

Reshaping Monastic Life

Some years ago, I used to give lectures at Sant'Anselmo in Rome on monastic formation. At some point I tried to find out what early monks and the great monastic figures of the Middle Ages said or wrote about that subject and I discovered almost nothing written about monastic formation either in early monasticism or in the Middle Ages. Then I realized that the idea that we could form someone to live monastic life is a completely modern idea that would never have come to the mind of early monks. They did not think that one could be formed **to** monastic life. On the contrary they considered that one should be formed **by** monastic life. The goal of a monk, as of every human being, is to be gradually formed or trans-formed into the likeness of Christ. And monastic life is a means - or a set of means -- to arrive at that goal.

Likewise, when I started to prepare this talk, I first wrote the title at the top of my computer screen: "Reshaping Monastic Life" and I stood for several minutes in front of a blank page. Then, I said to myself: How in the world can we reshape monastic life, when it is the job of monastic life to reshape us? But I understand what is meant by this title, and I will try to offer you a few reflections on the subject.

Actually, after what I said yesterday, I should not have anything to add, because if I was more or less right in what I said, it should be enough to make every effort to live a life of communion at all the levels I mentioned, and the rest would follow. But in practice, it is probably not as simple as that.

I would like to take up where I left yesterday, when I spoke about inculturation.

When we think of "reshaping monastic life", we think of what was called "*aggiornamento*" at the time of Vatican II, and what is also called "inculturation" or "re-evangelization". Pope John Paul II used to speak a good deal about inculturation in the first years of his pontificate; and then, towards the end he spoke more about re-evangelization. In fact the two words mean more or less the same thing. If we need to re-evangelize our modern society it is not because the first evangelization did not stick or because our culture has become de-christianized (which is partly true, of course) but simply because any culture is always in a process of evolution or

transformation - a process that is more rapid at certain times - and the culture that was evangelized does not exist any more. The culture constantly needs to be confronted with the Gospel message, over and over again in each one of its new forms. This is what re-evangelization means and this is what inculturation is all about.

Inculturation is a process in which a culture or a cultural element comes into contact with the Gospel. In that process both poles are affected: the culture in question - or the cultural element in question - acquires a new meaning and a new dimension; and the Gospel acquires a new mode of expression. There is some enrichment on both sides. Personally I am convinced that Christian monasticism is the first and better-realized form of inculturation. It was not suddenly invented or born in the third century (as we often read in our textbooks of history); it goes back to Christ himself. There was, at the time of Christ a large ascetical movement throughout the Middle East, both within and outside Judaism. John the Baptist was part of that movement; whatever may have been his links with Qumran. When Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan in order to be baptized by John, he assumed that ascetical movement and gave it a new meaning. Then, when some Christians of the first generation wanted to assume in their lives, as a permanent way of living, some of the most radical calls of Jesus in the Gospel, they had in that religious and cultural tradition of their time a way of expressing those radical calls of Jesus, in an external way of life. There was therefore an encounter between the Gospel message and that tradition. During a few centuries, that ascetical and mystical movement developed following several different lines both within and outside Christianity, with mutual influence. A process of purification and clarification gradually happened within Christianity and when, at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century, you have a clearly recognized and accepted form of ascetical life within Christianity, called "monastic life", you are at the end of a very successful process of inculturation.

It is not surprising therefore that, all through the history of Christian monasticism, there has been a constant interaction between monastic life and culture. Anytime there was a new form of monastic life that appeared, or a significant reform that was made, it always happened at a critical moment of history, when one person, or rather usually a small group of persons, were particularly sensitive to the culture of their time with its needs and aspirations, and found in their own life an answer to those aspirations - an answer that proved valid not only for them, but for everybody else, or at least for a large number, and many persons joined them.

Of course, I am here to speak about the present and perhaps the

future, and not to give a lecture on the history of monastic life. But we cannot build a future without learning something from the past. Before choosing where we want to go, we must remember where we came from and how we got where we are.

Let me mention just a few of the great moments of the past history of monasticism, in connection with what was happening in the society at that time. The huge numerical development of Egyptian monasticism both in Lower Egypt with Anthony and in Upper Egypt with Pachomian coenobitism, at the end of the third and at the beginning of the fourth century was made possible by very important socio-cultural changes realized by the reforms of Septimus Severus and Diocletian, and was a Christian response to those reforms. The monastic renewal that began in Italy with the Rule of the Master and the Rule of Benedict, in the 6th century was part of the Gelasian reform made possible by the intelligent leadership of a barbarian king, Theodoricus. We all know how the Cluniac Reform of the 10th century and the Cistercian Reform of the 12th century were part of a profound transformation of the relationship between the Church and Society at that time. Closer to us, the monastic restoration in France and Germany at the end of the 19th century was very much dependent on a political and social context.

Now, it seems obvious that we find ourselves again, at the beginning of the third millennium, at a very critical moment in history - a time of transformation that affects mostly the Western world, but affects also all the other parts of the planet, all the cultures and all the religions because of the effects - both positive and negative - of globalisation. If we limit ourselves to our Western world, we can certainly say that there is a crisis of monasticism (and I don't give a necessarily negative meaning to the word "crisis"); but that crisis of monasticism is only one aspect of the crisis of the Church; and the crisis of the Church is one aspect of the crisis of our society. All this means that it would be vain and useless to try to find a solution to our own crisis without taking into account the larger picture. There is a need for a collective, global listening to the signs of the times, the need for a collective analysis of the situation and for a collective searching for answers, although many different answers are possible and legitimate. Reshaping monasticism can only be one aspect of reshaping the Church; and reshaping the Church can only be one aspect of reshaping Society.

I would like to suggest that one of the main goals of monasticism at the beginning of the third millennium was to recover its capacity of unifying all the aspects of Christian and human life in one harmonious movement, thus reacting to a movement of differentiation and diversification that has often made of our lives a scattered series of

occupations and preoccupations.

The original meaning of the word *monachos* and of the Syriac equivalent *ihidaya* is not so much the person who is alone as the person who has only one goal, one love, one preoccupation in his/her life. Maybe the challenge of any “reshaping” of our monastic life, or of any reform or renewal is to return to that simplicity.

In the life of a monk there are always many things to do. In a community someone has to do the kitchen and we need a porter and a guest master. Someone has to do the bookkeeping and another one has to prepare the music for the liturgy. If you have a school, some monks will be involved perhaps with teaching or with the management of the school or simply with the chaplaincy; if we have an industry with which we earn our living, someone will have to manage that business, etc. And someone has to be the abbot... and therefore attend meetings like this one! The fact of having some of those jobs to do, or even several of them at the same time, does not prevent someone from being an authentic monk. But what is required of every individual monk, whatever may be the number of the things he has to do, is to have a unified and well-integrated life.

Once I heard a monk who was running an important business for his community explain to a journalist that his life was divided into three parts: he had eight hours for rest and personal care, eight hours of *monastic life*, and eight hours of business life. Of course I cannot judge the quality of the monastic life of that monk - and I know that he was also a good scholar and a good retreat director -- but I found his explanation absolutely wrong. You cannot be a monk only eight hours a day. You are a monk twenty-four hours a day or you are not a monk. I have no objection with a monk doing pastoral work, but he must do it as a monk. I have no objection with a monk doing some business work for the maintenance of his community or the sustenance of the poor; but he must do it as a monk. If a monk is a student, doing some specialized training, he must do it as a monk, etc.

Perhaps one of the aspects in which our monastic life has become more influenced by the manners of the world is that quite often our life has become compartmentalized.

The only thing that can maintain the unity of our life through all the activities of our days is constant, unceasing prayer -- unceasing contemplative prayer. Contemplative union with God is the goal of our life. Now “contemplation”, in its biblical and patristic meaning, is not something that happens once in a while, in the form of peak experiences. It is an attitude of the heart, a way of being. You are a contemplative twenty-four hours a day or you are not a

contemplative. If I am not a contemplative at work and when I meet people, or when I attend a meeting, I will not be more of a contemplative when I sing the office in choir or when I sit in the lotus position in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

For that reason, I have some problem with the way people speak at times of the monastic “observances” as being characteristics of monastic life. The danger is gradually to begin to think that if you do all those observances that are considered “essential”, you are a monk. As a matter of fact, you can do all those observances and have a pretty scattered life, which is just the opposite of the unity, or unification, or simplicity that should be the characteristic of the life of a monk.

This modern tendency to slice our daily life into a long series of unrelated occupations is so pervasive that, with the best of intentions we have come to consider as “observances” to be practiced at some specific moments of the day, some of the most fundamental attitudes of monastic life. *Lectio divina* is a good example.

Early monks knew the practice of reciting some prayers at various times of the day, either alone if they were hermits or as a community if they were coenobites. The main scope and meaning of that practice was to foster and nourish something much more important, that is the unceasing prayer, which is a constant communion with God. Since God has spoken to us, they felt that constant prayer was first of all a constant listening to God. They listened to what God was constantly telling them in the silence of their heart and through the many texts of the Scripture they had learned by heart and were constantly ruminating, through the texts they heard during the liturgical celebrations, through the words of a spiritual father and the writing of the elders, and also through all the events of their daily life. *Lectio divina* was not a practice. It was an attitude of the heart.

That attitude was largely lost in the late Middle Ages and still more in the post-Reform period in the Catholic Church. Then, in the last fifty years or so, in the wake of the biblical movement, we have rediscovered the importance of Scripture in our monastic life and of *lectio divina*. Unfortunately, we have begun to consider *lectio divina* as a “practice”, or an “observance”, rather than as a fundamental attitude of the heart. The faithful monk makes a half-hour or an hour and even more of *lectio* each day, and moves on to his spiritual reading, his studies and his other activities. He adopts a gratuitous attitude of listening to God during this half-hour, and often gives himself up to other activities during the rest of the day with the same frenzy, the same spirit of competition, the same distraction, as

if he had not chosen a life of continual prayer and constant seeking of the presence of God.

Not only is all this totally foreign to the spirit of the monks of the desert, but this attitude contradicts of the very nature of *lectio divina*. What is the essence of *lectio* is the interior attitude. Now, this attitude is not something that can be put on for half an hour or one hour of the day. One has it all the time or not at all. It impregnates our whole day, or the exercise of it is a pointless game.

To allow oneself to be questioned by God, to allow oneself to be challenged, formed, throughout all the elements of the day, throughout work as throughout fraternal encounters, throughout the harsh asceticism of a serious intellectual work as throughout the celebration of the liturgy and the normal tensions of community life - all this is terribly demanding. To relegate this attitude of total openness to one privileged exercise that is supposed to impregnate by itself the rest of our day is perhaps an easy way of running away from this demand.

For the Fathers of the Desert, reading, meditating, praying, analysing, interpreting, examining, translating Scripture - all that formed one inseparable whole. It would have been unthinkable for Saint Jerome for example to consider that his elaborate analysis of the Hebrew text of Scripture to discover all its nuances was an activity not meriting the name of *lectio divina*.

This shift in the understanding of Scripture and of *lectio*, is not unrelated to another transformation that happened in monastic life around the 11th and the 12th century and that had negative effects on monasticism up till then. I am speaking of what Dom Jean Leclercq called "monastic theology". That transformation has had, to my mind, very negative effects both on monasticism and on theology in general. In fact, what has been called "monastic theology" had nothing specifically monastic about it up to the twelfth century. It was the way theology developed among the people of God, with, certainly, as much pluralism in the monasteries as outside them. This discerning and contemplative way of expressing theology, up to then, knew how to take up and transform (inculturate, we would say nowadays), the contributions of diverse methods and diverse currents of thought. When the scholastic method appeared, monks rejected it. One could legitimately wonder how the theology of the following centuries would have evolved if the monks had not rejected that new method that was coming to birth and had known how to assimilate it as they had assimilated so many others before. In any case, for better or for worse, a way of doing theology called "monastic" was upheld in the monasteries, while scholastic theology developed in schools outside the monasteries.

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.

Now, what is to be done in the present situation? -- In any culture there are elements of death and seeds of new life. Part of the culture is dying out and a new one is coming to birth. Some people like to look at the elements of death and to present our monastic vows as a remedy against that culture of death. I think it is much more in conformity with the great monastic tradition to look at our culture as contemplatives, with the eyes of God, and to discern all the germs of new life and to help them grow by integrating them into our spiritual search. This is quite different from conforming to today's trends and today's ways of life.

Such an attitude is required in relation to the Church as much as in relation to society in general. If you allow me, I will add here a personal note. I belong (like a number among you) to the generation of people who were waiting for Vatican II with much hope, who followed its unfolding with great intensity and who put all their energy in putting it into practice. I was a young monk when John XXIII announced the Council. I was in Rome, on St. Peter's Square on the morning of the opening of the Council, and I spent all the years of the Council (and the after-Council) in Rome. After the Council I was very soon involved in the Central administration of my Order, and I used all my energy to work at the renewal asked for by the Council. I must say that for the last few years I have seen, with some sadness, many of the dreams generated by the Council die out or be pushed aside by some high-up powers and various influential so-called "ecclesial movements". Nevertheless my faith in a new Church renovated in the line of Vatican II remains intact.

This is not the time or the place to analyse what our communities, congregations and Orders have lived through in the Church since the Council. It would be wrong to attribute to the Council and to the reforms provoked by it the great diminution of the number of vocations in many parts of the Church and the closing of so many communities and so many church-related institutions. What the Council asked for was a spiritual renewal; and I think that, as a whole, we put all our efforts into that spiritual renewal. But such a spiritual renewal required some structural transformations, which, for most of them, arrived too late. The *krisis* (in the etymological and positive meaning of the word) that such transformations provoked had a great purification as a consequence.

We have gone through the same experience as Job in the Bible... We realized that even without many of the things that gave us our social identity and of which we were proud, we exist. Most of our communities are no longer strong, powerful and influential as in the past centuries; but in their precariousness and their weakness, they continue to be witnesses to the *sequela Christi*. This is our vocation:

To prefer nothing to the love of Christ, to follow Christ in a society that is itself in profound transformation and always seeking its own identity. Our communities can give that evangelical witness, whether they are small or big. Our identity does not reside in the services that we have fulfilled or are still fulfilling in the Church, but in what we are, spiritually.

One of the poverties that we experience is that we do not even have a renewed theology of religious life. In the whole contemporary theological reflection, there has not been any profound renewal of the theology of religious life. But, has there been, really, a real renewal of the theology of marriage, of priesthood, of the ministry of the bishop? Has there been, in Europe, since the Council a real renewal of theology? We are still waiting for a liberation of theology (please, pay attention to the order of my words).

Consequently, it is difficult to find a name to describe our form of Christian life that does not create a problem. What has been called up to now "religious life" - including monastic life - is only a particular manner to live the Christian life. How to describe it using a theological common denominator? *Perfectae Caritatis* placed the accent on the essential element, the *sequela Christi*. That's beautiful... but every Christian is called to follow Christ. We spoke of "Institutes of perfection"; but everyone is called to perfection. We spoke of "religious life", but everyone is called to be "religious". Nowadays, we prefer to speak about the "consecrated life". But that expression is no more satisfactory than the others. Every Christian is consecrated to God by his/her baptism. Every human being is consecrated to God by the fact that he/she is created in the image of God, and called to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. The post-synodal Instruction on religious life has kept the title *Vita consecrata*. In a first draft of the text, the three main writers had intended to structure the whole theology of religious life around the theme of *beauty*. The first proposed title was "*Divinae pulchritudinis amatores*". Fortunately a number of readers remarked that such a theological vision (reminding us of Urs von Balthazar's theology), did not have any foundation in the documents of Vatican II or even in the interventions made during the Synod. That theological "vision" was not retained, but beauty is still mentioned more than twenty times in the text. There are, therefore, many "beautiful" things in that Instruction, but it did not bring any progress in the theology of religious life. But was it necessary?

Maybe in this regard, we should be attentive to a number of lines of evolution of today's culture. I mentioned yesterday the shift that has happened in the place of the "religious" dimension in human life. And I would like to stress again that such an evolution is a fruit of the

Christian message. Jesus put an end to the sacrificial economy of the Old Testament and of all the ancient religions; likewise he replaced the religious rituals by his own life and his own death, inviting us to glorify his Father not through rituals but through the quality of our love. He taught us to recognize and to give a symbolic value to all the elements of our life and not to find a magic symbolic value in esoteric gestures.

Another important shift has been happening. Our forms of monastic and religious life developed in a period of history when, in Roman culture as in that of all the new nations, there was an enormous importance given to the ranks and classes of society. Ranks and classes had the same importance in the Church. Clear distinctions and separations existed between clergy and people, between monks, canons, mendicants and other religious. Those distinctions are gradually losing much of their importance.

That levelling has, perhaps, an evangelical origin and value. The only "new" theology developed by Vatican II is that of the "People of God". If we all form the People of God, living in various ways different charismas, all the distinctions of the past may have lost much of their importance.

The century-old practice according to which communities are composed entirely of women or men, are entirely active or contemplative, etc. will probably not be the only form of consecrated life in the Church of tomorrow. The fact is that the largest number of new religious groups in the Church are not "religious" communities in the traditional meaning, but "spiritual families" composed of celibates and married people, of lay people and priests, some of them living a rather contemplative life and others being very active in Society and in the Church, all united around a same spirit and a same spirituality. When they ask for recognition from Rome, usually the Congregation for the Institutes of Perfection and the Secular Institutes, recognizes the part of the group that make religious vows and considers the rest as Associates, which, usually, goes against the original spirit of the group. Of course the *Opus Dei* has found another solution by making itself approved as a "personal prelature"...

More and more groups of lay people form lay communities attached to monasteries. They do not simply want a pious, religious affiliation with the monastic community, but they sincerely seek how to incarnate in their family life and in their professional life the same values that the monks live in the monastery. They give a new expression to the monastic charism.

Maybe it is in that context that we should look at the "New

communities” we have been talking about yesterday. When we study the history of monastic life (or of religious life in general) we see that at each important moment of cultural and social transformation, numerous new groups appear. Most of them disappear after a generation or two; but a few of them gather all the spirit of the movement and become very flourishing new forms of monastic life. Generally, the more traditional forms, that have the characteristic of surviving all the crisis, find themselves renewed and revitalized by those new movements.

I think, therefore, that we should have a positive attitude towards all those new offshoots, welcoming the new vitality that they bring, but exercising toward them - if they accept it - a role of witnesses to a long tradition. We should not conclude that they are THE new form and that they will replace the present communities; but we should be ready to let ourselves be challenged and even renovated by that new spiritual dynamism

Another challenge of the Church in the next years or decades will be the revitalization of the local churches, after a very long period of increasing centralisation. This will also be a challenge for the monastic institutes.

We know that monastic life was not born in one local Church and then spread to the rest of the world. It rather appeared more or less at the same time in all the local Churches of the East as much as of the West, and - most important of all - it was born out of the vitality of the local Churches (and not in reaction to a lukewarm Church, as it is often erroneously said).

In the Middle Ages, especially at the time of Cluny, and in order to free themselves from the domination of the feudal lords, monks invented what was called “exemption”, depending directly from the bishop of Rome. But usually traditional monasteries were very much linked all the same with the local Church, both diocesan and national.

It might sound contradictory, but I think that the fact that we belong to a tradition that has come through several centuries of communion with the universal Church, and the fact that most of our Congregations and Orders are spread all over the world, while being always implanted in a local Church, may give us a particular capacity to help each diocesan community in which we live to become more and more alive, with its own specific identity and its own specific religious “culture”.

It is a secret for nobody that the beloved pope John Paul II placed

most of his confidence and hopes in the ecclesial “movements, like *Opus Dei*, the Legionaries of Christ, the Neo-Catechumenate, etc. which often have an action and interventions parallel to or even above the authority of the local bishop. We also know how someone like Cardinal Martini, for purely and profoundly ecclesiological reasons, had problems with such an evolution and never made a secret of it. We have to wait and see how Benedict XVI will deal with that issue.

In any case, whatever may be the attitude of the Pope and of the Roman Curia, in this regard, as people totally dedicated to a life of communion, we have the mission to do everything we can to foster communion with our local Church, and then between the local Churches.

The present geo-political evolution of the world has created an encounter on a massive scale of cultures and religions in all the parts of the world, but especially in our Western world. At the same time there are forces (we are tempted to speak of diabolical forces) that try to develop tensions, even wars between cultures and religions. Monks and nuns have certainly a very special role to play in this area. Not only because we are present in all the parts of the world and therefore have, as Orders and Congregations, a worldwide experience; but also - and still more - because what is at the core of our life, that is, spiritual experience, is also what is at the core of most of the great religions of the world. When it is difficult and at times impossible to dialogue at the level of philosophical and theological concepts, it is much easier to meet at the level of spiritual experience.

There is much talk nowadays about the European Constitution. Whether that Constitution is ratified or not is important but remains secondary. With or without it, Europe is painfully and gradually coming to birth. It is a movement that started some 1500 years ago and in which the monastic movement has played a very large role throughout the centuries, so much so, that Saint Benedict has been declared the Father of Europe, or the Patron of Europe. Whether the Christian roots of Europe are mentioned in the Constitution also remains secondary. (Hans Küng, in his usual provocative manner, recently gave a talk on the Muslim roots of Europe... and he certainly had a point). What is very important is that the new Europe in the making be animated by Christian values and Christian principles. Whether this happens or not will depend on every Christian, but in a special way on the monks.

Monastic life will reshape itself according to the way in which monks and nuns will answer all these challenges and many others.