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Cassian, Contemplation and the Coenobitic Life

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Cassian was not a systematic writer; or, perhaps to be more just, he was not afraid to allow his ideas to develop, and even change. He suffers, therefore, more than some at the hands of historians of spirituality. It is temptingly easy to present him as the instigator of a two-tier system: of an asceticism that distinguished contemplation from the 'practical' eradication of vice, or the *régime* of the hermit from that of the coenobite; and that distinguished them as activities of greater and lesser merit, raising the contemplation of the hermit above the more pre-occupied discipline of community life. Those who think of Cassian in these terms have also to face the fact that most western ascetics, in the centuries that followed, came together in groups to conquer sin; and yet they thought Cassian (as did Benedict) in some sense their master. Indeed, there are signs that Cassian himself witnessed the growing popularity of the coenobitic life. Given this apparent contrast, therefore, between his supposed interpretation of the spiritual life and the relentless development of communal asceticism, many feel impelled to regard him as a remote perfectionist, or at best—where signs of resignation to community life appear—as a weary and reluctant realist.¹

It is my conviction that Cassian became, in the end, a thorough-going coenobite; but that would take some illustration. There is a preliminary task: to show that Cassian thought of contemplation as having to some degree a place within the coenobitic life. Certainly there are passages in which he seems to write of contemplation as a separate calling, especially when he makes a clear division between *πρακτική* and *θεωρητική*, terms borrowed immediately from Evagrius Ponticus and the tradition of Origen.² *Πρακτική* refers to a state of perfection (or perhaps better, to a degree of skill and insight) 'quae emendatione morum et vitiorum purgatione perficitur': *θεωρητική* to one 'quae in contemplatione divinarum

¹ The chief works on Cassian avoid a little this simplicity: Salvatore Marsili, *Giovanni Cassiano ed Evagrio Pontico* (Studia Anselmiana v), Rome 1936, and Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, Cambridge 1959, 2nd ed., 1968; but Cassian has yet to receive his due as a writer of humanity and moderation.

² This classic distinction is almost always referred to in accounts of Cassian's spirituality; but his use of it is virtually restricted to *Conference* xiv: there is a partial reference at *Con.*, xxi. 34.

