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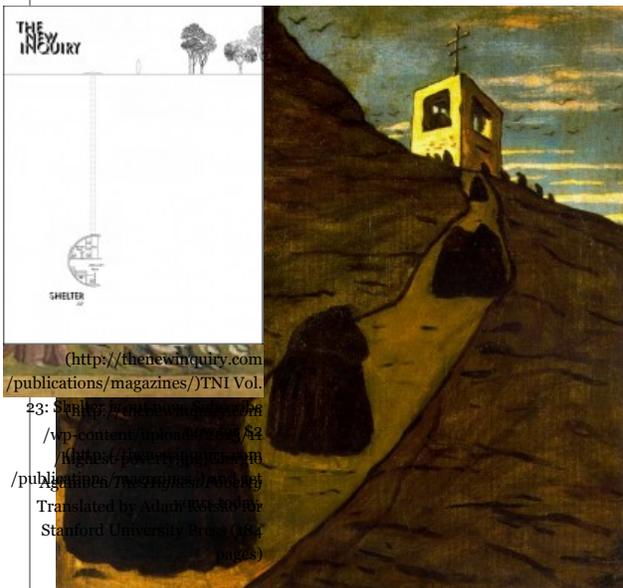
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Commiss for Christ

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([http://thenewinquiry.com/publications/magazines/YNI Vol. 23](http://thenewinquiry.com/publications/magazines/YNI_Vol_23))

(<http://thenewinquiry.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Highest-Poverty.pdf>)

Translated by Adam B. Kolber
Stanford University Press (2013)

(<http://thenewinquiry.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/climb-to-the-monastery.jpg>)

In Giorgio Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*, the monastery and the non-law of monastic codes suggest an alternative approach to life in late capitalism

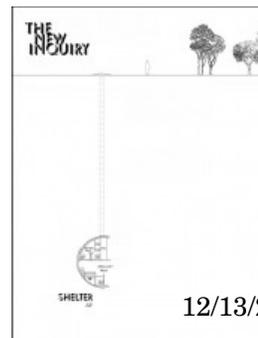
There is a monk in a monastery where I sometimes stay who leaves the door to his room open when he's not inside. The door faces the entrance to the hall from the bathroom, so everyone sees. His room is unfailingly clean, sparse, ordered — bed made, garments folded, books pious. The open door proclaims that he in fact owns none of it. Probably nobody but the monk himself ever goes in, though one theoretically could, and have a look around, and take something if one wished, as if it were a pencil from the supply closet. This is also the monk who sings opera arias while washing dishes in the fruitcake bakery.

What intentional communities long for hasn't changed all that much over the centuries — to leave the door open, to sing through unalienated dishwashing. Activist commune-dwellers might seem to be starting perpetually from scratch, while residents of monasteries cling to tradition, yet both mean to live outside the reach of empire; they hold things in common, attempt to produce no more than what is needed, and prefigure a world to come. Peter Maurin, the French peasant and vagabond father of the Catholic Worker movement, spoke tongue-twistingly about "creating a new society within the shell of the old with the philosophy of the new." Or rather, he added, "A philosophy so old that it looks like new."

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(<http://thenewinquiry.com/about-georgio-agamben/#onepage&q&f=false>) to his sublimely titled classic study *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*.

Giorgio de Chirico *Climb to the Monastery*



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Empire is empire, after all, then and now. It wasn't an accident that Christian monasticism started right as the Roman Empire was becoming, or claiming to become, Christian. Women and men—sometimes bending gender in the process—fled to the wilderness of Egypt and Turkey and Syria where they could live out the more demanding parts of their religion, with one another's company and encouragement, apart from the commerce of the cities and the temptations of a society built on hypocrisy and domination.

Strategies for making this drastic flight are the subject of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*, which appeared in English earlier this year thanks to a translation by Adam Kotsko, an influential young professor who writes about political theology and popular culture. The book is a careful, if idiosyncratic, study of monastic texts in search of the radical politics lurking between the lines. This kind of turn to the religious past for clues to the secular future has been a trend in recent Continental thought; Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek have both been writing about the apostle Paul, for instance, as has Agamben. And it makes good sense, considering the fact that Christianity did wind up conquering the Roman Empire, and — if Gibbon is to be believed — bringing it down.

The Highest Poverty is part of Agamben's several-volume inquiry into the logic of sovereignty and law, and into better kinds of thinking about organizing ourselves. Politics in the West, his earlier volumes tell us, rests on a callous dominion over human life. What makes the law the law is its power to deem the destruction of certain lives legitimate. What makes the state sovereign is its ability to break its social contracts in an emergency. Agamben's more political books, trickling out as they have during the post-Cold War pax Americana, suggest that the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib and the NSA's aspirations to omniscience are not momentary failures of the system, but examples of its basic function. For the sake of order, we ransom parts of our humanity—but perhaps we don't need to.

The Highest Poverty examines two medieval Christian attempts, in the name of eternal life, to live this life beyond the reach of ordinary politics: several centuries of monasticism, and then the brief and momentous epiphany in the movement founded by Francis of Assisi. Each, according to Agamben, fails in revealing ways.

A short monastic poem, found in a 12th-century French manuscript, reports the responses of God, the devil, and the abbot to a monk who fell asleep during nighttime prayers. The devil is optimistic. The abbot asks for help from God, who declines to intervene in such a minor incident. No one takes the matter so seriously as the monk himself, who expresses his regret in gruesome form: "Sooner would I have my head cut off," he declares, "than fall asleep again."

More recent psychology might cause us to shudder at the rapacity of this fellow's superego, yet a straightforward reading of the poem can't miss the mercy in it; the abbot fears for his "lamb," and God rates the nap as no big deal. Rather than from any external authority, human or divine, the sternest reproach comes from the monk's own ambitions for holiness — not from law, but from a rule he had promised himself he'd enact.

This is the monastic strategy. Nuns and monks depart the imperial world, foregoing its law to live in community with an agreed-upon rule. The rule doesn't govern life; it is a means for transforming life, for living the gospel more fully. Its adherents wear habits, which set them apart, together. Aspiring to "pray constantly," as Paul suggested, they recite psalms so regularly as to make the words indistinguishable

from their own thoughts. They obey the instructions of an abbot, whom they typically elect, not for fear of punishment, but in pursuit of the freedom to be found on the far side of obedience. As it was for the dozing monk, their own desire for God is their chief taskmaster.

Monastic rules originated in the third and fourth centuries as collections of advice and anecdote from the most impressive desert hermits; they could be followed or not followed as one wished. These were eventually formalized into more structured documents, such as the Rule of St. Benedict, which describes itself as merely “a little rule for beginners.” Agamben documents how these rules sought to insulate monastic life from the Roman legal tradition that governed the world and church outside the cloister. The rules were never meant to be solely texts or sayings; the truest rule is simply a Christ-like life, embodied. “The rule is not applied to life,” Agamben stresses, “but produces it and at the same time is produced in it.”

The monastery strives for an especially orderly kind of anarchy—to be a place where souls can live out the radical single-mindedness that Christ modeled, free from the kind of social order that eventually did Christ in.

The law, however, tends to get its way eventually. By the later Middle Ages, monasteries became firmly enmeshed in the feudal system. Their land holdings put them in a tug-of-war between local aristocrats and the distant papacy. Various orders underwent cycles of ease and strictness, but one way or another they were co-opted.

To aid in this process, monastic rules became less distinguishable from legal codes. Liturgical prayer, meant to be a vehicle of self-formation, became more and more a means of social control. (Noticing this process led Agamben to write an additional book-length tangent, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, which traces the path from the Divine Office of Christian liturgy to the banal, uncapitalized office of secular modernity.) The decadence of the monasteries, however, made way for a purer kind of Christian anarchy.

As Francis of Assisi wandered shoeless around the 13th-century Italian countryside, he defined what he and his followers were striving for as the “highest poverty” that Christ had modeled—possessing nothing, needing nothing, proclaiming the kingdom of God. In the midst of church institutions that gave the impression of being especially corrupt, including monasteries, Francis’s example exploded into a popular movement. Everyone wanted a piece of his poverty.

The Franciscan emphasis on poverty, for Agamben, represents a critical extension of the monastic rules. Clare of Assisi, who led the female branch of the Franciscan movement, insisted that Francis had given her not a rule at all but merely a “form of life.” He taught his followers by example and by preaching, eschewing the decrees one might hear from a monastery’s abbot. When his followers failed to listen, he didn’t police or punish. “I do not want to become a persecutor to pursue and frustrate them, like the power of this world,” Francis reportedly said.

Rather than isolating himself in a monastery and relying on scripted liturgies, Francis lived in the world but not of it. He discovered, by trying to follow the example of Christ, that poverty could liberate one from the world’s principalities and powers even more completely than a cloister. He stressed that his brothers should wear the simplest of clothes, and eat what is placed before them, and claim ownership over nothing. They should never handle money. As one Latin formula put it, he aspired to “the abdication of every right,” a life entirely outside the law and the legal economy.

The cover of *Highest Poverty* shows Giotto's famous picture of Francis preaching to birds; "even toward little worms he glowed with exceeding love," it was said. Even today, the annual Feast of Saint Francis is when people bring their pets to church to have them blessed. But for Francis the birds were not pets; he referred to animals as his siblings not just out of affection but because, before the law, he sought to be equally exempt.

As the Franciscan movement grew in influence, church rulers became determined to contain it. Francis deferred to their authority for the sake of humility, but still a good portion of his life (and Clare's) was spent in a series of negotiations with popes to protect the movement from becoming folded into the church's power structure. The struggle continued well after his death.

Agamben focuses especially on one debate that held the "highest poverty" in the balance — the question of whether Franciscan communities would have to hold property, even if individual friars couldn't. Franciscan scholars developed sophisticated legal arguments (as Francis himself never bothered doing) to insist that the friars could have use of necessities like food and clothing without actually owning them. It's an intriguing and dangerous notion, alluding as it does to the possibility of life without private ownership. They cited the economy of the Garden of Eden to this effect, a state of nature in which "all things are everyone's."

When you see a Franciscan friar for a couples' therapy session nowadays, however, you'll receive a bill at the end. The empire won out. In 1322, Pope John XXII rejected the distinction between ownership and use; the Franciscans would be expected to hold property, and property would doom them to bureaucracy. Agamben blames the eclipse of Francis's vision on the choice to defend the movement's lawlessness in the court of imperial law, with legal terminology, where poverty never stands a chance. The friars made a negative case for their form of life, he argues, when they should have focused on making a positive one.

At the end, Agamben puts the burden of articulating the positive side of the Franciscan project on us (and on a final volume to come): What can life look like outside the law? How can our communities provide us with what we need without the theft of ownership?

Thomas Merton, the eminent American monk of the past century, once prophesied to Walker Percy that the monasteries of the future would be small groupings of people living and working in cities. Like Francis, they would not flee from the world but live in its midst, distinguished by their prayer, their poverty, their authentic community. And Merton always believed that, however secretly, it is upon the monasteries that the fate of everything depends.

Religious orders today do not appear to be in a good situation. It doesn't help that capitalism inculcates in us habits of individualism and indecision that tend to steer us away from communal life. The countryside is dotted with half-abandoned abbeys left over from another time, but the cities even more so — empty cell after empty cell once inhabited by schoolteacher nuns. They are a mark of a failure not necessarily worth mourning, and of an opportunity.

Housing lawyer and Catholic Worker volunteer Karen Gargamelli recently published an article calling for the church to "open the doors (<http://americamagazine.org/open-doors>)" of its unused cloisters. There, she imagines new communities doing social transformation that start by making a home for the dispossessed. Otherwise, the Church may be tempted to sell its stately buildings for conversion into condos. Gargamelli quotes an objection to this from the new

... pope, aptly named Francis: "Empty convents are not ours, they are for the flesh of Christ." More than 50,000 people live homeless in New York City, she observes, and the city's largest landowner is the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, groups of young evangelical Protestants have lately been feeling their way toward a form of urban "new monasticism," a reaction to the empire that their parents' generation amassed through the political gains of the Religious Right. They set up communal houses in poor neighborhoods while picking and choosing from traditions of the Christian past. Others, like "sacred activist" Adam Bucko (http://www.adambucko.com/HAB/New_Monasticism.html), recognize that the monastic legacy is a global one, and draw inspiration for a new monasticism from a much broader range of religious traditions. The medieval Christian struggles that Agamben considers are just a few among many.

As the tide of corporate indebtedness creeps farther across the landscape and more deeply into our lives, monastic communities could be a form of much-needed jubilee, as well as base-camps from which to spread the spirit. *The Highest Poverty* points to some of the challenges such experiments will face, as well as to their promise. A book like this helps us to continue the ancient search for techniques of liberation in an empire whose subjects could really use them.

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