

Shepherd of Souls or Shepherd of Goats: Brother Marcel's Dilemma

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Abstract. In January 2024, a Spanish retailer's lucrative offer disrupted the tranquil existence of the Cistercian monks of Saint Chavron, who were renowned for their goat cheese. The ensuing dilemma focused on meeting unprecedented demand, testing Brother Marcel's ability to balance a profitable opportunity with the monastery's intrinsic values. While supplying large quantities could provide financial resources, it would entail sacrificing personal and prayer time, transforming a seemingly straightforward business opportunity into a genuine ethical dilemma. The case encourages an exploration of alternatives, analyzing conflicts between personal or organizational values and established marketing practices. As the discussion unfolds, students can embark on an inductive exploration, seeking to understand the competitive advantage of the World of Origin concept. Finally, they can delve into sufficiency marketing, fostering a critical reconsideration of marketing practices.

Keywords: personal purpose and values, decision making, monasteries, marketing, work-life balance, religious organizations, marketing mix, growth strategies, competitive advantage.

Author statement: Because of confidentiality and a genuine desire to remain as discreet as possible, the authors could not present the case of a specific abbey. Saint Chavron is a fictitious abbey, but it is based on the many years of field work and consultancy of the first author. As such, its organization, structure, values, manpower, and challenges are those of many French abbeys.

“*Ora et Labora ; Ora et Labora ; Ora et Labora*”; Brother Marcel was repeating to himself the Saint Benedict precept whilst walking around the cloister of the Abbey of Saint Chavron.¹ This monastery has been home to a group of Cistercian monks for the last 1000 years (except during the post-French Revolution period), and they have always followed religiously the precept of “*ora et labora*” (“pray

1. Saint Chavron is a fictitious abbey, but based on real data and years of field work. The description of the situation is inspired by observations and discussions held by one of the authors, and it mirrors the reality of many French abbeys.

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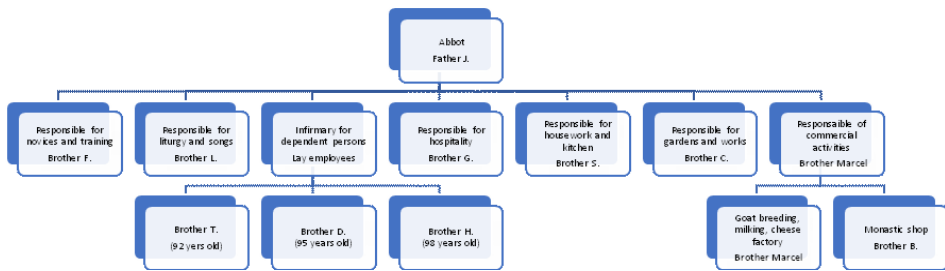
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and work”). The surplus of their work progressively became a source of income as they diversified and started selling jams, honey, but also goat cheese. This cheese was the centre of a dilemma in this month of January 2024.

A prestigious retailer from Spain wanted to purchase large quantities that Brother Marcel was currently unable to produce. The abbot (i.e., the head of the monastery, Exhibit 1) had asked him his views on this. His decision weighed personal preferences against the delicate balance between temporal and spiritual priorities, turning a routine business decision into a profound test of faith and devotion.

Exhibit 1: Organizational chart of the St. Chavron community



1. The French Monastic Ecosystem

Christian monasteries have existed since the Middle Ages in Europe. They have been religious entities defined by their separation from the rest of the world. Unlike priests and bishops, who have lived among the rest of society, contemplative monks and nuns have always lived in closed communities, separated from lay people. They have always followed the rule of Saint Benedict, which exhorts them to pray, to read, and to work (Exhibit 2). Revenue-generating activities, and particularly handcraft work, have been a condition of their survival, as well as a sort of horizontal prayer, linked in silence to the earth and to others. Historically, most of their production has been consumed by the other monks, but also given or sold at the gates of the monastery. Progressively, monasteries started to professionally organize their selling to lay consumers, until becoming since the 1950s economic players in their own right.

Exhibit 2: An explanation of the Rule of Saint Benedict

The document that organizes the practical and spiritual life of so many monastic communities is the Rule of St. Benedict. Benedict was a young nobleman born in Nursia, Italy, around 480 AD. In addition to the practical organization of the monks' lives, the Rule describes the monastic virtues of obedience, humility, and the spirit of silence. It organizes in detail the spiritual life of the monks, as well as their physical life: work, relationships, decision-making.^{2, 3}

Work in the Rule of St. Benedict