing information in the quotes has been changed into something comparable. Cited superiors are exceptions. 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 given numbers (e.g., M1-1, M2-3). The presented quotes have been translated from French.

The organization of work and the monastic ideal of obedience

In contrast to the central division between inmates and staff in Goffman’s (1961) seminal analysis of mental hospitals, Cistercian monasteries exhibit a variety of “inmate”-positions. Principal managerial positions include the abbot or abbess, the prior (the deputy) and the cellarer, in charge of the economy of the community. A novice director is responsible for educating new members. There is also work related to production, including management and planning, manufacturing and packaging. Every French Cistercian monastery fabricates some food products, such as biscuits, confection, fruitcakes, honey, chocolate, cheese, liqueur, or oblates. These are not consumed by the community, but produced for their subsistence and sold in a monastic shop, and to distributive traders. Every community has a shop where they sell their own products, products from other communities, and also books, postcards, toys, jewelry and other objects, most of them with religious insignia, meaning or references. Members also run a guesthouse, primarily for people who visit the community for a spiritual retreat, and there is a nurse among the members of the community. Household duties such as gardening, laundry, sewing, and cleaning are often performed by members, whereas cooking is often outsourced to a catering company nowadays. Work is organized hierarchically in the sense that someone is responsible for every, more or less extensive, sector or service, whether it is, for example, manufacturing, sales, or gardening. The responsible member then serves as a first-line supervisor for one or several assisting members. Members usually hold a mix of positions with more or less responsibility at the same time.
The superior (abbot or abbess) decides which positions the other members will have, and the reception of this decision is of great symbolic significance. In organizations based on normative control, it is not enough to obey in the sense of doing “what another person tells him to do” (Milgram 1965, 58), but it is also expected to incorporate values (cf. Kunda 2006 [1992], 64). Consequently, the webpage of OCSO (OCSO, 2017) states that “[m]uch more than the following of orders from a superior, our obedience is a quality of soul.” Monastic obedience is a condition (cf. Foucault 2010, 172), encompassing behaviors, feelings, and thoughts. “Obedience must be given gladly”; it is unacceptable to obey “grudgingly”, “not only aloud but also in his heart” (Rule of Saint Benedict, Chapter 5, see Fry 1981:15, see also Merton 2009, 121). “Unhesitating obedience” comes “naturally to those who cherish Christ above all”: “Such people as these immediately put aside their own concerns, [and] abandon their own will. (...) [T]hey walk according to another’s decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have an abbot over them” (Rule of Saint Benedict, Chapter 5, see e.g., Fry 1981, 14f.). Not least by connecting obedience to the praise of Christ, obedient members are “better” members. According to Catholic catechism, obedience to God is unlimited and Catholicism prepares monastic members for the more encompassing and concrete submission subscribed by the Rule of Saint Benedict. At the same time, monasteries involve an intricate blending of social and divine authority. The superior of a monastery is a formal, social authority, but also a representative of Christ, the divine authority, in the community (see Rule of Saint Benedict, chapter 2). In sum, religious underpinnings provide a supreme moral basis for obedience in the Cisterian setting, especially because obedience to the monastic superior is connected to faith (cf. Courpasson and Dany 2003, 1248).

Given the norms of authority connected to the abbatial position (cf. Biggart and Hamilton 1984, 543f.), one would perhaps anticipate that superiors simply command members to their positions and expect them to automatically accept them. In contrast, superiors propose and motivate their ideas about where a member will work. As one abbot (M3-1) explained, he discussed suggestions to shift position “with the concerned brother, evidently, to explain the nature of the modification, the reasons [for it]. In general, it’s nevertheless, it’s nevertheless accepted, when it’s well presented.” This is, in fact, unsurprising, given that the ideal is not only for the subordinate to comply, but also to fully accept. In addition, the quote implies that it is, at least in principle, conceivable and possible to turn down the request. In practice, there are often limited alternatives, however.

Monasteries “recruit” on the basis of vocation, not on skill, and there is occasional mismatch between the capacities of members and the requirements of different tasks in a monastic community. In some monasteries, there is a surplus of “capable” members to fill the few, more demanding positions, such as the cellarer or novice director. In other communities, a few members carry a heavy workload to compensate for the inability of the others, often related to old age. Monasteries in need may even ask for temporary support by lending members from other monasteries, but it is up to the superiors in these latter communities to decide if the member is available for such support work.

In addition to considerations of capacities, present OCSO-superiors try to place members in positions that fit with their personal character, where they can “prosper” (see also Cregård 2013, 77, 81), and avoid making “two incompatible persons work together,” as one nun (M4-2) said. In the past, it was more common to expose members to deliberate trials by intentionally going against their perceived or expressed desires (see also Hervieu-Léger 2017, 160; Jonveaux 2011b, 193). For example, one monk (M1-2) told me about an earlier
novice director who explicitly discouraged a novice by telling him: “You wanted to do Latin. You wanted to become a priest. And well, you are not doing Latin and you are not going to be a priest.” Superior often admit individual members to, for example, study (not least theology) to stimulate their intellectual capacities. In general, however, monastic life provides limited opportunities to develop individual talents. In fact, gifts and talents are not even considered as belonging to the person. According to the constitution of OCSO, members retain nothing for themselves. Reminiscent of how kibbutz members are expected to contribute according to their abilities (cf. Simons and Ingram 2000, 301) the monks’ and nuns’ individual talents should be used to the best of the community. This is related to the view of work as a service.

The ideology of services

From an ideological perspective, all working tasks and positions in Cistercian communities are different ways of serving the community. There is no principal distinction between, for example, household work and production in the sense that all work is unpaid, yet hierarchical differences are also underplayed. Contrasting with a much more authoritarian and top-down rule in the past (see, e.g., Hervieu-Léger 2017, chapter, 3) even the abbatial position, with significant authority is currently spoken of as “foremost a service (.) not a hierarchical position,” as one superior (M1-1) put it.

Services should not be performed grudgingly, as discussed earlier, and official information about monastic life emphasizes the unexpected joy from duties that the member did not want from the beginning: “Actually, living in a Trappist monastery, you discover that the work which is really most fulfilling of all is not necessarily work you enjoy doing, but work that is taken up for the sake of the good of others.” (OCSO, 2018) Although this appears to describe experience, it is undoubtedly also prescriptive rhetoric related to the obedience ideals, proclaiming how members should have faith in the duties they are given (cf. Kunda 2006 [1992], 65, 73).

In line with prescriptions, most interviewed members described their current working tasks in neutral or positive manner, as if it did not really matter what they did. A few elaborated about their position in relation to expectations on obedience. For example, one nun (M2-8) related to me:

So when mother Bénédicte asked me to take on the responsibility of the comfiture production, I said to myself, “well it really had to be an abbess to make me the head of a company!” (laughter) Because it was the route that didn’t interest me during my studies (…) Well, I would have had the capacity you know, but it wasn’t what I was interested in. (…) But finally, I have invested in my responsibility here and I am happy and … but it’s something I wouldn’t have thought of myself.

Because it was the abbess who gave the nun this position, reminiscent of a type of work that the nun had avoided before entering the monastery, the nun felt a moral obligation to obey (cf. Courpasson and Dany 2003, 1241). This member embraced obedience, but significantly, it involved accepting and investing in a duty with considerable influence (unlike more trivial positions related to, for example, cleaning or ironing). There is a balance to maintain here, however. Members should not invest too much in work or become specialized. The aim is to be detached and humble, not ambitious or in search
of recognition for performances or competences (see also Merton 2009, 192, 201). This is manifested in the following quote, where a superior (M4-1) explains why rotation of duties is important.

It helps to detach oneself; it’s an important value after all, because otherwise there’s the temptation of power. If I have a job for a long time, that I’m completely in control of, that I know how to do, it’s inevitable that I will be tempted to exercise power. And also put my efforts into my competence.

This quote exhibits key features of the monastic view on work as something to perform indifferently, rather than to master, engage in, and exercise authority within. In kibbutzim, job rotation in general and managerial rotation, in particular, have been pivotal to reinforce equality (e.g., Simons and Ingram 2000), but these settlements are typically the size of a small village and therefore including a more varied workforce compared to monasteries. In monasteries, rotation is infrequent. Monks and nuns often work with similar activities or hold the same position for a long time, at least 10 years or more. In this sense, members are objectively more attached to positions than they should be. Thus, some members have expressed worry about losing their position (because they want to keep it), whereas others have been removed precisely because the superior thought they were too engaged (and they could be replaced).

If exercise of power is considered as inadvertent consequence of long-term work commitments, influential positions are the riskiest from this perspective. One of the interviewed monks (M1-6) had held several positions of considerable importance, both inside his community, in another community, and for the monastic order as whole. Had it not been difficult to change? He explained:

the great conversion is not to become owner of one’s job, of one’s task in the community, but to always keep the spirit that one serves the community. So at a given moment in time, you are helping out as a cook, and afterwards he [the abbot] asks you to help as door-keeper, and afterwards, there you go. It’s . . . if one, if one tries to stay in that logic of service, and really to consider oneself as a humble servant of one’s brothers, one knows that in any case, you won’t stay at the same post all your life. At a given moment in time, you have important posts and at a different time you have less important posts.

This quote describes the ideal view of tasks as services, from which it follows that members should develop a spirit where they do not become attached to or care about what specific work they do. Yet it is precisely those few members I have interviewed who, like the quoted monk above, have had several important positions both inside and outside of their own community that have emphasized that all working tasks are simply different forms of services.

Relating the present “staff” situation in monasteries to more common work conditions, the organization of work in monasteries provides something which resembles career opportunities for a much-selected group of members, who have been recognized through their “services” in a way which is atypical for the average monastic member. Importantly however, the notion of career is inconceivable within the monastic discourse of services, obedience and humility. Given how work is organized, there are no promotion scripts (cf. Dany, Louvel, and Valette 2011) and it is impossible for individual members to deliberately aspire for a higher position. First, because the ambivalent view on positions as inherently equally valuable, yet vertically arranged, confuses what promotion would mean in this context. Second, too much aspiration and engagement
in relation to work and other appointments would be a valid reason for transferring them to another position. Ideal members humbly offer their talents and skills for the good of the community or the order, rather than asserting that they should be used for the purpose of personal recognition or development.

**Ascetic responsibilization: the struggle to obey in the right way**

Whereas certain positions are rewarding, facilitating “unhesitating” obedience among certain members, other members struggle more in relation to humility ideals and the service ideology. For example, one monk (M5-1) grumbled about that his competences in theology should have awarded him greater responsibilities after the novitiate. According to him, he could (should) have been teaching theology, and others had asked why he did not, but the superior had not requested him to do it. He continued to work as a subordinate in comfiture production, apparently conceived of as less valuable. Despite the ideology of services, members do not only experience that positions differ in status; they also care about these status differences. This is especially evident when members have been transferred (degraded) to less important positions and do not anticipate that the reduced responsibilities are temporary. Older members may feel like “second class” members when they are no longer regarded as capable of tasks they did before. One nun (M2-9) claimed that “everyone has an important function,” even if they do not “appreciate” it themselves. As an example, the nun referred to a conversation with a fellow nun, who had complained that “I don’t count at all, she [the abbess] leaves this for me to do: Cleaning the floor, I’m good for that’ she said to me the other day, because before she did other things.” In line with the service discourse, the cited nun emphasized that every member makes an important contribution, regardless what they do, but the quote also contains an implicit critique of the other, cleaning nun’s complaint. The problem, according to the cited nun, was not status degradation involved in changing from one duty to another, but the lack of “appreciation” for the new task. This is one of numerous examples of ascetic responsibilization.

When members described something they spontaneously experienced as problematic, such as a working task or the relationship with a fellow member, they often pointed out to me that it was their own experience of the situation, not the task or the person, that was the true problem. A glimpse of an interview with one monk (M1-9) offers a typical example of this type of statement:

> Because the problem isn’t the other person, the problem is me. So it’s up to me to solve my problem. (...) I have to find the right answers in myself (...) And that, the dialogue … In a monastery, I arrive here, I am confronted with a certain number of difficulties, very well, I have to manage to solve those difficulties.

From a religious perspective, this withdrawal from the external world is an example of ascetic practice, through which the solution to problems is to be found inside the member, through internal dialogue, rather than in altered circumstances. This is related to the vow of stability as a promise to stay in a community regardless the circumstances; it is an act of faith and trust in divine providence. From a more critical perspective, this is an example of how members become individually responsible for dealing with any form of problem through self-reflection. Ascetic responsibilization targets thoughts and
feelings, and in the context of monastic work, the aim is to achieve a state of acceptance, which is ultimately a happy obedience rather than a total submission against one’s will.

Another example of ascetic responsibilization is the following quote from a nun (M2-14), who explains her difficulties to “erase” herself when working with (other) “dominant” members as first-line supervisors:

The term, well, one says “crush,” the spiritual term, it’s “erase,” being humble etc., but that, that, well, it poses, well, it poses . . . for me, it poses problems. Well, one says that I have a strong personality too (…) There are temperaments, and life makes that one has to erase oneself in front of other dominants, and then you feel completely . . . well, completely, a bit crushed. (…) And there are those who are responsible and at the same time dominant and then, well, you don’t have much to say and that’s not easy, right. Well, it’s easy; it’s “easy,” in quotation marks, because you have faith huh? You have chosen this style of life, so it’s true that faith helps, but on the human level, it’s very difficult to live. Not on the spiritual level, because on the spiritual level you believe in the Lord and the Lord will help you to live through this, but on the purely human level, it’s very hard.

A first aspect to highlight is that the nun states an explicit tension between the “spiritual level” of monastic life (faith) on the one hand, and the “human level,” on the other hand. More specifically, the description above is an example of how members struggle to accept external conditions, in this case, to accept subordinate positions, but to mention that this “style of life” is “chosen” points at a personal responsibility. The nun’s interpretation of the problem is significant with regard to ascetic responsibilization: From the nun’s perspective, the problem was her own difficulty to accept and deal with a subordinate position, not the way she was treated. Consequently, the nun presented her own “strong personality” as part of the problem, without questioning the authority of the supervising, “dominant” member.

Potentially, even abuse becomes the responsibility of the subordinate to deal with: One monk (M1-2) related to me how he had experienced one first-line supervisor who had been looking for “hard Catholics” and a “hard contemplative life” but “it was someone who was fairly unmanageable in a community. Very . . . lots of brutality, lots of . . . without a doubt for several reasons, it’s not to condemn him.” The monk admitted that it was hard to deal with this first-line supervisor, but despite the fact that he was referred to as “brutal,” the monk did not blame him for transgressing the norms of authority attached to his role.

Whether it concerns acceptance of subordination or control of tendencies to dominate, the member is responsible for being vigilant about it. Consequently, members’ reflections on how to act in more superior roles also emphasize personal responsibility. Monastic first-line supervisors are as much the target for organizational control as the “workers” (cf. Grey 1997, 720), but it is mastering of “temptations” to exercise power that is primarily at stake here. The monk (M1-2) cited above speculated about how he would have behaved in a more “dominating” role:

I appreciate to not have proper power . . . because I think that that would scare, sometimes, the other brothers (…) Having someone who is capable, who is hard on himself (…) [W] hen you manifest a certain . . . willpower, discipline with yourself, you could be frightening to the others, very easily (…) They are afraid that you would treat them like you treat yourself. (…) One has told me several times that I could be frightening, because I have a way of . . . I have a personal discipline that . . . if it would be imposed on others, it could be badly supported.
This monk explained that his personal discipline could lead him to exercise too much pressure on his fellow members. Therefore, he claimed to “appreciate” not having a more powerful position, as this reduced the risk that he would not be able to adhere to the norms of authority. The suggestions signal awareness of an illicit “temptation” to exercise power (in the monastic context), not least because other members had reminded the monk about this tendency. Yet the monk also indicated leeway for tendencies to excessive demands by suggesting that he could “very easily” have been menacing. In fact, members with “strong” or “dominant” personalities, who were recognized by others and/or themselves as seeking to impose their authority and exercise power, were frequently mentioned in interviews. This expression indicates failure to control “temptations” to exercise power and transgressions of the norms of authority that are attached to a given position. The crucial point here is that the obedience ideal does not make subordinates blind to the exercise of authority, but it is up to the subordinate to deal with it and accept it, regardless of how legitimate it is.

Concluding discussion

Based on a multi-sited case study of present conditions within Cistercian monasteries, this article set out to address the research gap pertaining to how ordinary monastic members experience and deal with everyday monastic work, against the backdrop of organizational practices and religious ideals. This is a way to understand the underlying transaction between ideas and responses, which is necessary to understand how normative control works in this specific context (cf. Kunda 2006 [1992], 22). More precisely, the article analyzes the experiences of the individual members, who are situated between, on the one hand, the ideology of all-encompassing obedience and work positions as “services” of equal importance that one should be detached from, and on the other hand, organizational practices of multiple vertical relations and long-term appointments. Members should not care about differences in power and status. In fact, these differences should not even exist. Yet individual members’ positions and opportunities influence how they are affected by and deal with these ideals.

The hidden “winners” of the monastic system are those few members who hold significant positions or repeatedly receive suggestions for external “services.” In the absence of any other forms of explicit rewards, this form of individual recognition is crucial. While the recognized members are most vividly proclaiming the service ideology and the irrelevance of which work position one is placed in, less recognized and subordinate members often struggle more to accept work conditions. Unhappiness with positions in a work organization is normal from a general work-life perspective, but discontent in a monastery has a specific meaning. “Murmuring” reflects poor conversion; a failure to leave personal concerns and interests aside. Although monastic members fail to obey “gladly” in relation to all kinds of work, the monastic ideology of obedience seems to be at play when they “succeed” in blaming themselves for this failure. In other words, the combination of monastic ideals of obedience and the implications of the vow of stability serves to generate responsibilized members, for whom difficulties to obey gladly cannot be blamed on any form of problematic work (external) condition, but only on their own (internal) state of being.

This analysis contributes to discussions on normative control and responsibilization by combining the analysis of how organization, ideology and experiences interplay with a modified, more general conceptualization of responsibilization which helps to captures
how ideology shapes experiences. Considering that the “most fundamental” claim within the discourse on workplace spirituality “is that it is possible to change the world by changing oneself” (Bell and Thomas 2003, 345), the notion of ascetic responsibilization has the potential to capture processes beyond the monastic context. I suggest that the mechanism of making internal reflection the key is similar regardless of whether it takes place within a “programmatic” or “existential” meaning-making context (cf. Driver 2007), but the consequences are different. The workplace spirituality discourse which establish that all paid employment, regardless of structural conditions, have an inherent moral virtue (Bell and Taylor 2003, 335) deceive workers by obscuring the conflicts of interest that characterize production. The situation is different in monasteries, where the exclusive concern with the self and its deficiencies serve the purpose of realizing monastic virtues. Monastic members are not duped for the sake of a corporate interest, but focus on internal reflection for the sake of their own growth. At the same time, consistently locating the source of experienced problems in oneself leads members to turn away from the deficiencies of the organization (see also Bell and Taylor 2004, 462), including potentially problematic behavior among other members. Ascetic responsibilization does not blind members to abuse, but it serves to maintain a status quo in (monastic) power relations because of how these relations are interpreted. As such, responsibilization is never innocent.

Finally, the similarities between the monastic organization of work and kibbutzim, another type of utopian setting, are worth highlighting. These settings share, for example, absence of material rewards and a system of “job” rotation, but there are distinctive ideological differences. A comparative analysis of the kibbutz and monasteries from a work perspective may therefore be revealing for understanding the role of discourse and ideology in shaping the experiences and interpretations of these similar, but relatively exceptional, ways of organizing work.

Notes

1. Somewhat surprisingly, superiors experience that they receive too many requests from photographers, documentarists, and social scientists. They feel like “curious animals,” as one superior (M1-1) said. My requests have been accepted because I promised anonymity and because superiors have expressed their appreciation of my visit and recommended other superiors to accept my request.

2. Regarding the topic of the present article, conditions are relatively similar for nuns and monks. I will therefore not make cross-comparisons.

3. See, e.g., Langewiesche (2015) and Jonveaux (2011a) for analysis of monastic economies.

4. There is also a number of rotating duties, changing at a weekly basis (e.g., readings during offices, washing dishes).

5. Within the Cistercian tradition, the primary purpose of monastic membership is to deepen the relationship with Christ, within the context of a monastic community with a common purpose and a common vision. Entering a monastery is supposed to be the starting point of a journey of conversion, meant to involve a growing out of a life centered on the own ego, to a life centered on Christ.

6. A member of a community can also be headhunted to a different community to serve as “administrative superior,” if the community does not have any member who can take on the position or fails to elect one. The conventual chapter, comprised by all professed members of the community, elects the superior and an absolute majority of votes is required to be appointed. The abbess/abbot is required to be solemnly professed since at least seven years
and be at least 35 years old. In addition, the abbot must be priest. Superiors tender their resignation at 75 years old. (See the Constitutions for Nuns and Monks.)

7. Before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the division between lay brothers/sisters and choir monks/nuns meant, among other things, that the former took care of most manual labor, whereas the latter were more involved in the liturgy of the hours. Most choir monks were ordained priests based on previous education and conception of capacities. Nowadays, priests are ordained based on the needs of the community and there is only one category of monks (and nuns).

8. For analysis of work as spiritual from the perspective of Catholic social thought, see Peregoy (2016).

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