

Monastic Renewal by Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B.

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No religious Order can stand aloof from the *aggiornamento* that is affecting the entire Church nor declare itself immune from the impact of Vatican Council II. Even those institutions that are the oldest in the Church, such as monasticism, must reappraise themselves in the light of contemporary trends. Such a re-examination becomes even more urgent in view of the attitude of many that the monastic Orders are to be the preservers of the old or traditional ways while the rest of the Church is updated. Do monastic Orders, in this view, become preservers of a really ancient tradition that is still vital for them, or rather the preservers of a nineteenth and twentieth century interpretation that no longer answers the needs of themselves nor of the Church? Do they not have a duty to define themselves and their role in the Church, as well as give some consideration to the vitality of the image of monasticism that they have inherited from the great monastic revivers of the last century, before consigning themselves to the preconceived role of museum keepers in the Church?

Within monastic communities today there is a healthy re-examination of fundamentals. Although not all the answers are present to the questions being asked, it is a sign of growth that such questions are being posed. One of the clearest signs of renewal is a re-awakening of interest in the eremitical life. In the early centuries in the East, the eremitic and cenobitic ways of monasticism existed side by side, and many instances are recorded of monks passing temporarily from one to the other. The eremitical life with its total renunciation of human society will always be an exceptional charism within the Church. Although St Benedict considers the cenobitic life as a preparation for the hermitage, the two are not the same. Much of the confusion of monastic history has come from trying to apply the rules of one to the other. The cenobitic tradition must be considered in its own right: Pachomius owes no apologies to Anthony. Much of the confusion comes from using the same term *monachus* for both ways, the hermit being *solus cum Deo* (or *solus cum diabolo*, whichever way one looks at it), the cenobite, as Augustine says, being *solus cum communitate in caritate*.

The greater problem today is the shape renewal should take in the cenobitic life. Here the chief difficulty lies in definition. Monks cannot agree on what they are. The reason lies in a confusion of terms that has

come about by trying to apply the terminology of modern spiritual authors to an ancient form. First of all, monasticism cannot be defined in terms of an apostolate toward which its spirituality is geared. It did not arise as an active force to accomplish some special mission in the Church. Neither can it be defined in terms of active and contemplative life, nor 'mixed', since these terms are replete with historical overtones and imply a kind of exclusivism that is unknown in early cenobitic literature. Although the classical concept of the cenobite is one who is seeking only God – St Benedict's qualifications for a novice – it can be seen at once that this definition fits any Christian. The difference between the monk and any Christian must lie then not in the seeking of God but in the means used.

The monk's renunciation that characterizes his search for God and distinguishes him from the ordinary Christian has gone under the classical name of the *fuga mundi*. A cenobite today has an obligation of asking what this term meant for the early monks and thus what it should mean for him. First of all, he must void the concept of all unchristian, neo-Platonic innuendos that it has acquired and the false eschatology it has bred. Neither Pachomius, nor Basil, nor Benedict fell into the 'angelism' of some of their successors, nor into the naive interpretation that all outside the monastery walls is 'world' and that the wall is an impregnable safeguard against this world. The monastery wall was a visible, positive symbol of the cenobitic community as well as a barrier against unnecessary intrusion. The concept *fuga mundi* has also led to the false substitution of city for world, so that that which is urban is world and that which is bucolic and peasant is monastic. The monk's renunciation of the 'world' has to be seen in the light of his total detachment not only from sin and vice but also from the desires to possess property for himself, to fulfill the natural desires of the flesh, and even to apply his talents and gifts without superior direction, so that he may give himself more fully to love of Christ and his fellowmen. It also implies the physical atmosphere needed for prayer and reflection. But the monk does not fall into the false eschatology of wanting to leap over the world to the angelic life: he accepts the true eschatology that admits the incarnational principle that one must go to God through the use of material things. Such a definition of *fuga mundi* implies a certain physical separation as a means to the monk's personal renunciation of the 'world' within himself.

The cenobite, however, is still living in a community and cannot shirk the responsibilities of community living by applying the eremitical concept of the *fuga mundi* as a total separation from all society to a cenobitic way of life. (One wonders if the Trappists have not at times succumbed to this temptation.) Thus, in addition to such a renunciation as described above, the cenobite vows to live in a community under an abbot. Community life and the virtues related to it are essential to cenobitism, but not to monasticism as such. Any renewal of the cenobitic life today must also

examine the basic qualities of a cenobitic community in which a monk seeks God by total renunciation. This problem is best approached by dividing the subject into several natural headings that are a part of community life: prayer and work are the most obvious, although something must be said about poverty and obedience as well.

The most important task for a cenobitic community today is to rethink its life of prayer. This becomes even more urgent in the light of the Romantic image monastic liturgy has acquired. For the monk, the recitation of the psalter has no other purpose than his own spiritual formation and advancement within a community. Monastic liturgy is 'pastoral' in the best sense: it is meant to make God and the way of salvation vital to that community that performs it. For this reason, monastic liturgy was never meant to be the same as, or have any intrinsic relationship to, lay or parochial liturgy. On the other hand, neither was it intended to act in the Church as a source of spiritual edification to the laity. Monasteries did not come into existence as a source of spiritual and aesthetic pleasure for more educated and cultivated Catholics. Part of the problem current monasticism faces is that it has acquiesced to this common notion and has often made of its liturgy a theatrical performance with flowing cowls, hooded-heads, and ethereal chanting – much of which came from a Romantic, Tennysonian concept of the medieval cloister worship, rather than from a deep-felt liturgical sensitivity of what was meaningful for the spiritual life of the participating monk. One would not want to deny the importance of the monastic-liturgical revival for the general liturgical revival of the Church today, but the principles of the Vatican Constitution on the Liturgy that aim at making the liturgy truly pastoral for the general Christian community must also be applied now to the monastic community. Liturgy must become truly pastoral for the monks also. This would not preclude monks and monasteries from taking an active part in the liturgical renewal within the Church; in fact, it would be an aid, since the monks would learn to appreciate the role of participant and not merely that of a perpetual performer. Monastic liturgy, based as it is on such an immersion into the Psalter and Old Testament readings, cannot be meaningful for the twentieth century monk without continued meditation on Scripture and the acquisition of the biblical outlook that comes from living with the sacred text. Thus arises the need for a certain physical separation and solitude.

The next area for re-examination is monastic work. Certain prevalent myths have always been disturbing to monasticism with regard to work. From the beginning, monks never quite threw off the Messalian heresy of how one must pray incessantly: namely, that one must either not work at all or do a form of work that was mechanical, such as basket weaving, so that prayer (in early monastic times this invariably meant lip-moving and audible sounds) could be carried on without interruption. The Middle

Ages saw the rise of the continuous choir recitation where one group would take over as another ceased so that the round of divine praises would never stop. Today one finds hints of this attitude in a subtle division of work into two kinds: that which leads to contemplation, such as manual and agricultural pursuits in particular, and that which does not, only the former being truly monastic. Augustine's solution, which admitted the existence of a virtual intention and denied the need of perpetual active praying, has never seemed quite adequate for some monks. Monks in the Middle Ages soon realized that coming together in choir seven or eight times a day at about three hours intervals to chant the minor hours, in addition to singing a daily conventual Mass, did not leave much time nor energy for other work. But this practice, still followed by most 'contemplative' monastic communities, has little relationship to the daily schedule of Benedict and even less to that of Pachomius. The balance between work and prayer in early monasticism was much different, for the minor hours did not assume the choral prominence they began to in the Carolingian (subsidized!) monasteries and the daily conventual Mass was unknown. Forthrightly facing these demands may require some abrupt changes from the Romantic monastic image, but may be most healthful for the spiritual welfare of the whole monastic community.

The question still remains: what work is suited to cenobites and what work can they engage in that will not betray their communal nature and that will give them sufficient time for community living, prayer, and the meditative scriptural reading referred to? The answer becomes more complicated when we assume that most of the cenobites today are ordained priests. This places the cenobite-priest in a tension that the modern needs of the Church have provoked and that he finds difficult to cope with. There is no doubt that contemporary monasticism will have to accept the fact that full monasticism is possible without the priesthood and admit the existence of non-clerical choir monks, but this does not solve an immediate problem faced by most communities. Perhaps the question could be placed this way: must a community which is made up predominantly of priests select a work which is sacerdotal in character so that they can be true to their priestly vocation as well? Are ordained monks hoeing corn a waste within the Church? In the past the priest-cenobite resorted to a compromise by teaching, so that schools have become the accepted solution for most black Benedictine communities. Here, too, large areas of tension are apparent when the pressures of accrediting and the ever-present tendency to over-commitment conflict with community life. In the United States, at present, there are also some clear misgivings as to the whole role of the Church in education and a desire to re-assess this role. The Church as an educative institution will always exist, but she may be forced to alter her approach and her fields

of apostolate. Monastic schools may also be forced to change in scope and character – perhaps they must even be abandoned.

The question of schools is only one aspect of a whole field of intellectual endeavour that has been characteristic of cenobitic life and that reached its height in the Maurist Congregation. The answer one gives to the question whether intellectual pursuits are contrary to the primary vocation of monks depends on one's interpretation of the monk's eschatological witness. In view of the concept of the world found in the great encyclicals of John XXIII and Paul VI, the monk will have to ask himself if the distinction between knowledge that leads to God and knowledge that does not has any validity. Perhaps the only solution to the question of monastic work is that it can be of any kind, manual or intellectual, provided it does not interfere with community living and provided it is a means of sustenance for the monks and, according to the best of monastic traditions, is the source of a good to the Church. No doubt a monastery must periodically review its work in the light of the above. More concretely, each monk must periodically assess how he brings to bear on his work the close view of God and God's kingdom that comes from the whole of his monastic commitment. It is the monk's task in his work, not to avoid God's creatures, but rather never to lose sight of God's point of view in dealing with them. This is his primary witness to the secular world.

Monastic poverty has come under recent scrutiny and wisely so. In history, cenobites have so often fallen into the false rationalization that the community can be wealthy as long as the individual monk uses what he has with permission. This misses the whole point of poverty as a monastic virtue, which is a part of a monk's renunciation and his witness and, as such, must involve a real spirit of sharing with the Christian community. A monastery, too, cannot be conceived of as outside the larger Christian community. What is left over from that which is needed for the sustenance of the monks was traditionally shared with the poor. Monasteries have reason today to recall this principle. Some monasteries, because of the particular local circumstances in which they find themselves, may be obliged to live in the extreme poverty they find around them in order to be linked to others by a common bond and in order not to scandalize. Poverty is more difficult when monks are involved in a work such as teaching where the external apparatus required for the work is extensive. This does not mean that the witness of poverty in their own lives and in the way they use their equipment should be lacking. Nor is it necessary for monks to feel that poverty cannot be reconciled with aesthetics, but it is true that poverty cannot be reconciled with expensive tastes for their own sakes. The area of aesthetics or art is no different from that of intellectual pursuits discussed earlier, where a monk must bring to such endeavours that same approach of bringing all things to, and utilizing all things for, God. There is no doubt that this is the more difficult

way to perfection and runs the risk of self-deception, but is also the most Christian and therefore also the most monastic.

The last area to be cited where some rethinking is necessary is monastic obedience and the related concept of the abbatial image. Monastic obedience remains always the same, but it is necessary to re-establish this obedience as the relationship between disciple and pupil, spiritual director and spiritual son and not as that of monarch to subject. The abbatial image of a shepherd or spiritual guide has become clouded by centuries of additions from imitating the hierarchy and supreme monarchs. On the other hand, this relationship between a monk and his abbot cannot be the same today as in Benedict's time when all learning was based on the master-disciple pedagogical principle. Today the monk receives a deeper theological training, has access to numerous spiritual writings, and has been educated according to different processes. The superior must respect this in working out, with the subject, what the will of Christ is in each instance, avoiding an oppressive paternalism as an antidote against the former oppressive authoritarianism. Some concern must be given to the problem of size of the community if such a fraternal relationship between abbot and disciple is to be retained. A monastic community cannot be too small if it is to train its novices and young monks adequately, but it cannot be too large if it is to retain a community spirit. Perhaps the ultimate solution to this will be large communities which act as supply centres for smaller off-shoots in the *diaspora*.

Monks have always been considered as belonging to the charismatic element of the Church and their witness is like that of the prophets calling the people of God to see always God's way from God's viewpoint, immersed as they are in a more constant dialogue with God in prayer and in reflection on His words. But if the salt lose its savor? Monks in their *aggiornamento* are called upon to rethink, not so much how they can impress and edify the laity, but how they can strengthen their relationship with God and his ways, and why they are failing to bring deep spiritual insights to the work they are about. They must also ask themselves whether they are seeking an escape hatch, wanting to avoid the struggle that this life and world present. The results of such investigations will be fruitful for themselves and for the Church.
