

## **In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir**

Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O.

Foreword by Pico Iyer

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'I am on permanent vacation. Monastic life is essentially a vacating, an emptying out ... a personal emptying out of clutter within the mind and heart ... to make room for God.' (p. 1) So begins this fascinating memoir of Br. Paul Quenon, Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani, writer and poet, who entered the monastery in 1958 with Merton as his novice master. It is a book filled with his experiences, observations and interests – singing, poetry, photography, the composer Anton Bruckner and the poet Emily Dickinson. Unifying all these aspects are his outpourings of contemplative thought that give the book its wholeness and great unity.

What one immediately discovers is that the repetitive monastic rituals and routines are just the moulds of his existence and that what is important are the qualities with which they are filled. Because Quenon is such a lively spinner of language, the moulds and contents of the monastic life draw us into this world, and whatever interests Quenon becomes the reader's joy. He has described the monastic life as 'useless', but all the time his writing tells us otherwise.

Quenon presents the idea of life as a 'cosmic dance' and entitles the first chapter 'Introduction to the Cosmic Dance', having quoted Merton from *New Seeds of Contemplation* prior to the Foreword: 'No despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance. which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it ... for it beats in our very blood whether we want it to or not.' He likens his life of prayer, work and reading following the Rule of St. Benedict to play and an 'intense game', the biggest of which is liturgy. All the sub-headings of the opening chapter point to his statement: 'The purpose of play is play' (p. 5). He poses the question, 'Why should I pray?', and answers, 'Basically it is for the sake of praying'(p.5), and goes on to say that 'unless it is rooted in the boundless freedom of love and confidence in God, it is void and crippled' (p.5).

The second chapter finds us in the midst of the liturgy. He observes: 'Psalmody draws me along, farther and wider, stretches me almost

painfully at times, and deepens my empathy for the human race. ... The boundary of my soul is dissolved; the person I usually am becomes broader' (p. 13). At the conclusion he pays a special homage to one particular composer, Anton Bruckner. His symphonies are the monk's companions, 'a hike on an alpine trail with grand views, delicate flowers, runlets along the path, birdcalls' (p. 21).

Undoubtedly an attraction of the book revolves around the monk's experiences, from the age of 17, with Thomas Merton (Fr. Louis) as his novice master. Under the sub-heading, 'What Was He Like', we are given an essential description: 'He taught from a mind that was open to God and that accepts every person, with a heart willing to penetrate other minds and hearts and to identify with something he found there' (pp. 24-25). Throughout this chapter the monk offers us a well observed, honest characterization of Merton and his own nature. For example: 'Fr. Louis proved to be a master of introspection but it came at a cost. I believe he had to battle narcissism all his life. For me, nothing of this freedom from self-absorption came easily, given my inclination to guilt, self-doubt, insecurity and secrecy.' (p. 32) This is a substantial chapter with eight sub-headings and it is tempting to quote many passages. He has simply given us a probing, loving, personal portrait of Merton in eighteen pages that, in its insights, surpasses any full-blown biography.

The chapter, 'Nature, My Guru', is a paean to Quenon's ecstasy in being in the outdoors and in what ways nature is his spiritual teacher as he comes close to his true self among the hills, trees and birds. 'Several of the esteemed doctors and masters of my spiritual formation have been trees. Trees have often touched and molded my life of meditation.' (p.47) In his latter years he has taken to sleeping outside at all times of the year. Living at this natural pace demonstrates how much nature inspires this kind of eloquence: "Time, as I bear it daily, is weighted with eternity. The God who resists being named has a name for us. Throughout my time on earth, every day is a letter in the spelling out of that name for me: a slow revelation of who I am.' (p. 52)

The expressiveness, economy and precision of Quenon's use of language points to his adjunct vocation – that of a poet. This comes to the fore in the chapters 8-10: 'Prayer Nurtures Poetry', 'Battle of Wits with a Mockingbird' and 'Emily Dickinson, Soul Sister'. Here we have samples of his poetry rooted in nature. The poem about his encounter with a mockingbird is so delightful and whimsical. Outstanding is his essay on his beloved Emily Dickinson. He feels a deep sense of kinship with her as

a 'poet of solitude', a solitude in which 'she discovered contentment in God and repeatedly confessed herself as a bride of Christ.' (p. 91) He quotes particular poems which Quenon feels classify her as a mystic.

The twelfth chapter focussing on Merton's death and funeral is substantial and very moving. Quite striking are Merton's premonitions of death: 'I don't care what you guys do with monastic reform, I'm going to be out there pushing up the daisies. ... I am not going "home". The purpose of this death is to become truly homeless.' (p. 111) Quenon wonderfully captures all the details of the funeral's high drama, the writer's refined emotions pouring through every word. It is what any future biography of Merton must include.

The last two chapters are an encapsulation of the monk's spiritual and philosophical views, a portrait of his soul. 'God alone is pure act. My life is an exercise in being; it is a daily participation in and approximation to pure act. When it is authentic, it is a giving over to an astonishing freedom to be a pure act of love.' (p. 131) At the end of the book, in the chapter 'Epilogue', he poses the question, that after sixty years at Gethesemani, 'Have you found what you wanted in this life?' (p.134) He answers in the affirmative, yet 'it is a nameless yearning, one that loses its authenticity when you start to explain it.' (p. 134) He defines the monastery as 'a school of wanting, meant to take me beyond my mute desires into a deeper silence still – the inner repose of the heart where love itself instructs me in love.' (p. 135)

One can question whether Br. Paul Quenon's monastic life is useless. Unquestionably, his poetically inspired writing will be emotionally and spiritually uplifting to many a reader.

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