

Following Thomas to the Cloister

Fr Sam McNally-Cross

Exploring the monastic life

Like many people, when I first read *Elected Silence* (and later *The Seven Storey Mountain*) what I discovered was not just the tempestuous life of a monk in the post-war period, but someone who had remarkably, without ever having met me, reached into my very heart and mind and poured out all that was contained there in the pages of his autobiography. Thomas Merton quickly became my spiritual guide and so I, like him, began an exploration of the monastic life. I knew I needed routine and order, something that would root my life in the firm ground of faith and train me to be the person God had created and called me to be. I needed stability, and I found it in the beautiful prose of the Prologue of St Benedict's Rule — I was hooked. I began to cultivate a deep love of the monastery, of the history, the traditions and the different charisms that various brothers across the world and through time had practiced and perfected.

To cut a very long story short, I am not living in a traditional monastic community. I am a priest of a poor parish in North Kensington, in the shadow of Grenfell Tower. I am married to Jenny, and although we do not have children, we do look after our very lively spaniel, Marshall. I didn't follow Thomas into the monastery. I never quite managed to utter a yes in response to the words of the porter at Gethsemani who asked Merton, 'This time have you come to stay?'

But the monastic itch still needed scratching, and over the years I have applied various ointments and lotions to sooth it. Firstly, I became an oblate of Alton Abbey in Hampshire, attaching myself formally to a wonderfully eccentric (which I know they won't mind me saying) group of monks. Their good cheer, warmth, love and prayer carried me through my curacy in the Diocese of Oxford as I was cutting my teeth on the

clerical life. But it was not enough. I threw myself into study, undertaking a Masters Degree in Christian Spirituality with a focus on Monastic Spirituality and with a dissertation on Thomas Merton, thus blending my two loves: the monastic life and the liturgy of the church, all under the watchful gaze of Merton, still there, still speaking to me, still leading me on with words that could very well have been my own. But it was still not enough.

As an oblate I was living under a personal rule which bookended my priestly vows — the daily round of Offices, study and contemplation. But I realised what it was that drew me to Merton, what made me feel so close to him - we are both wayward and, left to our own devices, so often going off the rails. I needed discipline, order and, most importantly, accountability. I had a confessor, I had a spiritual director, I had the oblate master at the abbey, but I was now the parish priest in London, working alone with no staff or colleagues, unable to make the time to get to Alton, hindered further by no longer having a car. My monastic life, such as it was, was dwindling - and yet the desire remained.

But what could I do as a married priest?

Lockdown

Lockdown occurred and we were forced into a semi-monastic existence, unable to leave the cloister walls of our makeshift monastery. The church doors were closed by order of the Archbishop and obedience led me to follow. So my life became saying the mass in front of a camera, a lot of reading, and a sustaining diet of prayer. It was as close to living a monastic life as I could get. As venturing out of the house was limited due to lockdown, I made supplies last as long as possible and I occupied my time with chores amidst the prayers - following that old Benedictine motto 'prayer is work and work is prayer'. In a fit of Desert Spirituality I even taught myself to make rosary beads (which quickly became a fundraiser for my parish) so that my hands were occupied and I could do battle with the noonday devil. I was spending time in contemplative silence and finding great solace, so much so that I felt guilty at Clergy Chapter when fellow priests admitted to finding lockdown hard and I was enjoying myself immensely.

I continued too my usual trawl of the internet, reading the updates from the Benedictine Brothers in Nursia as they continue to rebuild post-earthquake, and the brothers of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico, reading the abbot's sermons and notes, and keeping an eye on what feels

like a spiritual home - Gethsemani in Kentucky. And via Twitter my life was changed as I encountered The House of Initia Nova, a Vermont based Benedictine Community in The Episcopal Church under the care of Abbot Michael-John. They are a mixed house of men and women, celibate but also having married members - not just as oblates but as full vowed members. Although some of the order live at the motherhouse (which is also a B&B if you ever happen to be in Vermont and need a place to go) most of the members are spread across the USA, UK, Ireland and Australia. The lockdown had caused the community to meet more than it ever used to, with weekly meetings on Sunday afternoon or evening (or Monday morning for the poor Australian brethren) and so I tagged along as an enquirer - or 'nibbler' as they call it. Over the weeks and months I got to know them, to experience their warmth and their dedication to 'The Rule'. They don't consider themselves to be a 'fresh expression' or a 'new monastic community' in the way that has become widespread; they are faithful to the Rule and exploring what that looks like in a different setting

I was hesitant. I had read a lot about different expressions of monastic life and one thing that had come up time and again was a watering down of the rigours of the rule, not out of a lack of concern for it, but either because of a different focus, a lack of clarity over detail, or the sheer practicalities. But that was not the case in The House of Initia Nova. As I began to make my enquiries I became acquainted with the requirements. There I found a real rigour, a depth that made sure this was not just play-acting at being monks and nuns but a group of people, a dispersed household who were accountable to one another, to their Abbot, to God, seeking the best path in life. References were to be collected, and if you were married your spouse had to be completely understanding and knowing that this would require time and effort. There would be financial implications to attend the convocations, postulants would be expected to make a whole host of commitments, mapped out for each day of the week, and to be in touch with the Abbot if it changed. In addition the novice master would set assignments every quarter (with a weekly check in) which needed to be completed including daily at least four offices and thirty minutes of lectio divina on the psalms with a written report of what had come up during that time of playful reading. The weekly meeting would be an expected fixed point and dispensation would be sought and granted only for good reason. It was as close to a monastic life as one could hope, arguably made harder by the lack of proximity.

My new monastic life

To commit to the process, to the community, meant a certain promise to be open and honest, to embrace the discipline and stick to the programme. I needed this. I made a formal application to join the House which was accepted and in November I officially became a postulant and was given the name Samuel-Bruno. I had spoken of my deep love of the Carthusians and my admiration for the life of their founder, Saint Bruno, and so the Abbot incorporated that into my new name.

I have found that being part of the community has enhanced my relationship with scripture. I am spending more time reading and praying with the Bible than I have done before, and I don't lapse as often as I would if I were relying upon my own will, for I know my novice master will expect a weekly report and will prayerfully respond. The community meetings each week are a balm at the end of Sunday, when I, after having fed my people with word and sacrament, am now fed too by the wisdom of the Abbot and the strength of the community. I am afforded different perspectives of the faith from different cultures and backgrounds, being carried by their prayers and adding my own voice to the prayers for others. I am still studying, completing my assignments but, rather than the rigours of academic referencing and drowning in footnotes, I am basking in the lived reality of what it means to live a monastic life.

I read the rule daily, reporting back on what has struck me. I read the monastic customary and constitution of the house on a daily rotation as part of my ongoing development, learning to love it and live it. The Abbot describes the community not as dispersed but on mission, running parishes or working in the secular world but connected by the ardent desire to enter the cell and to let it teach us everything.

I thought my monastic life was over, but in this lockdown I have learnt that it has only just begun.

Sam is an Anglican Priest and the Vicar of Kensal Town in the Diocese of London. He has completed an MA in Christian Spirituality with a focus on Monastic Spirituality and Thomas Merton's liturgical writings. He is currently undertaking a PhD at Anglia Ruskin University with a focus on The Promethean Theology of Thomas Merton. He is a member of the House of Initia Nova, a published poet and avid maker of rosaries.