The Portable Cloister of the Heart: Emerging New Forms of the Monastic Impulse

Rich Fournier

For we have this treasure in earthen vessels...

Both in the world itself and in the world of monasticism, we live in a *kairos* time; a time pregnant with possibility, a time shot through with uncertainty. The old is passing away, and behold, the new has not yet come. These unsettling times tend to elicit polarized responses. Some people cling desperately to old ways, holding fast to the known rather than facing the unknown. Others meander their way through the ferment and chaos and, seemingly without discernment, become attracted to anything new.

This is a *kairos* time for the monastic Spirit as well. There is an increased interest in all things monastic. Even the advertising world has tried to capitalize on this, with religiously garbed monastic men and women providing the context and contrast to sell computers, communicators and copiers. Books on monasticism and music from monastic liturgies become best-sellers. The question is: is this interest in monasticism a regressive movement towards the past to escape the complexities of the present, or is it an authentic renewal of the charism of the monastic spirit and the lure of the monastic quest to seek God above all else? Are our monasteries capable of responding creatively but faithfully to this seeking, or are they too heavily laden with historical forms that no longer convey the life-giving spirit of monasticism? Have we, as seekers, matured enough to avoid confusing change with transformation? These are questions that Merton also spent a good deal of time pondering, since the initial winds of this change were blowing during his lifetime.

I believe that the Spirit of God is behind this *kairos* time, actively seeking to make people more aware of the "hidden ground of love" and the "hidden wholeness" which connects us all. This mystical reality, or mystical matrix, has been intuitively expressed in Christian doctrine (e.g. the Trinity, Mystical Body of Christ, Communion of Saints, etc) and has been directly apprehended and experienced by mystics throughout the ages. The awareness of this deep interconnectedness provides the foundation for healing the painful divisions within and among people and nature. Karl Rahner predicted that Christians of the 21st century will be mystics, or there won't be Christians at all. The treasures of the monastic tradition can be a great resource and help in this transformation of consciousness and in cultivating awareness of the mystical matrix.

But the treasures of the monastic spirit and tradition are housed in earthen vessels. Merton was aware of this ongoing tension and liked to make the distinction between the living tradition (the treasure) and convention (the earthen vessel). Monasticism is constantly faced with the challenges and struggles to remain authentically alive and faithful to the charism of the monastic spirit. Can the monastic spirit be set free from its historical institutional expressions without being set adrift? Can we find ways to remain rooted in tradition, but not unnecessarily bound by that tradition? The problem of the routinization of spirit is a long-standing one in many traditions. And it starts right in the earliest attempts to pass on the knowledge and experience. As Sam Keen notes:

> "Not one of the founders of the great religions was orthodox. Jesus wasn't a Christian. Gautama wasn't a Buddhist, Mohammed wasn't a Muslim. All were charismatic spiritual seekers, mystics, prophets, troublemakers, critics of the establishments of their day. As Emerson said, speaking about religion, 'In the first generation the men were golden and the goblets were wooden. In the second generation the men were wooden and the goblets were golden.' Charisma is bureaucratized, the spirit is forced to punch a time clock and answer to the authorities. (Keen, *Hymns to an Unknown God*, p.74).

Mutatis mutandis, this is also true for the monastic spirit and its historical forms. The monastic spirit is like the wind mentioned in John 3, that blows where it wills. No fixed form, however solid and sanctioned, can contain it for long. For those who try to capture it, or hold it fast to a particular form or manifestation, the monastic spirit

as wind can be experienced as a tornado or hurricane, that radically razes the boxes and houses constructed to contain it. For those more sensitive to its nuances, it can be experienced as the wind to fill the sails of a vessel tacking its way on the journey to God.

The monk needs to be related to the tradition without being controlled by the historically evolved institutional forms of that tradition. She must be rooted in, but not pot-bound by, that tradition, in order to be free to flower in her own unique way as an expression of the monastic seed/spirit. I am not saying that institutional monasticism is bad or obsolete. There will always be those who are able to live a deep, true and authentic life within them. But institutional monasticism can no longer be exclusively normative, no longer have a monopoly over defining who is and who is not a monk. The monastic charism transcends and outgrows any particular form created to contain it or express it. Monastic institutions can become resources and catalysts for people to respond to and embody the monastic impulse that beats in their own hearts. As Lawrence Cunningham points out:

> [Merton's] writings argued for a kind of delicate balance in which a monastic culture with authentically deep foundations could be maintained while permitting a maximum degree of flexibility to allow for human growth and development. (Cunningham, p.127)

There seems to be a redefinition and relocation of the monastic spirit underway—a redefining of what the monastic spirit or monastic impulse essentially is, and who are the carriers of it. There is also a relocation of the monastic spirit away from exclusively identifying it with its historical, institutional, and geographical places, e.g. monasteries, to the portable cloister of one's own heart.

The Monastic Spirit and Impulse

The monastic spirit predates any Christian expression of it, it is an archetypal aspect of being human. This "monastic impulse" (Walter Capps) has been a part of human experience for as long as history has been recorded. Some people have always tended toward solitude, the margins, toward liminality. The monk refuses to settle into the ready-made forms the world provides and requires, and instead sets out on a journey to the unknown, following the siren song of the

monastic spirit. The monk is one who lives on the margins of the world to enable engagement with the center of life.

The monastic spirit is present when one takes one's relationship with God with a singular seriousness (not a deadly seriousness, but a lively intensity, a life-giving focus). Like it says over the entrance gate to Gethsemani "God Alone." The word 'monos' itself can mean 'one', or 'alone' or even 'all-one'. It is about integrity and wholeness in body, mind and spirit. The monk is thus the one who seeks to be at one with God, self and others. There is a going *apart* to become *a part* of everything else. The monastic spirit is a withdrawal from that which fragments us in order to promote a oneness within and without. Evagrius Ponticus describes the monk as one who is separated from all and united to all.

The monastic impulse is the "still small voice" of God whispering into our lives that there is more to life than the surface living of it, and that there is more to us than the identities and tasks that our culture gives us. It is the almost silent, but relentless, pitch of an inner homing device that calls us from artifice to authenticity. Or in Augustine's justly famous words, "God has made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him." The monastic impulse is the refusal to rest in anything less than the presence of God.

The monastic spirit needs to be cultivated to be kept vital. It is here that the role and experience of monastic practices can be most beneficial. Monasteries can become resource centers, hubs around which true yet diverse manifestations of the monastic impulse may revolve and evolve. Places where there can be a hollowing out of the false self to make room for the growth of the true self in Christ. People can come and learn tools, make relationships, and have experiences that they can take with them to practice the presence of God in their everyday life.

Monasteries need to be places, not just of formation, but of transformation. They need to be a place where the vow of *conversio morum* is not just a verbal one from the lips, but an existential one from the heart; where the obedience called for is a listening for the continuing call of God for people to be their unique and authentic selves and not for fitting in and being simply a smoothly functioning part of monastic machinery.

> Monastic enclosure and monastic observance were not ends in themselves. They were considered a necessary condition for, and matrix out of which would come, contemplative union with God. (Cunningham, p.27)

The essence of monasticism, or the monastic impulse, the 'one thing needful' is to maintain the primacy of *being* over *doing* and *having*. The monk is the one who cultivates and 'rests in' (hesychast) one's own being, which is simple compared with the complexities of having and doing. The sources tell us to sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything. It is there in the practice of sitting, of contemplation, whether in a physically set apart cell, or a carved out psychic cloister of the heart, that the monk becomes yoked to living and learning the primacy of being and the cultivation of contemplative being and consciousness. The being found in the core of one's heart is the being that is shared with all, related to all.

For *being* is never simply and purely 'being-in-itself'—it is always a *being-with* because of the relational matrix of life. Being is always a 'being-with' because God is the ground of our being, the matrix or womb which "causes to be" (Exodus 3:14), and in whom we live and move and have our being. This being, which is also a 'being-with', has as a constitutive element a *being-for*, which manifests as a desire to transcend self through service to something beyond self. Put simply, by cultivating *being*, the monk increases conscious awareness of *being-with*—being with self (true self), God, and others. With this awareness comes the natural desire *to be for*. There is a way in which one flows into the other, a dialectic of being which deepens both. Attended-to being leads to the realization of being as 'being-with', which in turn opens into a compassionate 'being-for.' So the monk is one who cultivates and rests in the basic 'being-with' and 'being-for' of the true self, our original face, in the cloister of the heart.

Since our selves are socially constructed they are overlaid with an artifice of having and doing. These are not bad in themselves, and are necessary experiences of being human. However, when they become substitutes for true being (e.g. one tries to gain a sense of self worth by having many things, or by doing great things etc.) then one is in need of a *metanoia*, a change, a re-orientation. The treasures of the monastic tradition, particularly the living of a form of the vows, can

help with this. St Paul beckons us to not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of our hearts. (Romans 12:2)

The Portable Cloister of the Heart

> "Monasticism of the heart is the heart of monasticism." (David Steindl-Rast, *Cistercian Studies* 38)

The heart has always been a central metaphor in the life of the monastic spirit. In a recorded talk to the novices, Merton said that we are called to give our hearts away, but first we must have our hearts in our possession to give. Monastic practice is about possessing our hearts, guarding our hearts, seeking purity of heart in order to make us more truly able and free to give our hearts away in love. Not to give them out of compulsion or duty but out of the fullness of being that spills into a being-for in the mystical matrix. Armand Veilleux writes:

> The goal of monastic life is to get to know oneself—to know one's heart...to go back to the roots, to the core of one's being, where one can ultimately encounter God. Then I realized that the common denominator of the persons that we could call 'monastics' would be the fact that they are all people who, in their search for God, go through the path of their own heart. (*Blessed Simplicity*, p.143)

How then can we keep the monastic spirit alive in our hearts when we are not in a monastery? What are some of the emerging forms of the monastic spirit and impulse that can help us? What treasures from tradition can enrich our hearts today? This paper is really a work in progress, not a finished product. I'd like to broadcast seeds into the wind. I offer a series of thoughts, ideas, predictions and sightings of the emerging new forms and applications of monastic theory and practice.

The effort of translating the traditional monastic vows in forms that communicate today. Here the works of Diarmund O'Murchu and Joan Chittister are important. The traditional vows function to highlight *being* by helping us to detach from the lust of Having (vow of poverty) and the compulsion of Doing (withdrawal). Vows can be understood not so much as static states of perfection e.g. vow *of* chastity, *of* poverty etc.; but vows *for* and *towards*. Vows toward the world might include—poverty, simplicity, right livelihood, ecological humility. Vows toward others—chastity, non-dominative

relationships, partnerships and mutuality. Vows toward self—obedience, authenticity, integrity, conversion of manners. All are encompassed by and embedded in the vows toward faithfulness to God.

- Vow for Poverty can be understood as a resource to not fall prey to the consumer culture, to hold our lives and possessions as gift, and learn to be good stewards of what we have.
- Vow for Chastity can be understood as not using our relationships with others for our own gratification. This has applications far beyond the merely sexual.
- Vow for Obedience can also be understood as the ongoing listening to the call of God within the heart and responding faithfully to that call.
- Monasticism is becoming less geographically fixed and more mobile. Stability can be understood more in terms of faithfulness to practice than location.
- Withdrawal from the world will be understood less physically and more in terms of getting out from under the formative power of the cultural norms and values, and renouncing the external and internal patterns that keep us separate from God and one another. Sometimes this withdrawal will need to be physical, at other times through the cultivation of alternative consciousness and practices that remind us of who we really are.
- People following the monastic impulse will be nourished more through relationships with other people, fellow travelers, spiritual mentors rather than through the structures of institutions. Small groups will foster the life and growth of the monastic impulse. Peer groups will play an increasingly significant role in the lives of spiritual seekers.
- The forms of passing on tradition are becoming less formal, more flexible and fluid. Practices are becoming more individualized, and more effort is being made to tailor the resources to fit the needs of the individual rather than fitting the individual to the needs of the institution.
- Silence is becoming a very rare commodity in this world. The practice of silence can help to undermine the relentless chatterings of ego-speak that prop up the false artificial self.

- *Conversio Morum* is a way of understanding and committing to life as continuous growth in spirit. The *process* will be highlighted over the product or results.

Rhythms of withdrawal and return, solitude and community, service and contemplation, inner and outer work, differ among various individuals. Resources to address these rhythms will be less defined and structured in advance, but more likely developed in response to the needs, life stage and life context of the seeker.

- Contemplative prayer, centering prayer, Christian meditation, and sources from other religious and spiritual traditions—people are hungry for experiential resources that invite them into the cloister of the heart where the presence of God and the reality of the mystical matrix await. It's crucial for monasteries and other custodians of contemplative practice and wisdom to make these more available for people to access.
- Growing theory and practice of nonviolence in heart and action.
- Teaching and disseminating the practice of Lectio Divina. The practice of sacred reading can help people to engage scripture and other scared texts in a transformative way. People not only ask questions of the text, but allow the text to question them and their lives. This may be done in groups as well as individually.

Thomas Merton himself embodied the paradoxical tension of the monastic spirit lived through inherited forms. He was both fed and fed-up with these forms. He was a catalyst for reform and renewal and at the same time called for a return to the sources and well-springs of monasticism. People will continue to find his writings and life a rich resource for their own unique dance into the mystical matrix and presence of God.

> For now I am a grown-up monk and have no time for anything but the essentials. The only essential is not an idea or an ideal; it is God Himself, who cannot be found by weighing the present against the future or the past but only by sinking into the heart of the present as it is. (*Sign of Jonas*, quoted in Forest, p.106)

May the treasure of the monastic spirit be carried on faithfully and lovingly in the portable cloister of our own hearts.