

Are There Any Monastic Vocations in the World Today ?

By
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In the days before the culture of change set in there were plenty of vocations to the priesthood, to monastic life and to religious life. Then came the upheaval – change of such extent and rapidity that mankind had never experienced anything like it before. So we look back to the time of many vocations as if to a remote age, although in actual time it was really not so long ago; in spite of that, it was a different world. It was before Hitler's war, the nuclear age, the cold war, the electronic revolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the awakening of Africa, China, the Far East; and it was before the current world-wide dominance of consumerism and the rule of money. It was also before the Church strove through Vatican II to renew her spiritual resources and keep in touch with the changing world.

It is tempting to look back with nostalgia to that time of plenty, but there are things we should understand which may temper our nostalgia – things which are relevant still. It was a time, for instance, when vocations came and were nourished by flourishing, impressive ecclesial structures which were very dominant in Catholic life. The parishes were strong and growing and well staffed by priests, who were educated for growth with many young ones among them. The Churches were thronged with Catholic families and the young were there at Mass in great numbers; they had to be. The Catholic schools were equally strong, and the Junior and Senior Seminaries were full. The religious orders, especially perhaps those for women, were strong and influential and taken for granted as part of Catholic life. The question about 'vocation', including monastic vocation, was kept alive in the minds of all young Catholics. It was a living, accepted option woven into their Catholicism, and it didn't seem then to be a lonely choice. In every novitiate and seminary there were other young people to make everywhere the throng of a young community that the young loved then, just as they do now. It was a living, protective climate to nurture and encourage vocations at every level.

In that world there was a view about the nature of vocation that was widespread and often taught. It was that, whatever personal inner experience a candidate might have, his or her vocation did not

come from within. It was not a question of personal choice – personal conviction. Inner experience or feeling or desire or conviction were all very well but they could not be called a vocation until the external, official call came from Bishop or Abbot or other Religious Superior, and when that came it was the one thing that really mattered. Vocation was an outward authoritarian call by the official Church – in the name of Christ indeed, but within the structures and the control of the visible Church. Of course, that was not the only view, but it was the dominant one and many consequences flowed from it. The most serious consequences were to be found in the tensions between the inner and outward aspects of vocation which could not be resolved by authoritarian decisions. These tensions were always there, but they remained, on the whole, covered over by the strength and dominance of the structures. When change began, when even the Pope was speaking of throwing the windows open, those inner tensions had their day among priests and religious. When light and air are let into a long-forgotten attic, strange things are liable to emerge. So problems in the Church began to emerge which were hard to deal with. It is good to have a strong protective carapace, but the centre of life cannot be the carapace; if the life withers within then it cannot be revived by the carapace.

In those difficult times it was the cry for authenticity, inner consistency and inner freedom – the freedom of the children of God – that broke out from the agonised tensions between the inner and outward aspects of vocation. The cry seemed valid to some and misguided to others, but there could be no doubt about its intensity and the tensions from which it arose. What was often forgotten was that the seeds of the problems were sown in the theory that what uniquely mattered in vocation was an outward call by the official Church. I do not believe that it was ever meant to be exclusive, although I have heard it very strongly stated. What now seems clear to me is that more attention should have been paid to the inner process – its beginnings, its development, its needs and its perils. However vital the outward, authoritarian call of the official Church, the inner call is where our direct relationship with Christ himself is in question and that must be the heart of all vocation. It is where the New Testament may throw light on our problems of today. That is where we must start – not in re-living the past. We are never called on to re-live or re-create the past, in whatever way that is attempted. In any case the authoritarian past cannot be re-created.

In the west we do not any longer live in a world of strong and growing Catholic institutions which are all-embracing and through

which vocations can be confidently nurtured, directed and guided. We are in an age of disintegration and the repudiation of strong outward structures. The repudiation is on the whole without bitterness or acrimony, but that does not make it less profound in its effect. It is mild and civilised and slams no doors; it simply walks unhesitatingly through them; it is marked, not by hostility in the Church, but by personal absence from it; nevertheless it is unmistakable, not only among the young, but among the middle-aged also and the elderly, as the statistics show. In a world like this we may seek desperately to maintain what is left, or to re-create strong structures and outward forms and in this we may, of course, have some success, like a military rear-guard action in a massive retreat.

Alternatively we may look back further still not to the early twentieth century, nor to the counter-reformation, nor the medieval period but much further to the early Christians under pagan Rome. There we may find some hints of how to survive and grow in a world of powerful and indifferent secularism that is progressively possessing the minds of young and old alike. Does Christ still walk among us? If so, does he still call us? And, if he does, how does that call come and how should we respond and what perils should we try to avoid in that response? Wherever we look for inspiration, however we go about it we would be well advised to face the problems about inner reality and outward structure that are inherent in all vocation. There have always been tensions between the two in all Christian history, and there can be no peace and strength without a balance between them. Those who seek to live out a Catholic vocation need more than ever today that balance and inner strength if they are to survive in the swirling spiritual fog of ever encroaching secularism.

What did happen, then, when Christ was around? What was his example and his teaching? Well, he did not engage in any mass missions. He does not seem to have had a programme, or masterful plan of campaign. He does not seem to have been affected by great examples of human achievement in the world of his day - not by the impressive power of Judean legalism, nor by Alexander nor Pompey nor Caesar nor by the all pervasive apparatus of Roman dominance. He lived in obscurity. He came out into public life unpretentiously through John's baptism and fasting in the wilderness. He shunned publicity. He was utterly free. He met individuals eye to eye and called them by name - the apostles, Paul, Cornelius. In his call, even then, there was an inner and an outward aspect. Peter was called but replied: *leave me alone, Lord, for I am a sinful man - the first example*

of inner/outward tension in vocation, which was not resolved until their post-resurrection meeting by the sea of Tiberias (Jn.21)

In spite of his personal obscurity there was - and there is still - a hidden power in every word of his. His call was neither mild nor limited. His call was for everyone and it had a disturbing ring: *I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled*. Nor was his baptism a mild symbolic washing as John the Baptist had warned his followers: *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*. The fire was for everyone. We tend to use the word 'vocation' in a specialised way, limiting its meaning mostly to the call to office in the church. Christ had a broader perspective and St Paul also, who says everything in his introduction to Romans. He refers to himself first as *servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God*. There you have the vocation to office in the Church, which is also a call to serve. Six verses later he refers to all the faithful in Rome to whom he is writing who *are called to belong to Jesus Christ*. That is the other vocation - the forgotten one - the vocation of baptism - the call to belong to Jesus Christ to be set on fire by him, which comes before any call to office and which incidentally is the basis and root of monastic vocation. Perhaps we should start with this point. If all laity were keenly aware that, in St Paul's words they *are called to belong to Jesus Christ*, we should begin to see all vocation in a different light. After all it was Christ's idea; we are all chosen for the gospel and summoned to follow him. Key words in the gospel on the same theme are concerned with following him and belonging to him, becoming like him: *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. (Jn.10.14) If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. (Lk.9.23)*

Although Christ's call to office, then, is personal and particular, that does not mean that everyone else is overlooked like the unsuccessful candidates for a job. Although he selects for particular offices at the same time he performs the miracle of making everyone special and calling everyone by name to follow him and belong to him. What appears to us to be his more general call to everyone to faith and baptism is as personal and particular as his calling of the apostles: *I know mine and mine know me (Jn.10)*.

Perhaps it is precisely because it is individual, personal and particular and the outcome of what is really an intimate dialogue of love that there is always a tension between the inner and outward aspects of any vocation - including the general vocation for all to faith and baptism. Without that tension there would be no growth and growth is one of the very central themes of the gospel; we are never

done with it in this life. We are never finished with spiritual growing – not with baptism, not with the call to monastic life, not with the call to religious consecration, not with the call to priesthood, nor with any stage in our life and development right into old age. We are called every day to growth in love. The seed of the word may be sown in good ground, but still it must germinate and develop and grow; and it can fail in that process or prosper. It may start in good ground, but the thorns and thistles may still catch up with it.

The recognition of this in the Church was the very reason why those great protective structures were set up in the first place. The monasteries, the schools, the seminaries, the parishes were for promoting, encouraging growth in the love of Christ and feeding it through sacraments and prayer and giving it protection at dangerous times so as to bring everyone more closely into intimate relationship with Christ. Perhaps it is true that the institutions have at times become ossified and so come to be used not as a means of inner growth but as a mask for lack of inner growth. Perhaps it came about not only through those who organised and managed them but equally because those who sheltered in them made use of them to evade their own responsibility; but that was never their purpose. The institutions could be abused and their mission distorted but, when they are weakened or lost, it is no cause for satisfaction but for deep personal renewal from within. The question for us is what to do about vocations when the strong institutions disintegrate and their protective power is no longer to the same extent available so that the vocations they fostered are no longer available. If the institutional Church is left loveless, where is love to be found again?

When Christ ceased to appear among us, although his actual presence never varies, he gave us the foundational apostolic offices and sacraments but left the details of institution-making to us. Of course he did, because we are natural institution makers; you can see it everywhere. Revolutionaries have always been institution makers; first they break up the old ones and then make up their own. All the protesters against institution of the world today create their own institutions in the course of their protesting. All the haters of uniform have their own disorderly uniforms. It is the way we are. So Christ left us to fashion the details of Christian institutions. They began immediately and have continued ever since to reflect the human face of different times and different cultures in which the Church lives. But we must not forget (it has often been forgotten) that there was something vital he kept entirely for himself. The institutions were not to be the centre. He was himself to be the centre. He was the vine and

we the branches. He was the Head and we the body. And our communication was to be immediate and personal, whatever institutions might grow up. Our communication was to be prayer. Prayer was to support the individual and weld the body together and, if prayer did not do it, then all other attempts would end up as a pathetic caricature. That was to be the secret of the Church. Newman, reflecting on the early Church saw this with great clarity:

To a candid pagan it must have been one of the most remarkable points of Christianity on its first appearance that the observance of prayer formed so vital a part of its organisation, and that, though its members were scattered all over the world and its rulers and subjects had so little opportunity of correlative action, yet they, one and all, found the solace of a spiritual intercourse and a real bond of union, in the practice of mutual intercession. Prayer indeed is the very essence of all religion; but in the heathen religions it was either public or personal; it was a state ordinance, or a selfish expedient for the attainment of certain tangible, temporal goods. Very different from this was its exercise among Christians, who were thereby knit together in one body, different as they were in races, ranks and habits, distant from each other in country and helpless amid hostile populations. Yet it proved sufficient for its purpose. Christians could not correspond; they could not combine; but they could pray one for another. Even their public prayers partook of this character of intercession; for to pray for the welfare of the whole Church was in fact a prayer for all the classes of men and all the individuals of which it was composed.

JHN Letter to Pusey p. 68

Newman's picture is a remarkable one of what today might today be called the internet of prayer. It really was a live idea. Its purpose and its power came from this - that it bonded Christians to Christ. There is a letter from Gregory the Great, that master of both practical administration and spiritual vision; it was sent to the Patriarch of Alexandria when Gregory had just received news of the success of Augustine and his forty monks in converting the Anglo-Saxons. Gregory attributes the success to the prayer of the Church - and especially the prayer of the Patriarch.

The inner immediacy of that relationship with Christ is always with us, always available. It is the context in which he calls us - through which vocations come. Sacred institutions, the example of

others, the mood of the times may have their influence, but it is from him alone that the call comes and it is often strongest when it is unheralded and unexpected. von Balthasar tells us that when he was already working on a doctorate at university he had not the slightest thought of becoming a priest or entering a religious order. Then it all happened in a flash:

Even now thirty years later, I could still go to that remote path in the Black Forest, not far from Basel, and find again the tree beneath which I was struck as by lightning... And yet it was neither theology nor the priest-hood which then came into my mind in a flash. It was simply this: you have nothing to choose, you have been called. You will not serve, you will be taken into service. You have no plans to make, you are just a little stone in a mosaic which has long been ready. All I needed to do was 'leave everything and follow' without making plans, without wishes or insights. All I needed to do was to stand there and wait and see what I would be needed for.

Hans Urs von Balthasar ed David Schindler p.11

That is very much the manner of Christ's call as it comes to many nowadays. It is not a question of feeling or personal desire or self-image or ambition or the attraction of a career-structure or personal fulfilment. It is a question rather of the gradual growth or quite sudden unexpected invasion of a deep inner conviction that this is how it must be - just as von Balthasar portrays it. Of course it can be refused; of course it can be smothered like the seed among the thorns. But, if we allow ourselves to be spiritually awakened, then the best tests of its spiritual validity are: that it is contrary to personal desire, feeling ambition - that it does not pander to any previously cherished ideal - that it arises most strongly in moments of prayer and the presence of Christ - that it is best weakened by avoiding prayer and by closing our life to God - that it seems like an invasion from without, over which we have no control or very little - that it comes unexpectedly and unbidden and not as the result of any programme or promotion or invitation - that it survives and may even be strengthened by rejection, resentment and attempts to get rid of it.

So, a young man was carefully protected in his utterly secular upbringing from any mention of God and was busy burning himself out by frantically making money, when one day rushing to work (because, as they had impressed on him, time is money) he knocked

over an elderly lady. He stopped in his tracks; she was all right; but he had been changed; the protective carapace of godlessness had been shattered and this question possessed his mind: what are they turning me into? The question turned into a call. He was on the way to baptism into Christ on Holy Saturday.

A young Catholic academic had briefly toyed with the idea of monastic life as dedication of everything to Christ but had got the better of it, as he thought. He was a success; perhaps monasticism might be the answer to failure. He promised that, if he failed in a certain academic ambition, he would become a monk; if he succeeded he would forget about it. He succeeded, but the gnawing conviction did not have the decency to disappear. Almost unaccountably he found himself asking for profession.

There was another with a fine Catholic upbringing and education, who had kept a nodding acquaintance with the Church in case it might help his career. By chance he fell in with an old friend. He was embarrassed to find that an important part of this friend's life was *lectio divina*. Grudgingly he gave way to an invitation to take part and found himself reading the New Testament in a way he had never dreamt of reading it. He had thought of his Catholicism as a mildly acceptable background to the real business of his life, but *lectio* brought him into contact with the word of God in scripture. The background suddenly became the foreground. His life changed so radically that not long afterwards he entered monastic life.

There was a young girl in whose upbringing there had been no hint of religion or religious standards, but one day she decided to search for God, entirely on her own. She tried various churches and was attracted to the Blessed Sacrament in a Catholic Church. With deep reverence she decided on her own to receive the Lord as she saw others doing. She found that it meant so much to her that she longed for more and her longing brought her to baptism. No-one has ever approached it with greater conviction and joy. Nothing could have been more irregular and nothing more fruitful.

There was a young man studying a very safely secular course of technology at university. Everything had been kept securely negative for him as far as God was concerned in a country where anyway the teaching of religion is not permitted in the schools. He was well armed against faith. At university he met a Benedictine monk and idly asked some questions. The questions led him to the word of scripture. The word of scripture led him to Christ and to baptism and to monastic life, because he saw monastic life as the completion of his self-giving to Christ whom he had learned to love.

Something like that happened in Africa. A young African came to the Prior of a monastery one day and said that he had just been baptised and must now become a monk. The Prior suggested circumspection and delay - to make sure. 'But I am sure now; how could I not be?' said the young man, 'after three years preparation and all that time in a prayer group I have been baptised. Now there is only one way to be utterly faithful to my self-giving to Christ. That is to become a monk. I have made the decision and cannot change. What is there to wait for?' In the end, of course, he won the contest and is now the Abbot of that monastery deep in Africa. From the first he had seen, what the Fathers saw, the intimate connection between baptism and monasticism - not that the one necessarily leads to the other. It is rather that the monastic vision is a completion and fulfilment of baptism. That perception is common today among the laity who find such inspiration and support for their lay lives in the spirituality of the Rule of St Benedict.

So Christ is still walking among his people and calling them. You can find him at it everywhere. He is calling all the time - to baptism, to deeper spirituality, to deeper love, to monastic life and to office in the Church. He is not prevented by Christian divisions, nor by the din of cities, nor by the frenetic pursuit of pleasure, nor by the envelopment of secularism which saps spiritual life and leaves a gaping void in its place. He came to deal with all that. He is in pursuit of sinners. Perhaps, if the gospel were written today, the text would be *I came to call not the self-confident achievers but those whose life is empty, bereft and meaningless*. He is not prevented by such things in his pursuit of us, but the effect of his call is deadened and frustrated so as to be reduced to nothing but a wistful echo in a life of regretful emptiness. That is the problem we need to address. We need, not to dream of the past and how vocations were then, but to follow his way of open-ness to all who may need encouragement, enlightenment, example, who need to learn how to listen to his call, how to cherish and learn from his word in scripture. More and more we shall need centres of deep spirituality and universal hospitality through which the human spirit can get into tune with Christ and his grace and his call to everyone once more. If monasteries of men and women have a role in the future, it is surely this, and in so far as they fulfil that role they will not lack vocations.