

### **What makes a monastery a sacred place ?**

A sacred place may be visited by a tourist or by a historian or by an archaeologist. Each one of them, of course, looks at it from a different point of view. For some people that place may also be a *dwelling place*. My talk will attempt to give you the point of view of someone who lives in a sacred place, and who tries to reflect on the meaning of that place – the meaning it has for his own life and for the life of those who live there with him, and also for the life of all the people who come there either for a short visit or for a longer stay.

I am a monk – at least I have been trying for many years to become one --, and therefore I live in a monastery. My monastery – Scourmont, here in Belgium -- is not a famous piece of architecture (like, for example, Villers, Park, Kaisersberg). It is simply a normal, ordinary and functional monastic dwelling place built a century and a half ago and well maintained – constantly adapted to new needs and new conditions. Some time ago some tourists who visited Scourmont, having looked at the Church and the surroundings, including a beautiful park asked one of the monks : “Where are the ruins?”. That little anecdote shows that for a large number of people, a sacred place is almost necessary a heap of ruins from past ages, more or less well preserved or more or less well restored, which has become a tourist attraction. A **normal** monastery, on the contrary, is simply the living place of a monastic community, which means something only to people who know something about the meaning of the life of that community.

### ***An analogical concept***

The adjective “sacred” when applied both to a monument of the past and to a place where the sacred liturgy is celebrated, or to an abbey or a convent where a monastic community actually lives, is definitely an analogical concept which means different things according to the context in which it is used. Therefore, we must ask ourselves not only what makes a place sacred, but also what we mean when we say that something is “sacred”.

A specialist or a tourist may come to a sacred place because it is considered sacred. But to consider a place “sacred in itself” would be a pre-Christian and even pre-biblical understanding of the “sacred”. According to Greek mythology and most ancient cultures and

religions, there was a radical distinction between what belongs to the realm of the sacred and what was considered profane. Hence the constant aspiration of humans to steal away from the Gods something that was sacred and therefore to profane it, which was, of course, expressed especially in the Promethean myth. In the Jewish Bible, and later on in Christianity, we find a completely different approach. Nothing is sacred in itself but everything can be “sacralised”. In the myth of Creation in the Book of Genesis, God gives everything to man as a caretaker, and therefore everything is profane. But man can sacralise anything by using it to express his reverence for God.

Now, if we want to apply that to Christian architecture and specifically to monastic architecture, we must say that it is sacred not because it is built in such and such a way, because it is old or even because it is beautiful. It is sacred simply because what is lived (or has been lived) there. Of course some of those buildings are masterpieces of architecture and of art -- thanks God. But that does not make them more sacred and holier than any simple, even un-artistic (perhaps ugly) monastic building. (Of course, we all prefer the first ones!)

Monasteries are sacred because they are inhabited by men or women who want to make of their lives a worship to God. Some of them may be holy people, others not. What makes of their place a sacred place is the holiness of the spiritual **goal** they have chosen for their lives. To what extent they attain that goal and to what extent they fall short of it is another question - an important question for sure, but which has no impact on the holiness or sacredness of the place.

For that reason it would perhaps be important to make a clear distinction in our way of speaking between “sacred and holy”. This is a distinction that recurs constantly in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (who actually wrote a beautiful book with this as a title : *Du sacré au saint*). For him the word “sacred” would correspond almost to the pre-biblical notion of sacred. It is almost an objective quality. Holiness is not something objective, outside the subject. It is a quality of the subject and of his life. Above all it is a quality of relationship.

However as in many other domains people say different things using the same word and, at other times, use different words to say the same thing. What Lévinas calls “Le sacré” corresponds pretty much to what René Girard also calls “Sacred” in his *La violence et le sacré*. On the other hand, what Levinas calls “holy” is very close to the notion of sacredness developed by Mircea Eliade, for whom “sacredness” implied a dimension of interiority, which was not present in the work of Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige* (1917), the master of all in this field.

In his reflection on “sacred” and “holy”, Lévinas uses the biblical image of the Shekinah that created a sacred place at the heart of the People of Israël. It was a *sign* of God’s dwelling among men. The Temple was a sacred place, because it was a space – an empty space -- made by men where they could meet God. The empty space under the Shekinah, was filled with God’s presence – because of its goal. We have the same thing in the New Testament. During his last Supper with his disciples, Jesus says : “If you love me, you will keep my Word, my Father will love you, we will come and we will make our dwelling (*monè*) in you.

The effort of man to keep God’s word creates in him a space that is filled with God’s presence, or God’s dwelling in him; and then man wants to dwell on that Presence, and he builds places where this can happen. Those are the *loci sacri*, the sacred places.

The early Christian monks, following a long tradition of asceticism that preceded Christianity, went to the desert (and the *muni* and the *rishi* had gone to the forests of India, thousands of years before), in order to bring that presence into what was in the imagery of the time considered as the dwelling places of the devils. The evil places and transformed into sacred places. This is described in a highly symbolic way in the Life of Anthony of the Desert by Athanasius of Alexandria, who in his figurative way of speaking puts into the mouth of the devil the declaration : “I don’t have any “place” left to go, because those crazy Christian monks have filled the desert and make of it their own dwelling place. The pagan spatial economy was annulled.

### ***The Rule of saint Benedict***

Let us speak now about Christian monasticism and more specifically about Western monasticism. In the Western part of the Church, monastic life has been most of all coenobitical – although there were always some hermits -- and, after the Carolingian reform, following almost exclusively the *Rule of Benedict of Nursia*.

This has an importance -- not only for the monks -- because monastic life is a human archetype. It is a human archetype not only because it is a way of being that we find in every great culture and spirituality of the world, but it is an essential dimension of human life as such. Those whom we call monks, in any culture, are simply those who have chose to place that dimension at the heart of their existence and organize everything in their life around that dimension.

Since almost all the monasteries that have existed in the Western Church for the last 1500 years have lived according to the Rule of St. Benedict, we cannot understand all the great masterpieces of monastic architecture of the past or any type of modern monastic building

without a reference to that Rule. Of course, that Rule has been constantly re-interpreted and inculturated. It has been lived in a great variety of forms; and we can say that each expression is a different lived interpretation of the Rule, (just as the Rule is an interpretation of the Gospel for monks).

That Rule being a very important monument of Christian literature, spirituality and history, we can say that its study is a prerequisite for the understanding of anything that has to do with the Benedictine tradition, spirituality, architecture or art.

I will now dwell on that document for a few moments.

When you read the RB, you may be surprised not to find any indication on how to build a monastery. You have the impression that Benedict could have written about the architecture of the monastery exactly as he wrote about clothing : "The monks should not worry about the colour or texture of these items, but simply use whatever they can find in the locality where they live, or what can be purchased more cheaply."

What is important for Benedict of Nursia is what is lived in the monastery. In the Prologue to his Rule he describes his theological understanding of monastic life as a person's answer to God's invitation - an invitation addressed to anyone who wants life. Benedict's goal is to establish what he calls "a school of the Lord's service". Then he goes on to explain, in his first chapter, that he writes the his Rule for coenobite monks, not for hermits or gyrovagues or sarabaites. Then he defines what a coenobite is : (and that description is extremely important). It is someone who lives in a monastery, under a Rule and an Abbot. You have there the three basic elements of Benedictine monastic life. The most important, of course, is the first one : "*in monasterio*".

Then, in his chapter about receiving candidates, he stresses first of all the need to clarify what that person is looking for, whether it corresponds to what we have to offer him and whether he is able to live it. And right from the beginning, even before the period of initial formation, the candidate must promise his *stability* in the monastery. Then, after a whole year of formation, during which he is repeatedly reminded that he is free to leave, and that he must make a serious discernment, the monk makes his solemn profession : he promises his stability (in the place), his conversion of manners (i.e. living according to a common rule) and obedience.

Then, everything will fall into place easily. **Stability** in a place is of the utmost importance. The location where a monastery is built is

not normally chosen because it is a “sacred place”. On the contrary, it is chosen simply because it is a suitable place for monks to live. Then, it will become a sacred place.

**Stability** is the visible, physical expression of a deeper reality -- that of communion. It is around that reality of **communion** that the whole way of life of the monastic community is built and it is around it that the architecture of the monastery develops. It is a multidimensional communion. First of all, it must be a communion with God in contemplative prayer. That communion is expressed and lived out in a communion with brethren within a local community. That community cannot be closed in on itself; it must be open to the local Church and the Church at large, also to the world, especially to the people around the monastery and to guests. Finally, it must include a communion with nature, with the environment and with the whole cosmos. The architecture of a monastery is meant to foster all those levels of communion.

In any monastery you will find first of all, at the centre, a space for common prayer in a church which is so built as to make beautiful and harmonious common celebrations possible. Then there are other spaces for study, *lectio* and private prayer - all activities which prepare one for the community celebrations which are spread throughout the entire day. There is a chapter room, always near the church, where the community meets for all the important moments in its life, like professions, election of the abbot, and various forms of dialogue. Not far from it, on the same level, you have the dining room. All these places are linked to one another through a quadrangle cloister that allows for an easy passage from one form of communion to the other and expresses the connection between all aspects of the life. As for the dormitory it is normally on the first floor with a direct access to the church by means of a staircase.

That plan corresponds to a spirituality but also to a cultural incarnation of that spirituality. It remained basically the same during several centuries. It was meant usually for rather large communities which were part of a confident and powerful, expanding Church. That period corresponds to “Christendom” That period and that type of Church now belongs to history. (The attempts made by some fundamentalist groups to bring it back are useless and pathetic), Today’s Church, at least in most of our modern Western countries, is no longer powerful nor numerically important. Maybe it is its normal situation - a little bit of leaven in the dough of humankind. We are back to a situation like the one described in a book of the second century, called the Letter to Diognetos. The present Church is like the one of the first few centuries of our era, before the Constantinian peace, and like what it was probably meant to be : a collection of

small local communities of believers. In that Church, monastic communities tend to be small. There is nothing wrong about it. The quality of life and of witness of a monastic community can be as good and as valid, whether the community is composed of 100, 50 or 5 monks. What is important, however, is that the material setup corresponds to the size of the community. (Problem of communities living in monasteries built in a time of restoration, when vocations were abnormally numerous).

The location of the monastery is important. Cistercians were very practical - especially concerning water. Benedict wants the monastery to be in a solitary place so as to allow for enough solitude and tranquillity for the monks. At the same time he stresses the importance of hospitality and even mentions that guests are never lacking in a monastery. There is therefore in the setup of a monastery a special place to welcome guests, to offer them food and shelter. Various services of the monastery, especially selling products of the monks and buying what is necessary require trips outside by some of the monks.

Concerning the architecture, the legislator of Western monasticism is surprisingly silent. He mentions the presence of the church, which he calls the oratory, and which is certainly the heart of the monastery. He does not say how it should be built. He simply says that it should correspond to its name and therefore should be a place of prayer and that nothing should be done there or kept there that does not correspond to that purpose. As you see, what is important for the monks, even the most important part of the monastery is not the way it is built or decorated, nor the materials with which it is built. It is what happens there. - Beautiful and simple as a consequence, with neither decorations, nor statues.

It is said of one of the first abbots of Cîteaux in the 12th century that he was "*amator loci et fratrum*". (The "*locus*" that he loved was not a famous sacred place of great renown. It was still a desert and a primitive, poor monastic setting.

The notion of "place", just like that of "sacred" includes a spiritual and an affectional dimension. A place is not only a name on a map. It is space where something happens or happened. For monks, the place they have chosen to live in and which they love is the space where a community lives. If, for any reason the community has to move to another location (as it happened for several foundations), the place is moved to another location.

For anyone who has to build a monastery nowadays or for anyone who wants to study the architecture of a monastery built centuries ago,

the notion of communion remains the “key” which conditions everything and gives its meaning to everything.

### ***What is the present situation?***

Nowadays there are few monastic vocations in Europe and some monasteries are being closed. We must however view that situation in a larger perspective. The worldwide number of monks and nuns remains presently about the same, and new monasteries are founded every year all over the world. Communities, however are smaller than in the past.

All the Cistercian-Trappist monasteries, which are those I know best (although I also know a good number of Benedictine ones) can be placed in one of the following categories with each one having its negative and positive aspects - or rather its challenges and chances.

Some communities live in beautiful buildings of the past that have been either preserved or restored (with various degrees of success). Even if the monastery is considered a national monument, a large part of the energy and resources of the community goes into the maintenance of that monument. The monks must either share their existence with a continuous flow of tourists or even become some kind of museum objects themselves. For monastic communities as such, to live in a beautiful, grandiose piece of architecture is rarely a blessing. It is often close to being a curse. Fortunately a number of them have found a way of rearranging part of the building where they live, leaving the rest for the tourists.

The monastic community has the responsibility to live its monastic life. It does not have the mission to maintain an architectural heritage. If it can do it, all the better; but if this has become too much of a burden, it should not stay in a situation where it is bound to die out under that burden.

The monastic charism belongs to the whole Church. The monks are the stewards of that charism. The monasteries as architectural and cultural treasures belong to the whole society. The whole society is therefore responsible for it. And it should not use the monks to do it, if this does not foster their monastic life.

Someone talked yesterday about “residual sanctity”. I don’t think a building should be considered sacred because it was used in the past as a monastery or as a church. On the other hand that building deserves respect because it is a witness to something sacred that was lived there.

A number of communities especially in Europe, but also in America live



in monasteries that were built in the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, usually in imitation of the classical style, often in various forms of poor neo-gothic architecture. The situation of those communities is not much better than that of those just mentioned with the exception that they can dare transform and re-adapt their living quarters without any scruples, provided they have the means.

On the other hand, new communities who build their monasteries nowadays or old communities who have the courage to leave their white elephants to build something more adapted to their needs, should have the freedom to create something totally new and the courage to do it. Those places will be authentic “sacred places” if they answer the cultural and spiritual needs of the people of today, which are often quite different from those of the former generations.

They need to respond to rather different demands than the monasteries constructed in the Middle Ages or the following centuries. First of all they should not be symbols of a spirit of grandeur but expression of humility. They are usually the dwelling place of a small, even often precarious community. To respond to the present spiritual ethos, a sense of intimacy and rootedness will be preferred to high flying naves that expressed confidence and power in the past. The separation of the monastic community from the guests, especially in the celebration of the Liturgy will be much less marked. The dormitories will be replaced with small individual rooms, the shops, usually more noisy than in the past, will be built at a distance. If the climate allows for it, the cells will be spread out on the property in small groups of three or four, instead of forming a long wing within the monastery building. The quadrangle cloisters will rarely be present.

One good example I have seen of a well adapted and inculturated architecture was the chapel of a small monastic foundation on the outskirts of Noumea in New Caledonia. The chapel was a large round hut built entirely of straw, in the same way as the dwellings of the local tribe. It was built by the local people according to the traditional manner, in one day, and had to be replaced every five years, as the dwelling places of the local people. There was enough place in that round hut, at Sunday Mass for the monastic community and a large part of the village population. It corresponded exactly to the needs and situation of a concrete, fragile but very authentic monastic community. To my mind it was an authentic “sacred place” as much as any masterpiece of architecture that has survived centuries of wars and periods of decadence in Europe.

The relationship of the monks with the lay people is very important. Nowadays there are several communities of lay people attached to a monastery. In my Order, we call them “Lay Cistercians”. This is not



simply an answer to a lack of monastic vocations. It is an authentic new expression of the monastic charism. That charism belongs to the whole people of God. The Spirit is bringing to life new expressions of that charism. The distinction between various classes of people is nowadays much less important than it was in the Middle Ages. For lay people a monastery is therefore much more than merely a place where to go, in order to escape the tensions of daily life in the world.

We should also be aware in our present developments of a radical change that has affected all the religious traditions in our time. That change is a completely new relationship with the world of symbols and rituals. The liturgy of the past and also the architecture and other forms of art of the past used a large variety of man-made symbols. These symbols may be highly appreciated by people having a devotion to the past. They usually don't speak any more to most people - not necessarily for lack of culture on their part, but simply because of a deeper change. People nowadays are less sensitive to symbols created by human beings, and much more attentive to the symbolic dimension of all the aspects of daily life, at the local, national and international levels.

Symbols are no longer symbols when they need to be explained.

In the past few days I have personally felt questioned and challenged by the role played by the monks in Burma in the life of their people and the reaction of the population. Their intervention has a tremendous symbolic value that speaks thousands of times more than all their rituals and their temples.

I don't say that all the Belgian monks should take to the streets to ask the politicians to stop playing games and to give the country a government. But if they did it would certainly give their life and the life of the country another dimension of "sacredness".

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