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## THE ROLE OF MONASTICISM OF TODAY IN THE RE-EVANGELIZATION OF A SECULARIZED WORLD

(Kolympari, Crete, Greece, May 14th 1989)

### Introduction

Tomorrow, according to both the Eastern and the Western calendars, we will celebrate the Feast of Saint Pachomius, one of the monastic fathers for whom I have a very special love. It seems to me extremely appropriate to close our encounter on that Feast of one of the great lights of monasticism. And that common celebration will remind us, in some way, that we have a common monastic tradition, rooted in the same early Christian asceticism that developed during the first Christian generations in each one of the countries touched by Apostolic evangelization.

Asceticism has suddenly become a very popular object of studies in the academic circles of the West these past few years. Listening to many of the presentations given at scholarly meetings one has almost the impression that asceticism (or monasticism) suddenly appeared as a mushroom on the shore of the Nile, on a wet morning of the fourth century, more or less on the weekend that followed the Constantinian

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peace! It is presented as a completely new phenomenon responding to the contemporary political, sociological and economic situation.

In reality, as we know, monastic life developed during the first centuries of the Church in every local Church, and out of the vitality of each local Church. It took different forms in Syria, Constantinople, Caesarea, Egypt, Greece and Rome, according to special circumstances of time and place. Obviously, like all other human phenomena, it was conditioned in its development by all kinds of human factors; but the fact is that monasticism did not originate with these factors.

Monasticism has played an extremely important role in every Church, from the very beginning of Christianity. Two days ago we heard about the role it played in the evangelization of Europe. Today we are asking ourselves what role it has to play in the re-evangelization of a secularized world. But when we are asking ourselves that question, we are aware that monasticism, today as in the first centuries, is a response to a call from God and not a response to a cultural or even ecclesial situation. Nevertheless, we are also aware that, according to the economy of Incarnation, such a response to God's call expresses itself in a concrete historical environment.

Beginning with the first Christian generation, we see virgins and ascetics present in the life of the local Churches. Acts 21, 8-9, for example, tells us about the four daughters of "Philip the Evangelist", virgins with the gift of prophecy who lived in their father's house. The story of how Christianity spread with astonishing rapidity is well

known. Profiting from the Pax romana and the means of communication furnished by the Empire, it was soon established in every part of the Roman world and even overflowed its borders into eastern Syria, the kingdom of Edessa or Osrhoene, and Persia. And in all these places we come upon *parthenoi* of both sexes, who lived in the midst of the ecclesial community and devoted themselves not only to celibacy but also to a rigorous asceticism. They manifested an equal zeal for liturgical worship and for visiting the poor, the sick, and the orphans. In the numerous writings of the second and third century which mention them, it becomes clear that these "virgins" came from every social class and occupation. Their resolve to live in continence was recognized by the Church, and even before there was any question of an explicit promise this resolve was ordinarily treated as irrevocable.

During these first centuries the Judaeo-Christian Churches were characterized by something of an ascetical and rigoristic tendency. This is manifest in a number of documents, such as the *Liber Graduum* and the apocryphal Gospels. We get the impression that these ecclesial communities in their entirety were living what we today would designate as a "monastic" life. In any event, it was in the midst of these communities and from this Judaeo-Christian soil that there sprang up the first groups of virgins and ascetics; these were the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, about whom we are informed a little later by St. Ephrem at Nisibis and Edessa, and by St. Aphraat in Persia. Along this same line and by a process of homogeneous development in these groups of ascetics, there appears at the end of the third century that vast movement, so multiform, so diverse and so

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confusing in the variety of its manifestations, which has been designated by a name that has always been ambiguous: monasticism.

The rise of monasticism had been prepared by the rapid growth of the Church during the third century. While the Roman Empire, having developed into a form of military dictatorship, was losing its vitality and showing signs of considerable decadence in the realms of art, morality, and literature as well as in the arena of politics, the Church was in a state of unceasing growth in spite of the trial of the persecutions. She had soon spread and become established in the most scattered countries of the Empire: Egypt, Spain, Italy, Gaul, and the regions of the Danube. By the time the Edict of Milan confirmed her victory, monasticism was already present and alive nearly everywhere.

Pachomius was baptized in the year of the Constantinian peace; he began to receive his first disciples in the year in which Athanasius became the archbishop of Alexandria. Anthony had already gathered disciples at that time. Athanasius understood what force the monks could represent for the Church, and, in writing the *Life of Anthony*, he assumed a pastoral role toward them while making himself their advocate in relationship to the rest of the Church. So did Basil in Caesarea and also John Chrisostomus in Constantinople. So will do, Pope Gregory in the West.

In the West, where Eastern influences are soon apparent, the monastic phenomenon manifest the same spontaneity and vitality. From the second quarter of the fourth century the monastic life was propagated in Gaul among all the social classes, but especially in the rural areas. After

a slight let up in the fifth century, during the invasions of the Vandals, Huns, and Visigoths, it flourished anew in the sixth century. The Merovingian saints often showed considerable versatility in their careers; they were by turns hermits, cenobites, preachers, bishops... Among the important centers which developed we should call attention to Marmoutiers, Lérins and Marseilles. Marmoutiers was surely one of the most original of these foundations, for there all the forms of monasticism were housed under a single roof, from the monk-cleric engaged in pastoral work with his bishop to the lay monk occupied in copying manuscripts.

All that rich past tradition has to be kept in mind when we ask ourselves the question that constitutes the title of this talk: "What is the role of monasticism in the re-evangelization of a de-christianized world. Before beginning to answer that question it seems to me important to define the terms we are using; and, first of all, what we understand by monasticism.

### *Monasticism*

Monasticism has been a multifaceted reality from its very beginning. Its evolution, though, has been different in the East and in the West. The East has not multiplied the monastic institutions, that is, has not developed a variety of monastic Orders, and therefore, in the Eastern Churches the word \*monk+ continue to designate still nowadays every form of ascetic life, whether it is lived in the solitude of the desert or involved in some pastoral activities. In the West, there has been a gradual diversification of the charisms. Not only did various

monastic Orders developed through the centuries, but a clearer distinction than in the East has appeared between the monastic life and the life of the secular clergy. Regular Canons were also founded in the twelfth century, along with the Mendicant Orders, as well as various other active communities after the XVIth century.

In fact, even in the West, when our brothers of the protestant Churches speak of monastic life, they often refer to what the Catholics would call "religious life" in general. In this paper, due to our oecumenical context I will use the expression "monastic life" in its broader sense. Were this paper addressed to an exclusively Roman Catholic audience, I would probably give it the title "The role of *religious life* in the re-evangelization of a secularized world.

I think that this use of the terminology is all the more justified since I will not attempt to describe all the various forms of active involvement of the Religious men and women in the pastoral activity of the Church, but will restrict myself to the role that they have to play by their very *way of life*, that is, by their special consecration to God. And, at that level, there is a great unity between the vocation of the monk in the strict sense and that of what we call in the West the various other forms of religious life.

The monk as such does not have any particular ministry in the Church. He may be asked to play various functions in the Church and society, or not; but nothing of what he does -- or does not do -- characterizes him as a monk. He may live always within the enclosure of his monastery, without any pastoral activity; he may be teaching in a

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monastic school or be in charge of a parish; he may be a writer. Through all of that he may participate in the evangelizing activity of the whole Church. But nothing of that characterizes him as a monk.

Like any other Christian, the monk has set for himself the goal of living in a personal communion with God always deeper and as constant as possible. This, he knows, can be accomplished only by the Spirit of God, and therefore he has chosen a specific way of life that implies some radical detachments, which have no other goal than to prepare him to the contemplative prayer in the context of which the transforming action of the Spirit would be realized.

One aspect of the monk's *detachment* is the fact of not being identified by any type of activity. As it has been said often, the only relevancy of the monk is to be *\*irrelevant+*, which is not without some importance in the modern society so concerned about relevancy. To be "irrelevant", in that sense, does not mean however to be *\*meaningless+*. The monk belongs to the Church; he shares, therefore, in the common responsibility of all the Christians, to evangelize, to be witnesses to the faith in Christ. If he did not do that he would not be a Christian. No more than anybody else, the monk chooses his vocation *in order* to be a witness. But the fact is that he cannot, any more than anybody else, avoid being either a witness or a counter-witness. And if he wants to live an authentic Christian monastic life, he must be aware of the *meaning* of his life in the overall mission of the Church.

*Evangelization*

Now, before asking ourselves specifically, what is the role of the monk as such in the mission of the Church, we must clarify also what we understand by evangelization. The Council Vatican II has done it in *Gaudium et Spes*, that is, its Pastoral Constitution on *The Church in the Modern World*. And Paul VI has developed the theme still further in his beautiful Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

Breaking with the defensive and pessimistic tradition of the last centuries, the Council starts with the consideration of the dignity of the human person and of the needs, aspirations and difficulties of today's society; and it describes how the Church is called to be in the world and for the world, as the leaven in the dough. Paul VI stresses the fact that Christ is the first Evangelizer, and that the Church itself must be evangelized first, since it is by the witness of their life more than by any type of preaching that Christians are called to evangelize.

#### *A secularized world*

Now, what do we mean when we speak of the evangelization of a *secularized world*? The world secularization has been used in several different meanings, some negative, some positive, corresponding to the two meanings of *world* in the Gospel of John. In the negative sense, secularization expresses the gradual de-christianization of Western society, along with the expansion of atheism. In the positive sense, it expresses the clearer acknowledgement in our time of the basic value of the world as it came out of the hands and the love of the



Creator, and the profound dignity of the human person and of the City of Man. Both movements, in Europe first of all, but also, consequently, in the Western society in general, imply the disappearance of a type of social order that was know as *Christendom*. And since monks had an extremely important role to play in the development of that Christendom, it will be important for me to recall, at least schematically, how it came about, how it flourished and how it crumbled. All of this is not without importance for the monks of today, because they may be more liable than anybody else to give in to the temptation of continuing to live as if the structures and the spirit of Christendom wee still around.

To describe it in a perhaps simplistic manner, Christendom was a form of civilization where all the structures of society were subordinated to the basic truths of the Christian faith, and where all civil and political authority was subordinated to the religious and ecclesiastical one. That type of civilization lasted for centuries, and produced treasuries of literature, architecture and other forms of art, as well as social structures. Starting with the conversion of Constantine and finding its culmination in the Christian Roman Empire of the Middle Ages, it implied not only a fusion but often a confusion of State and Church. When entire barbarian peoples received baptism out of forced obedience to their kings, one may wonder how much Christendom generated an authentic Christianity. But, in any case, the whole understanding of society, of life, of all the human questions was religious and Christian.

Recent historians believe that the profound transformation, the

consequence of which we now call secularization, begin with a natural phenomenon of dramatic proportion: the Great Plague, also called the Black Death, which was one of the most traumatic moment in the known history of humankind. It is estimated that this plague, which began in Constantinople in 1334, within twenty years killed off between one third and two thirds of the population of Europe. Throughout the 14th and 15th centuries there was a decline in the whole of Europe. In London the last of the great plagues was in 1665. There were two basic responses to this terrifying experience of the Plague. From these two responses were formed the two communities of the present, which Thomas Berry call the believing religious community and the secular scientific community.

The believing community had recourse to supernatural forces, to the spirit-world, to the renewal of esoteric traditions, sometimes to pre-Christian beliefs and rituals that had been neglected in their deeper dynamics since the coming of Christianity. In that situation of incessant disaster, a Redemption mystique became the dominant form of Christian experience and the creation doctrines were neglected. This response, with its emphasis on Redemptive Spirituality, continued through the religious upheavals of the 16th century, on through the Puritanism and Jansenism of the 17th century. This attitude was further strengthened by the shock of the Enlightenment and Revolution periods of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The other response to the Black Death was the reaction that led eventually to the scientific secular community of our times. This reaction sought to remedy earthly terror not by supernatural or religious

powers but by an understanding of the earth process. It led not only to all the discovery of modern medicine, but also to all the present scientific development that built on the discoveries of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

The sad thing is that the dialogue between the two communities was almost non-existent. The religious community often closed its eyes on the discoveries of the scientific one, while it did not fought it; and the scientific community became more and more atheistic. The relationship between the world and the Church has deteriorated and we have now, all over the Western world, but especially in Europe a situation where the great majority still consider themselves believers, and even Christians, but do not consider that their Christian faith is supposed to affect their social, matrimonial or economic life. In a recent statistical study, 10% of those who declared to be Christians also declared themselves atheist!

The world became suspicious of the Church, and vice versa. The Second Vatican Council made a real effort to stop sulking at the world, and the conciliar period was full of talk of "the open Church", the "Church present to the world", and so on. We are now far from a Church opposed to the world. But with the best of intentions, the Vatican II position is still a face-to-face one -- gazing into each other's eyes, maybe, but still dualist. In the lands that knew "Christendom", the current problem is how to work a cleavage that will finally allow the Church to be "in the world" without being "of the world" --avoiding the Constantinian confusion of "the world with Church" and without setting the two on parallel courses. In other words, the question is

how to be the salt of the earth and the leaven in the dough.

There is no doubt that our modern society needs to be evangelized again; whether we speak of evangelization or re-evangelization, or "second evangelization". But one thing is certain, such an evangelization cannot be an attempt at reconstructing the Christendom of the past. It cannot be either the simple dissemination of a Christian ideology. It has to be first of all a witness. According to a phrase used in several occasions by Paul VI, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

#### *The monk in the present situation*

Now, all of that was a pretty long detour. But if we accept, with Vatican II that the Church is by essence missionary, that is, that the Church exists for the world, as a living witness of Christ's message to a society within which it is in a situation of diaspora, it becomes obvious that the only manner in which we can describe the role of monastic life in the society of today, is by describing the needs and expectations of that society. What monastic life is in its essence never changes, no more than what Christian life is in its essence. What changes is the specific form in which monastic life is meaningful not only to Christians but to every man and woman of a given society at a particular time.

If monastic life is to be significant for the Church's identity and mission today it must be so because of what it is and not just because

of what some monks, in fact, do (however valuable that may be) because monastic life is not merely a collection of individuals who engage in a variety of good works but a distinctive state of life in the Church.

By state of life I mean a permanent, stable, and public form of consecrated life in the Church which raises to visibility in a special way some aspect or dimension of the Christian mystery which all the baptized are called to live but to which all do not witness in the same way. To what aspect or dimension of the Christian mystery does the monastic state of life witness in a special way and what is the significance of that witness in our time?

As I have mentioned before, our society has become deeply atheist, whether we think of the theoretical atheism of most of the socialist countries or the practical one of the capitalist countries. Even those who believe in God often serve other gods, beginning with Mammon, the god of money and efficiency. In that context, two aspects of monastic life are particularly important: the *immediacy* in the relationship with God, and the *marginality* in relationship with the world.

### *Immediacy as a Mode of Christian Experience*

The characteristically human way of seeking God and working for the transformation of the world in Christ is through material mediation. Incarnate spirits, born in the flesh and immersed in history, we work out our salvation in and through the material universe in which we live and move and have our being. This is our natural element. Nevertheless, natural and good as this approach is, some people are

called to bypass, as much as possible, the earthly mediations of the divine and to seek God with an immediacy that would be foolhardy unless it were a response to God's own invitation.

Of course nobody can do completely without human mediation in his relationship with God. But the monk who is true to his vocation starts with God, not primarily as the ultimate horizon in terms of whom everything is done, but as the first point of reference in which being and action originate. One comes to every historical experience out of one's immediate involvement with God rather than seeking God primarily through one's historical relationships and activities. And this happens first of all in contemplative prayer.

The fundamental precept of the New Testament about prayer is that one must pray without ceasing. And one of the most constant preoccupations of the monks throughout generations has been to develop ways of maintaining as constant as possible a contemplative awareness of God's love and God's presence. An unceasing prayer that is always rooted in an unceasing *lectio* and meditation of the Word of God. Monks have also discovered, through centuries of experience and practice, that continuous prayer is not possible without continuous conversion. They have developed ascetical practices that predispose the heart to the action of the Spirit of God who, in the end, is the only One who can teach prayer.

In our time when there is a deep thirst for prayer in the people of God and at the same time an exaggerated confidence in methods and techniques, the monks seem to have the mission of witnessing, on the

one hand, to the possibility and the absolute importance of a contemplative, loving relationship with God, and, on the other hand on the very relative character of human means and tools. They have to show, through their own lives, that what is really important is not so much to learn how to pray as to learn how to live in such a way that the whole life can gradually become an ongoing prayer, under the action of the Spirit of God.

Immediacy with God goes hand in hand with immediacy with oneself and with the struggle that goes on in each one of our hearts between the Kingdom of Light and the forces of evil. Another dimension of the monastic quest for God is the desert, which has not been understood by the great monastic tradition primarily as a place of sweet encounter with God but as a place where one goes with Christ to fight the powers of darkness in their own terrain. This also can be an antidote to a modern preoccupation with the cult of the self and its aggrandizement. The desert is an attitude of human powerlessness in the presence of salvation. It is a disposition to receive this salvation gratuitously in the painful experience of one's own limitations and with the obscure conviction that God seeks us out and that Christianity, rather than man's love of God, is the love of Jesus seeking out man first.

The essence of true Christian prayer has always consisted in going out of oneself to encounter the Other who is God. Far from being a kind of egoistic approach, an escape from realities and responsibilities, true prayer is the supreme act of abnegation and forgetfulness of self in order to encounter Christ and his demands in others. The monk tries to witness through his life that the preoccupation for the needs of his

brothers and sisters is something that most naturally grow from a life of intimacy with God rather than being simply accompanied by occasional prayer.

There is another form of immediacy in his love relationship with God to which the monk gives witness in his own flesh. It is the life of celibacy. Celibacy, chosen as a public and permanent state of life, establishes the monk in an existential solitude which no bonds, however deep, on friendship, community, or solidarity with the world can mitigate. Aloneness is, in a certain sense, the inner structure of the life of the consecrated celibate as faithful and fruitful mutuality is the inner structure of matrimony. This aloneness, if cherished, attended to, and dwelt in as the heart of one's vocation, finds its positive meaning in the contemplative prayer just mentioned, which it fosters and nourishes. The solitude which Religious choose through their public and lifelong commitment to celibacy raises to visibility in the Church the fundamental aloneness of every human being before God.

### *Marginality*

The attempt to live such an immediacy to God on a day to day basis places the monk on the margins of the social order. It is a marginality that derives from the choices the monk makes, both as means to and an expression of his immediacy to God. The monk chooses not to forge a common destiny with any other individual human being through marriage and not to integrate himself into the world's historical process by procreating and raising the next generation of



human beings. He chooses not to participate personally in the profit economy either by working for personal gain or by making independent use of what he earns. He seeks to guard an inner freedom that is incompatible with ordinary involvements in the political order. He chooses a form of community life that transcends personal taste or advantage and intends to witness to the transcendent inclusiveness of Christ's universal reign. These foundational choices are the coordinates of a lifestyle which places him on the margins of the secular order. According to a well known expression of Evagrius Ponticus, while being united to everyone he is separated from everyone.

As the monk realizes, the more complex life in contemporary society becomes the more difficult it is for one to live it freely and simply as a disciple of Christ, and the more important it becomes for some people to attempt it and to create a lifestyle in the Church which witnesses publicly to the desirability and possibility of living that way. By describing this attempt in terms of intimacy and marginality, rather than in terms of flight from the world or a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, I am attempting to avoid fruitless arguments over words while continuing to affirm that monastic life involves an inner stance and a public lifestyle which witnesses to the primacy and all-sufficiency of God and grounds a vocation to prophecy.

### *Prophecy*

Nobody who attempts to be a prophet is an authentic one! But prophecy is an essential dimension of Christian life. And therefore the monk

will be a prophet in the very degree in which he will be faithful to his call, which is always a call addressed by God to him personally, but never *for* him alone.

Prophecy is not primarily about foretelling the future. It is about telling what time it is, what it is time for, in the present. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel put it, the prophet's "essential task is to declare the word of God to the here and now." Jesus is the prophet par excellence, the one who announced that the time is now and what it is time for in the Reign of God. Prophecy requires three things: a clarity of vision and acuity of hearing that is a participation in God's view of history; the ability to effectively announce that vision both to the powers which oppose God's Reign and to the people who are oppressed by those powers; and the willingness to pay, even with one's life, for the ultimate triumph of God's covenantal order, the Reign of God.

In his contemplative prayer the monk tries constantly to listen to what the Spirit of God is telling the Church of today. He listens also to the events of the world from God's point of view. As Heschel says, "the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos." The immediacy to God and the marginality to the social order that the monk attempts to live is directly ordered to sharing God's perception of humanity in history, to the cultivation of sympathy with the divine pathos.

Contemplative prayer is the place, the locus, of the coincidence of the contemplative's view with the divine view. It is the entrance of

the human person into the sphere of God. In Contemplative prayer we pass through the center of our own being into the very being of God where we see ourselves and our world with a clarity, a simplicity, a truthfulness that is not available in any other way. Ant it is this view of reality which the contemplative must bring to bear upon the social order. For the monk, solitude has as its primary purpose the fostering of such contemplation within which he participates in the divine perspective.

Marginality, if it is lived authentically in all its agonizing ambiguity and without any attempt at self-justification or any claims to superiority, gives the monk a hermeneutical vantage point which is somewhat analogous to that of the poor and oppressed, those who are marginalized not by choice but by violence. To be outside the system, especially when one does not have an alternate source for the goods and services the system should make available, allows one to discern the contradictions and the violence of the system that those who participate fully in it are less equipped to see.

Religious are marginal by choice, but that marginality is in the service of prophecy not of escapism. From the edges of the system there is a view of what the system does to those who are excluded. If contemplation fosters immediacy to God, marginality fosters immediacy to the oppressed. The monk wants to be where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God. To feel the pathos of God is not a warm and comfortable religious experience; it is an experience of the howling wilderness.

In that experience the monk will discover that two forms of encounter with God are equally important and complementary: the contemplative, prayerful encounter in the silence of the cell (Mt. 5), and the encounter of Christ in the suffering and needy brother (Mt. 25). In a Church where two temptations are as prevalent one as the other, that is, the temptation to seek a sweet presence of God without sharing his pathos and his preoccupation for the poor, and the temptation of losing oneself in a type of social activism deprived of any contemplative dimension, an aspect of the mission of the monk is to witness to the equal importance of the two.

In many occasions the monks will feel called to be involved either in works of mercy or even in social actions, as individuals or as communities. In some cases it will be only a temptation; in other cases it may be an authentic call from God. But Whatever the involvement is, the essential vocation of the monk will remain be a consistent locus of that prophetic insight born of immediacy to God and social marginality.

### *Pilgrimage*

Such a constant seeking of God and such a social marginality makes of the monk a pilgrim. The "journey" is one of the great spiritual archetypes found in every major religion and culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that monks have very often adopted the lifestyle of pilgrims. Such were the *munis* of pre-aryan India, the *rishis* and the *sannyasin* of Hinduism, as early as the period of the

first Upanishads, the *bikkus* of Buddhism and the most ancient ascetics of Christianity whose life is described in the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Liber Graduum*. In the Western tradition of Christianity, the same spirituality of pilgrimage was at the heart of Celtic monasticism and inspired the missionary ventures of Augustine in England and Boniface in Germany.

This was not a universal practice however. In the Christian East, the early Egyptian monks, while receiving a large and constant flow of visitors, were reluctant to adopt a wandering lifestyle themselves, and, in the West, Benedict clearly expressed his lack of esteem for those whom he called "gyrovagues". But although both Egyptian and Western monks after Benedict were characterized by a search for geographic stability, monastic life continued to be viewed by them as a journey, although essentially an interior one.

While the gyrovague is rootless, and therefore cannot really grow, the authentic pilgrim is someone solidly rooted. Either he has a "home" from which he comes and to which he will return at the end of his pilgrimage; or -- if he has adopted the existence of a permanent pilgrim -- he has found enough inner rootedness to go beyond the supportive environment of a geographical and cultural rootedness.

The pilgrim is at home everywhere without trying to build a home anywhere. He has a sense of freedom that can easily become a threat to anyone who still finds his security in the fact of belonging to a specific place and group or to a solid system. He is not a good client for the merchants of foreign spiritual goods. The gyrovague, on the

contrary, builds temporary homes everywhere he goes, buys all the last products on the market and becomes the naive disciple of the last self-made master.

In a society more and more marked by a massive encounter of cultures and religions, and by a more and more frequent geographical instability, the capacity to be a "rooted pilgrim" in the spiritual search is something that the monk is called to develop and teach to the world.

In an article that had probably an autobiographical flavor Thomas Merton described monastic life as a therapy and the accomplished monk as someone who had reached final integration.

"The man who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. 'He has embraced all of life... He has experienced qualities of every type of life': ordinary human existence, intellectual life, artistic creation, human love, religious life. He passes beyond all these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, 'finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self.' He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture, but all mankind. He does not remain bond to one limited set of values in such a way that he opposes them aggressively or defensively to others. He is fully "catholic" in the best sense of the word. He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others, some more definite and more certain than others. He does not set these partial views up in

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opposition to each other, but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity. With this view of life he is able to bring perspective, liberty and spontaneity into the lives of others. The finally integrated man is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such men of insight."

Nobody can enter the paths of dialogue as an authentic pilgrim without having reached at least a certain degree of such integration. Merton was such a man. Deeply rooted in his own tradition, he was able to understand almost by osmosis the basic teachings of other traditions and to develop deep friendship with authentic representatives of these traditions. It is also extremely important to note that the period of his life when he more and more entered into that dialogue was the period when he became also more and more deeply concerned with the fate of the oppressed and of the victims of war.

What I have tried to described are a certain number of aspects of the monastic vocation that seem to me to have a very special significance for the Church of today in its mission of re-evangelizing the world. If this was meant as a description of what monks of today actually are, it would obviously be pretentious. It is rather the expression of a call and a challenge.

All of this does not set the monk aside as a superior human being. He is simply a Christian, having the same goal as any other Christian, but having been called by God to seek that goal according to some specific way. Monastic life is not the heroic quest of the spiritual athlete but a wrestling in the dark of ordinary human beings who, for

Document extrait du [site de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont](#), qui se trouve sur le territoire de Forges, à sept kilomètres au sud de la ville de Chimay, en Belgique. Notre-Dame de Scourmont est une abbaye de l'Ordre Cistercien de la Stricte Observance.

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some reason known only to God, have been attacked by a messenger who holds the secret of their name and will not release it without wounding them.

Abbot Armand Veilleux

Holy Spirit Monastery

2625 Hwy. 212 S.W.

Conyers, GA 30208-4044

U.S.A.