

## **The Monastic Way**

### **Melvyn Matthews**

First of all let me spend one or two moments trying to answer the question why I have chosen the topic 'The Search for Holiness in Today's World'. The first reason should be very clear - because I believe that we need, more than ever before, a holy Church. We live in deeply disturbing and challenging times, times when all is in flux, when much that was apparently true and settled turns out not to be so. I believe that in these days Christian people are called to live out the Gospel in a way which requires much dedication, much prayer and enormous openness to the work of God in our lives.

In each age, when there has been flux and change, the Church has responded by throwing up people or movements which live the Gospel life more clearly and more strongly. At the time of Constantine, the Desert Fathers took up this challenge. St. Benedict took up the same challenge when the Roman Empire lost its sway over Europe. St. Francis and St. Dominic founded a new way to cope with the rise of great cities .... and so on. I believe that today we need a return to the quest for holiness if we are to come through the present disintegration with any real Church at all.

Related to this is the situation of the Church itself. Over the last twenty five years, since my ordination, we have devoted ourselves to massive and long needed reform. We now have liturgies in the language of the people, we have genuinely synodical government, we have equity and security in the pay and housing of clergy and we have, thankfully, the ordination of women as priests - all long-needed structural reforms to the Church which have taken up our energies for twenty five years or more. There is still more to do, but we will not, I believe, progress any further now unless we also make progress in the evangelical life. It is no good having properly paid, democratically inclined clergy if none of them can pray. We have now to return to that inner search for God. Issues of ministry and management must be tackled by a holy Church.

I also profoundly believe that such a search is part of the decade of evangelism. I have very serious doubts about church growth strategies, church planting and the theology which accompanies it. Most of this seems to be no more than a spiritual materialism, a packaging of the church in the spirit of the age. I prefer to believe that the conversion of one person to standing still in prayer more often, and the development of a thoughtful and reflective church, whose worship rests on and derives from a deep sense of the mystery of God, will be more deeply attractive to the people of our age than a church which simply replaces a frenzy of getting and spending material things with a frenzy of getting and spending in its own ministry and management. We need more attention to mystery.

But the search for holiness also poses difficulties and dangers. Even the very act of giving lectures on holiness contains within it an implicit danger. This is because holiness is not something which knows itself. Once holiness known itself then it ceases to be holiness because it has become self-regarding. "Those who speak, do not know, those who know do not speak ....". I think true holiness does contain within itself a type of self-disregard, a lack of self-awareness, even in some cases, a self-forgetfulness which verges on the extreme - a form of madness for God. What it does not do is continually check itself out, or measure itself against a scale of holiness which is somehow regarded as 'the best'. As soon as the soul begins to worry about whether or not it is on the right path to holiness then the risk of losing the path becomes very high. When you have the way, you may have lost God. All that became very apparent to me while I was director of the Ammerdown Centre running a number of retreats. I became very disturbed at the self-regarding nature of so many of the people who came, particularly those who were influenced by New Age thinking. And so you might wonder why I have taken this risk of talking about the quest for holiness in today's world if, by the very act of talking about it, I risk destroying what I have set out to achieve. Part of the answer is provided by the author of that quotation I have just used, "If you find the way you may lose God." - Meister Eckhardt. Eckhardt, the German mystic and teacher, lived in the latter half of the 13th Century and spent a great deal of his time working with enthusiastic women in the religious communities of the day. Much of the 'enthusiasm' Eckhardt found very difficult. He was concerned to find a true way in an age which had gone overboard on religious experience. Without wishing to claim any affinity with Eckhardt, I think that it is true to say that we live in a similar climate when courses on 'spirituality' proliferate and Spiritual Direction is a growth industry. It seems that every person you've come across is part of one spirituality network or another, or has been or is going on a course about it.

You see, we are part of a Church which has embraced religious experience with massive enthusiasm - whether this is pentecostal experience or the more private and individual experience of a retreat or a course in spirituality. And I do believe that this phenomenon needs to be understood and placed in context. Our place in it will enable us to see more clearly where we are. Because it is not necessarily a good thing in itself. It verges on the anti-intellectual and narcissistic. Eckhardt - although he found himself in deep trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities of his day because of his attempts to clarify the place of God in the religious life and to distinguish the reality of God from mere religious experience - he, at least, did attempt the task. I feel very strongly that the same needs to be done in our own day. You see, God cannot be reduced to our own attempts to experience him. Nor is he 'a spiritual reality'. This might seem a surprising thing to say. He is not a spiritual reality whom you can possess or 'get' if you are spiritually gifted.

God is not 'a reality' or 'a thing' at all. He simply is and is known by us as whole beings and not known by us through some 'spiritual' sense which is like touch or hearing, but spiritual. Herbert McCabe, the Roman Catholic Dominican theologian, says "God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the Universe should add up to make two." So the growth of enthusiasm for religious experience risks now making a category mistake in understanding God, reducing the reality of God to the level of another thing, this time a 'spiritual' thing which you can know.

But I also think that we need to look carefully at the growth of spirituality in our day because of the way it risks a disconnectedness with this world. Not long after I became director of the Ammerdown Centre I wrote an article in *The Tablet* called 'The Director's Dilemma', which caused quite a little storm at the time. In this article I puzzled over the question as to why people apparently valued courses on 'spirituality' more highly than courses on the quest for peace and justice in a violent world. Weekends on 'Reconciliation', which God only knows is the thing we need, even when they figured people from Corrymeela or similar places dedicated to reconciliation, never recruited enough participants, whereas weekends on Celtic Mysticism or New Age Spirituality never failed. I wrote then (and six years later I would say the same, even more strongly) "A spirituality which remains self-regarding cannot claim to be a genuine spirituality ... from the joy of discovering prayer and the consequent awareness this discovery brings of personal wholeness ... there must emerge a profound moral concern for the whole of creation."

Now it is also for this reason that I feel it is important to risk talking about holiness ... in order to find a way of being holy in today's world which releases that profound moral concern. In other words, I believe that much talk about holiness/spirituality is cheap talk. Talk which makes a category mistake about God. Talk which misses the whole dimension of a renewed moral life - which St. Benedict calls a conversion of manners - which the quest for holiness, I believe, should bring. Holiness which claims to be so but which lacks a concern for peace and justice in the world is deficient.

The other thing I want to do is to issue a strong Government health warning. I shall talk a good deal about prayer, spirituality, holiness and so on and shall emphasise the importance of a recovery of the mystical sense. Much of what I say has been influenced by Thomas Merton - the great mystic - and I would like to dedicate these lectures to his memory, just after the twenty fifth anniversary of his death. Incidentally, it's important to note that there is now a Thomas Merton Society in this country. But, whatever I might say about mysticism or whatever, nothing of what I say should be taken to imply that the regular, normal practices of the Christian way can be abandoned. There is no special or extracurricular way to holiness for special extracurricular people. We all have to go through the normal processes. There is no new way in a New Age ... and I use that language very advisedly. There is no new way in a

New Age which abandons regular private prayer, regular frequent communion, attendance at Church, sitting on Church Councils, sitting on Deanery Synods or in cold cathedrals, or praying with people who may smell. If anything, the discovery of the presence of God in your lives and growth in holiness will drive you back to these things. Part of the way of holiness is the discovery that God is known in all things and not, particularly, in special experiences. Holy people are those who are, quite simply, aware of that truth and who live it without fuss or difficulty.

A similar health warning occurs in two quite different places. The first, in the prologue to the *Cloud of Unknowing*, where the author warns that nobody should read the book, or pass it to somebody else, unless they are determined to be a perfect follower of Christ, and that in the active life as well as in the contemplative life. The ideal reader, he says, will be he "who is doing all that he can, and has been presumably for a long time past, to fit himself for the contemplative life by the virtues and exercises of the active life." Which in our case, I believe, means attending P.C.C.'s or being a good Christian teacher or whatever it might mean. The other warning comes from a different source, C.S. Lewis, who in the *Screwtape Letters*, has the Senior Devil urge his junior counterpart to tempt his newly fledged Christian with thoughts of higher and better experiences. Then he will begin to scorn the Church he prays in and the fat butcher that he has to sit next to every Sunday. But enough of these warnings and preliminary remarks. Let us turn to one or two other matters. First of all, a brief review of the whole process. What I want to do in the lectures is look at a number of different contemporary "Ways of Holiness". These are all ways or searches which are coming into prominence within the Christian Churches in the present era. They are:-

- \* The contemporary resurgence of interest in monastic or quasi-monastic paths. Much of this is to be found in France and Europe. It's interesting that Charles Hadley, the Vicar of Somerton, has just completed a survey of this as part of his sabbatical leave. Some of the conversations that I have had with Charles will influence what I have to say.
- \* The resurgence of interest in scriptural spirituality - much of which is associated with Catholic women/feminist writers.
- \* The growth of interest in mystical awareness - the Alister Hardy research unit showing us that this is far more widespread than previously thought.
- \* Social and evangelical holiness movements, some of which are influenced by liberation theology, others by scriptural study.

- \* Finally an overall look in which I shall make some wider comments and suggestions of my own.

In each case, I want not just to talk about these movements but also to link them to see whether they are of this age only, how they are part of the development of a tradition, or not. I want to make some critical comments on them all. Inevitably, it's rather broad brush - but I'm told that I'm better at broad brush than detail so you'll have to put up with that.

Two summers ago my wife and I visited the monastery and monastic community of St. Benoît-sur-Loire in France. We toured the monastery on Saturday and returned for Mass on Sunday. It is the most lovely Romanesque building, simple but glowing with light. The coloured Roman pavement under the nave altar is quite stunning. At the Mass the Church was full and afterwards we toured the bookshop which was full of books on prayer and the spiritual life and a great deal on the Bible, which is the subject of renewed interest by French Catholics amongst others. So it was a warm, active and reflective community which welcomed us. The sermon during the 11 am Mass was a very intelligent exposition of a modern position on market economics - critical of capitalism, but affirming the need for wealth creation. It was very similar to recent statements by the Bishop of Oxford, so I felt quite at home! The liturgy was very - if I might say so in the presence of the Abbot of Downside - very Anglican in style.

The community there is, like all French monastic communities, a renewed one, dating from this century. It was obviously attractive to the young people of the modern age. Many were there. It is a community which is not only prayerful but also intellectually rigorous and socially committed. I came away, and not for the first time, deeply impressed by the vigour and thoughtfulness of French Catholic life. Much current Anglicanism, either management obsessed or emotionally obsessed, is quite simply flabby by comparison.

I have described this community at length because it struck me as being one of the best examples of "a new form of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming barbarism and darkness." In other words it is a community within which a life of praise and prayer is linked with communal love and a common intellectual reflection to preserve a fully moral life of openness to God - and by moral I do not mean simply 'behaving correctly' but also behaving with love and thoughtfulness stemming from prayer and praise and work. No wonder it was full up and crowded with visitors. The interesting thing is that that quotation, about the need for new forms of community within which the moral life can be sustained, comes from the end of an important book, *After Virtue*, by the American Catholic philosopher, Alastair MacIntyre.



I was reminded of the quotation while I was there because the monastery houses the remains of St. Benedict himself. I visited the crypt and paid my respects. The legend is that St. Benoît-sur-Loire had been founded by monks from St. Benedict's community very early on but later they heard that St. Benedict had been killed and so they sent out a small search party and recovered his remains and brought him back to France. This reminded me of MacIntyre's book because at the end he calls for a new St. Benedict in our day, "We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another, doubtless very different, St. Benedict ...." MacIntyre considers that western civilisation is at a crisis point markedly similar to that which obtained at the end of the Roman Empire. Then "Men and women of goodwill turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman Imperium and ceased to identify the continuity of civility and moral community with that Imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead, often without realising what they were doing, was the construction of new forms of community ..." These new forms of community were, of course monastic, based upon a Rule with an Abbot and a common life of prayer and work.

Our situation now is very similar because we too are at the point of failure of empires. It could be argued that the crises in the British way of life derive wholly or in part from our inability or our unwillingness to accept the end of Empire and to discover - post imperium - a new identity. Our current and previous Prime Ministers have been reluctant, in spite of their criticisms of the past and its reliance upon class, to accept that new morally responsible forms of community life are required of us. Both leaders have looked back to previous days (either under Churchill or under Brian Johnson) but have no coherent vision. 'Classless' increasingly means 'empty'. I have no wish to make a political point but simply to show that we are at a turning point in Western Civilisation. This turning point applies in Russia which again is finding it difficult to accept the end of the communist empire - and all of the recent turmoil there is to do with that. It applies in continental Europe where past empires are faded dreams. It applies also in America where retrenchment from empire is the commanding force.

In this climate what new forms of communal life can we see? In fact we see, once we begin to look, a remarkable resurgence. The revived community of St. Benoît-sur-Loire is but one example. We all know of the community of Taizé, the originally Protestant but now ecumenical community in Burgundy. We know also of Christian communes of various kinds which have sprung up and died down - but do we know of the Community of Celebration in South London - an Anglican community with individuals and married couples forging a new way forward which links prayer and pentecostal praise with a rule of life and social commitment. We know of Iona and Corrymeela, but do we also know of new community life in Tymawr where Una Kroll was professed and of burgeoning new communities in France, many of them based

on a rule with full acceptance of celibacy, poverty and obedience but also dedicated to contemplative prayer and the service of the poor - some of them afflicted with Aids? These Nouvelles Communautés have a number of particular characteristics. They are dedicated to contemplative prayer, particularly, and silence. They can include married couples and families, they can be more monastic. Dedicated to the poor, with beautiful, simple worship, they are often engaged in evangelism. They sometimes attempt to bring together Jewish and Christian traditions by celebrating Sabbath on Friday and they have a deep reflection upon the law of God as a blessing, as revealed in the Torah. These are new forms of community within which the moral life is sustained at a time of breakdown.

But it is not so much the external forms of these Nouvelles Communautés with which I am concerned. They are very diverse and descriptions of them as a religious phenomenon while interesting are not my immediate concern. Those of you who are interested can find them ... Charles Hadley can help you in that. I want to probe deeper into the inner significance of these new forms. Given that they are consonant with the inner meaning of the tradition can that inner meaning be translated into something of significance for ordinary Christians today? Can the person in the parish pew who is not inclined to monasticism of a celibate kind find any inspiration for his faltering steps from monasticism old or new? Isn't this just another form of withdrawal from the world? Even Canon David Gillett, the Principal of Trinity College, Bristol in his new book on evangelical spirituality makes some rather side-swiping remarks about monasticism. He says, "Whereas monasticism stands for some traditions as the epitome of the radical call of Christ to forsake all and follow him, for the evangelical this radical call cannot be left to the holy and encloistered minority."

Perhaps we should look at the Rule of Benedict. It should be remembered that St. Benedict does not stand at the beginning of the monastic life. Although celebrated as the Father of European Monasticism, he stood at a point along the development of that life, the point when it was being regulated - hence the elaboration of a rule (or Regula). Benedict's rule comes at a point when it was felt that the incipient chaos of early monasticism needed to follow proper procedures. Cassian (upon whom Benedict relies) interprets the traditional monastic virtue of 'discernment' as being achieved by following the advice of the brethren and the rules of the elders - not an individual matter. We have to live by following the consensus and the place of the abbot is to tell us what the consensus is and to enforce it. "True discernment," he says, "is obtained only when one is truly humble. The first evidence of this humility is when everything done or thought of is submitted to the scrutiny of our elders. This is to ensure that one trusts one's judgement in nothing, that one yields to their authority in everything, that the norms for good and bad must be established in accordance with what they have handed down." The weight of tradition is

codified into Rule first by the unknown "Master" in *The Rule of the Master* and then by St. Benedict who certainly modifies the strict austerity of the Master's rule, but does not abandon the general thrust, which is to ensure conformity of practice. For example, the Rule of the Master tells everybody what they are supposed to be doing at any time of the day or night in any circumstances. Monks are divided into groups of ten, each with two 'provosts', two, so that if they split into smaller groups they still have a supervisor. Nobody can go off on their own without being watched. The Master has a short chapter telling monks to be kind to those who are sick, but a very much longer chapter telling them how to make sure that somebody who says he is sick really is sick! The monk who claims to be sick must be given very little food so that unless he is actually ill, hunger might drive him out of bed to look for food in the kitchen! It has been pointed out by scholars that the master hardly ever speaks to people wanting to live in the monastery out of love for God, and even in the one place where he does, he immediately qualifies this and talks of "discipline norms of holy living."

Now Benedict modifies all this austerity but he does not completely abandon it. Esther de Waal, in her important study of St. Benedict - and it should be said that Esther de Waal, the wife of the previous Dean of Canterbury, is the one who almost single-handedly, in the Anglican communion at least, has brought the Benedictine way into focus for our generation and made it accessible for Christians today - Esther de Waal over-emphasises, in my view, the discontinuity between the Rule of the Master and that of St. Benedict. She says, "The Rule of the Master had given enormous power to the abbot. St. Benedict changes this almost exclusively vertical pattern of authority by emphasising the relationships of the monks with each other ... Textually his Rule may be almost the same in many of its phrases as that of the Master; but in its mood and outlook it is a world apart." I think that that just needs a little modifying really. Benedict does make changes - he allows the monks to elect their abbot, but only with special precautions to prevent them electing somebody who will consent to their faults. He reduces the supervisory procedures for the brethren, but requires the abbot to search the monks' beds frequently to ensure they are not keeping any private property!

The point is that the theology which underpins these monastic rules whether that of the Master or that of St. Benedict, is really Augustinian and contains the assumption that human minds and human wills are far too unstable and erratic, particularly it might be said, at a time of social breakdown, to form the basis for Christian discipleship alone. We need the objective support of the Church and the community and the grace of God within that community. A free and willing acceptance of community life is the gateway to holiness. In this perspective, true freedom grows when we accept constraint and so monastic obedience is a radical way of leading us to heaven by providing the circumstances within which grace can act upon us. In a real sense therefore

the monastic way is understood as a sort of cooking pot - it is enclosed so that gradually, by the very proximity of the recalcitrant ingredients to the heat of God's love, the true flavour of what they contain may emerge. I hasten to disclaim responsibility for that image - although I think that it is a good one! This is the import of St. Benedict's famous phrase in the Prologue to his Rule, where he says we must "learn to run with hearts enlarged." This has often been used by Christian teachers to encourage people to live in a spirit of openness to each other and to God, but the full quotation shows that it comes from a very different context, one which is suspicious of our capacity to reach the goal of holiness without constraint. The phrase comes when Benedict tells his monks that they must accept the discipline of the rule, "But if, for the correction of faults or the preservation of charity, some degree of restraint is laid down, then do not be overcome with terror ... on the contrary, through the continual practice of monastic observance ... our hearts are opened wide ..." In other words continually fulfilling the needs of the rule makes you love the rule ... or, as Simon Tugwell says, it relies upon the principle that behaving like Christians, we actually become new creatures in Christ.

Now if this is the essence of monasticism - the acceptance of a rule by which acceptance we are brought through to see the face of God - then there is a relevance here for all of us, who are not subject to monastic rules but who need to place ourselves within the discipline of the common life of the Church. The common life of the Parish can then be seen as that which replaces the acceptance of a formal rule. Just as the monk accepts the rule and the discipline, so the ordinary Christian accepts the limitations of the parish community, its pettiness, but also its opportunities. Each parish is a sort of cooking pot. Benedict's rule is not to be found so much in Chapters in Parishes, but in the discipline of the Parish Meeting, the P.C.C. and the limitations of worship in any of our churches, where we have to learn to live with each other through thick and thin. We do not need to live in a convent or a monastery to find a School of the Lord's Service. There is one not very far away from each one of us where, if we would accept the discipline of regular worship, of love in community and the rule of accepting others then eventually we will be able to run with hearts enlarged and find 'a sweetness of love that is beyond words.' The normal parish is then the primary place of "monastic" vocation for the Christian today. The inner meaning of the monastic way is that we accept the discipline of living with the people God has given us in the place where he has put us. And so 'the Monastery' is where we are. This, incidentally, is the reason why the French Bishops are so very suspicious of these *Nouvelles Communautés* which are all springing up. The French Bishops would say "Look, you've already got a School of the Lord's Service in parish life but these new communities are drawing people away from this life." This interpretation is given additional force by the fact that St. Benedict did not enjoin upon his monks a vow of poverty but did ask them to vow stability, that they would stay with those people in that place. Anglican

parish life then with its resident priest and its attachment to 'place' is in direct line with Benedict - it is popular equivalent of a rule originally intended for a few.

This is the interpretation given to St. Benedict by Esther de Waal who says, "... we might all too easily forget the continuing link of the Church of England with the Benedictine life. For the Benedictine presence, so strong in England in the Middle Ages, left its mark on the Church at the time of the Reformation ... It is hardly too much to claim that the Benedictine spirit is at the root of the Anglican way of prayer. And, if the Benedictine way stands above all else for balance and moderation, so also does the Anglican via media." But to say that the contemporary equivalent of the monastery, for everyday Christians, is the parish, particularly the Anglican parish with its emphasis upon the importance of place, while very true and very necessary, is only part of the way in which we might re-interpret the monastic search in our own day.

I hinted at a further truth when I said earlier that Benedict's Rule was one of a series of rules - albeit the most humane - which came into existence when Western monasticism became codified and preoccupied with the need for "proper procedures". What was there, then, before that? What there was was a more diffused but nevertheless strong tradition of monastic life more in the eremitic tradition - that is where the emphasis was upon the individual monk who takes up the monastic way on his own or with a group of others, all of whom are striving for the divine life, but where the links between them are informal rather than formal. They may resort to a spiritual father. Such spiritual fathers may have formed communal groups, but such a way of life - described best in the anecdotes of the Desert Fathers and in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus and then Cassian - was not regulated. So the great shift was not between the Rule of the Master and the humane Rule of St. Benedict, but between the Desert Fathers and the rules of western monasticism.

There are a number of theories as to why Christians flocked to the Egyptian deserts in such great numbers in the 4th Century. Some see it as a desire for martyrdom of the spirit when, after the rise of Constantine, physical martyrdom became an impossibility. Andrew Louth, the Anglican scholar who has made a great contribution to the study of mysticism, takes this view in his book, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*. He says, "Martyrdom had become, during the early centuries of the Church's existence, the ideal of sanctity: then martyrs were the athletes of the Christian life, those who had achieved a mighty victory in a great combat ... All this was (now) carried over into monasticism ... The Monk, like the martyr, is in the front line against the powers of evil ..." While there may be some truth in this, it is not an interpretation upheld by most scholars of the Desert Fathers. Philip Rousseau, in his study of the Fathers says, "Text after text declares that

endurance and deprivation were not the major aims ... striking self-denial was pointless if it gave offence ..." There is the story of the visitor to one of the Desert Fathers who says, "Forgive me, Father, for distracting you from your rule." The Hermit replies, "My rule is to put your mind at rest and to send you away in peace." And so Simon Tugwell says that the aim of the Desert Fathers is integration of the self, a rediscovery of who they really are. The point is this - before you can truly pray, let alone achieve any of the more refined feats of spirituality or service, you have first of all got to make sure that you are really there.

And the discipline of staying in your cell (that was one of the favourite sayings of the Desert Fathers, 'Stay in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.') is intended to bring you face to face with yourself and with your real needs and capacities ... "Without this foundation of self-knowledge and realism, any attempt to help other people will founder...." Thomas Merton takes this up in his search for personal integrity as the source of love for others. It's much more linked, I think, to Zen Buddhism in our own day than anything. Merton's interpretation of the Fathers is important as well. He says that it is significant that they fled to the desert at the time of the creation of the 'Christian State' under Constantine. "What the Fathers sought most of all was their own true self, in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in 'the world'. As Constantine christianised the Roman Empire, so the numbers of Desert Fathers grew."

And here we have a form of monastic ideal which is prior to that of Benedict and in some people's view more essential. It is the view that the monk is the one who seeks God because he has been found by God, and who then poses a question mark over the world. Now, I don't want to say that this cannot be done within the Benedictine tradition. Obviously it can be. I am just looking at the thing more historically and trying to draw out the points. In this sense the monk is only distinguished from other people by virtue of the fact that he gives himself exclusively and continuously to this search for God by forsaking the normal patterns of employment etc. in the world. Others seek for God in the same way within the responsibilities of this world. And so the monk is not set above others. Indeed the monastic life may give him particular problems, but he is one who treads the path to God because he is called, for various reasons, he may not know why, to follow that way. In this sense the rules and structures of the monastic life are aides to the discovery of the true self and may have to be adapted or changed in each generation. And this discovery of the true self is something to which we are all called and the monk is the sign that we are all called to that. In the renewal of monasticism in this way the whole question really is one of spiritual guidance.

Merton discovered these truths in his spiritual pilgrimage and sought to move



his community towards a greater acceptance but came up against the whole question of control by his Abbot and his superiors. Merton pioneered, through his reading of the Desert Fathers, a view of monasticism which is translatable into the ordinary life of the Christian involved in parish life, because it is one which is deeply interior. We need, he says, "another movement such as that which drew these men into the deserts of Egypt ... we must liberate ourselves, in our own way, from involvement in a world which is plunging to disaster. We cannot do exactly as they did, but we must be as thorough and as ruthless in our determination to break all spiritual chains, to cast off the domination of alien compulsions, to find our true selves, to discover our spiritual liberty and build on earth the Kingdom of God." Merton knew that he was called to do that by being a monk. But he also knew that this interior quest was possible in the world and essential in the world.

But it wasn't just a question of searching for God but also a question of putting a question mark over "the world". Merton went through a great deal of careful thinking about what he meant by 'the world' - 'What do we really mean by "this world", do we have to reject it, and what do we mean by rejection?' Merton came to say at the end of his life that the monk's relationship to this world was not so much one of rejection but as that of social critic. He had an extensive correspondence with Rosemary Radford Reuther, the American feminist theologian, who during the 1960's accused him of hiding away. He should come out onto the barricades with all the rest of them, you see, and fight the institution. He should come into the real world, she says "where the real demons are". Merton replied, and I think got the better of the argument by saying that "political action is too often rendered futile by massive corruption and dishonesty ... I do not mean that political action is ineffective, just that something else is needed." Merton saw the monk, therefore, as a deep social critic who raised questions over society which society cannot generate for itself. Only somebody living partially askew to it, as a monk, can do that.

This also becomes clear during his last speech in Bangkok, just before he died. He once again addresses the question of what a monk was. He told of his encounter with some Marxist students, whom he thought had parallels with monasticism. He said, "The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude towards the world and its structures." The monk is a social critic. I remember this coming out in a conversation I had with one of the monks of Bec in France when I went there with students. We asked him ... he was English ... what he thought was the role of the monk. He thought for a long time and then he said "asking questions." The social critic is allied to the monk who seeks God only. One needs the other and one without the other is nothing.

So I would say that the essence of monastic life and its contribution to us as ordinary Christians is the search for integration, for personal identity in a

disintegrating world. This is done by a quest for God and results in the asking of questions about the nature of the society in which we live. We desperately need this today - and therefore I want to go further back than Benedict and ask the questions which the Desert Fathers asked. So I think that the current emphasis on the importance of monastic life in community which I mentioned earlier is somewhat overplayed. New communities are just as oppressive as old ones. We need the monk, I believe, not to provide new communities but to ask radical questions about the sort of society we have. The monk is only really there also to remind us as individuals of what we should be doing anyway and can do if we would ... which is to search for God and his justice in the world.

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This was one of a series of talks given during Lent 1994 in Wells Cathedral.

