

Monastic Scribe XXXIX: November 11, 2022

THE MONK IN ME

Someone suggested to me that I devote a blog to what being a monk means to me. That is not an easy thing to do. Many years ago I was with friends sitting around a fireplace after dinner and reminiscing. One woman said casually, "What you marry is not what you get." We laughed. In a similar way the reason I became a monk in my youth, what it has meant to me since then, and what I think now are not all the same. When we are young, especially as men, we are very goal oriented. What am I going to do? What jobs will they give me? What can I achieve? Now that I am older it does not matter so much what I do but who I am.

In Chapter 58 of the Rule of Benedict, the author tells us what is expected of someone who wants to be a monk. Benedict's focus on a candidate is to find out whether one truly seeks God? Now truly seeking God is what is probably implicit in the lives of all believers. It is behind a married couple's love for each other and their children. It is probably also implicit in the lives of beginning monks who are often more taken with the externals of wearing a habit, common prayer and meals, heeding the bells, and perhaps being respected by lay people. It becomes more explicit as you get older. One's love story with God gets clearer. Being a committed celibate makes more sense.

The challenge of the spiritual life for anyone is to let go of ego-centeredness, control, attachments, power and possessions. We are thus driven to be our true selves, free of all masks, denials, pretensions, the need to be respected or applauded. Once I know, really know in my gut, that I am loved by God and I am a lover myself, then I am free. This can take a lifetime to fully achieve and we need others to help us on our way. Indications that this is happening is a deeper sense of compassion in one's life, a loving and non-judgmental embrace of all people.

Monastic life is a structured (but hopefully not too structured) way of coming to know and accept oneself and thereby find God. There are two prongs to the challenge. The first is living in community. We need others to really know who we are as others help us to be truthful about ourselves. Community is also needed to be loving people in a concrete way. Saint Basil the Great, monastic predecessor of Saint Benedict, warned against living alone. "Whose feet will you wash?" he wrote. Community can be demanding. To live with others whom you did not

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choose tests us. I know that well from experience. You can't get away with any B.S. in community. Benedict calls coenobitic monasticism the strongest kind of monks. That's the kind that lives in community.

The other traditional form of monasticism is called the anchoritic (hermit) form. Benedict says this is a legitimate way to be a monk but only if you have "come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life." Actually the anchoritic form is really part of communal life.

One writer wrote a book about monks calling it "Living Alone Together." A monk, even in community, needs to love solitude and silence. He/she needs to spend time alone in prayer, in contemplation, in reading and study, in writing. This is where the search for God becomes intense and demanding. To love God when that God seems to be absent or in darkness demands real love. It means pouring out oneself, one's ego, and making room for God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived in Nazi Germany, developed a community for Christians. He said that no one who cannot live alone should be in a community; and no one who cannot live with others should live alone. I think that is so true! People at times leave a monastery when they cannot live with others or cannot live alone.

I have also found that there are certain dangers for monks. The first is similar to clericalism, the attitude that one is better or higher than others. We can take delight in lay people coddling us, often saying "You deserve this. You have given up so much." That really is a scary attitude. One is put on a pedestal and then enjoys it! A second danger is to get too comfortable. The monastic lifestyle should be a simple one, avoiding creature comforts, avoiding being addicted to all the best technological tools. To truly seek God means God is more important than anyone or anything else. A third danger is busy-ness. One can avoid God and avoid oneself by always being on the go. Of course, monks have always been involved in serving others and practicing hospitality. Important as these are, you don't have to be a monk to practice these basic Christian cities. Love is expressed in these ways. Monks have run schools, hospices, retreat houses; there is no one work that monks do.

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These are the thoughts of an aging monk. I did not always know this was the way I have chosen, or rather the way God chose me. I am still learning and there is still much that I don't know or don't appreciate. Raimundo Panikkar, mystic monastic, claims that monasticism is an archetype which lies in every one's psyche; every believer has a monastic soul. Have you found that in your own life?

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.