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St. Scholastica's Priory  
Manila

Dear Sisters,

The responsorial psalm for the first Sunday of February is: “Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” This is one of the most touching pleas for conversion in the Scriptures. It reminds us that God's voice can be heard from our neighbor's lips, from the events happening around us or in the depths of our own inner silence. And this voice is often an invitation to conversion—to a change of heart, to a change of mind, to a change of behavior, to a change of life. It is also often a call to compassion—to listen to someone's sorrow, to share someone's burden, to forgive someone who hurt us, to be extravagantly generous to someone who needs help. And the second part of the verse enjoins us that when we do hear this invitation to conversion, to the call to compassion-- that we should not harden our hearts. A hardening of the heart is a very vivid picture of refusal of grace. We know that medically the hardening of the veins or arteries of our heart means certain death. Spiritually it also means spiritual death. When we harden our hearts to ourselves by not heeding the invitation to conversion and to others by ignoring the call to compassion, then we block the channel of grace refusing to let LIFE enter into our lives. Sometimes this hardening of the heart is a slow process caused by some disappointments, sense of having been betrayed, wounds inflicted by our loved ones or some misfortune or failure that can embitter us. But even at these moments we should remember God's promise: “I will change your heart of stone and make it a heart of flesh.”

On the feast of our patron, St. Scholastica, who is known as a woman who loved much, let us pray that our hearts like hers will always be hearts of flesh.

Lovingly yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

# S T A T I O C O N F E R E N C E

## DUST THOU ART

by Sister Mary Bernard Lansang, OSB

I started writing this conference on that day when Barack Hussein Obama stepped into history as the first black president of America. A week before that, the 17<sup>th</sup> Manila Priory Chapter was brought to a close with the hope of new beginnings. For a couple of days I was laboring, desperately trying to get my act together but my efforts seemed futile. But a day after, the school had its Sportsfest '09, a big and thrilling event for the high school Scholasticans. Together with the sisters, I rushed to the gym, leaving behind all my papers and books, ready to enjoy the fun. My heart swelled with joy and excitement as I watched the various teams marching their way to the gym amidst the thunderous cheers of the students -- a wholesome release of youthful energy! a building up of unity and collaboration!

These three events mentioned above serve as a framework on which to build up the theme of this conference: LENT: A CALL TO RENEWAL

- ✚ In her Common Letter 135, Mother Prioress Mary John sent forth a clear call that echoes the spirit of the Priory Chapter, **a call for renewed commitment to the monastic element** of our life as Missionary Benedictines.
- ✚ The inauguration of President Obama as the first African-American to become the President of the United States of America raised high expectations all over the world that the new regime “will clean up the American mess in Iraq, prevent the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and confront the conflict in Gaza.” **It is hoped that the new administration will address the global crisis in energy and fod security. In short, we have here a peoples’ Plea for Peace.**
- ✚ In her Welcome Address during the Sportsfest, Sister Roseve brought the cheering to a heightened pitch when she herself called out “Cheers for the Red Team... the Blue Team... Green Team... Yellow Team!” Amidst the resounding cheers, she sent forth her message loud and clear: “The Sportsfest is a vital part of your Benedictine education. **You are trained to play the games with fairness, honesty and justice. In the spirit of sportsmanship, you will accept success and defeat. This is the REALITY OF OUR LIFE... SUCCESS AND DEFEAT !**

## THE LENTEN LITURGY: GOD’S CALL TO RENEWAL

The liturgy during the entire season carries with it a distinct call to renewal: GOD CALLS US TO HIMSELF.

**“Even now, says the Lord. RETURN TO ME with your whole heart with fasting, weeping and mourning... rend your hearts and not your garment and RETURN TO THE LORD, YOUR GOD.”**

*From the first reading: the Prophet Joel 2: 12*

The Gospel reading on the day after Ash Wednesday and the days that follow are echoing God's call for conversion, renewal, a return to the Father. Christ himself calls: "Come, deny yourself and follow me"

### **Global Concerns : the Concerns of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ**

Ours is

- a world racked by the ravages of war and violence, torn apart by hatred, greed for power and ambition,
- a world suffering from the melt-down of the global economy, the pangs of starvation and despair of unemployment,
- a world of confusion, corruption and deceit, a world dominated by selfish interest and personal gain,
- a world of fast-changing and varied attractions; a world of consumerism heightening the search for pleasure and comfort.

This is the world that GOD SO LOVED THAT HE SENT HIS ONLY SON... not to condemn but to save it. This is the world for which Jesus Christ shed his blood upon a cross. We, the members of the Mystical Body are called to fill up what is lacking in Christ's suffering.

*It makes me happy to suffer for you as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ, for the sake of his body, the Church. (Colossians 1: 24)*

It is for this reason that Mother Mary John, in her message at the close of the Priory Chapter, calls for a three-fold renewal

- ✚ Renewal in the monastic element of our life
- ✚ Renewal in the simplification of our lifestyle
- ✚ Renewal in our commitment to our social apostolate

### **St. Benedict's Call to Renewal**

In all our communities, at the start of Lent, we have an Ash Wednesday assembly where Chapter 49 of the Rule of Benedict is read. I am using this chapter as a basis for our Lenten Renewal:

**RULE OF BENEDICT: chapter 49 OF THE OBSERVANCE OF LENT**

#### ***The life of a monastic ought to be a continuous Lent***

St. Benedict gently reminds us that the lifestyle of all monastics/ sisters ought to have a Lenten quality. St. Basil recommends a **moderate fast** for the sake of **self-control** that leads to **inner freedom** from "unregulated passions" such as *anger, aggressiveness or sadness, ill-humor and depression.*

According to Cassian, the monks fast “*in order to make themselves capable of living out the essential values of ‘goodness, patience, and love’ to attain **purity of heart and apostolic ‘love.’*** In the early Church, there was special time for fasting because *fast* was maintained the whole year. St. Benedict, in saying that the life of a monastic should have the quality of Lent, reminds his monastics to live out the spirituality of the early Church:

**v. 4    *This will be worthily done if we abstain from all vice,  
if we work at PRAYER WITH TEARS  
at READING and COMPUNCTION OF HEART  
and ABSTINENCE.***

Esther de Waal explains the monastic concept of *compunction of heart*. This expresses the experience of being touched or pricked (*punctio*) as if by a dart of love... as one is touched and overwhelmed by love that reaches out to love and to forgive and to end all that separates us.

Michael Casey, OCSO, explains to us that compunction of heart awakens in us the awareness of our sinful condition and *the urgency of our desire to be totally possessed by God.*

Lent is a SACRAMENT: a symbol of our whole life on earth  
**a gift from Christ himself**  
so that we may share in his suffering, his passion  
and the joy of a new life of resurrection.

**v. 5-6    *In these days therefore, let us increase somewhat our ordinary round of service  
prayers on one’s own  
abstinence from food and drink***

I recall the early years of our novitiate in the late 50’s. We submitted to Sister Magistra the list of Lenten practices we decided to observe. The list was read and approved by the Magistra. During the Ash Wednesday assembly presided over by the Prioress, this list was returned to us with a book which we were to read from cover to cover. So during the whole season of Lent, we had the rigorous practice of serving at table. During those years, the community in the Priory House numbered almost a 100 sisters. Table service was a real penance: serving soup, lemon drink prepared by our dear Sister Ricarda and the scullerians, pushing a heavy wagon loaded with serving trays. Then, we washed dishes and serving spoons; encumbered by the wide sleeves of our old habit. Can you imagine how tiring this could be?

Nowadays, the setting described above no longer holds true. Our communities are smaller; we have household helpers who do much of the cleaning, preparing of food, washing of kitchen utensils and other tasks. The SERVICE asked of us today is the SERVICE OF LOVE AND COMPASSION towards one another in community and the people who come to us: teachers, office staff, service personnel, our other mission partners in the service of the people. This would mean, among other things

- Listening to distressed co-sisters
- Being present to someone who needs our presence
- Speaking kindly when we are tempted to speak angry words; speaking words of affirmation instead of negative critical words that sting

- Participating wholeheartedly at community recreations
- Listening to complaints and taking time to work out possible solutions
- and many other ways of being present to others

In short, what is being asked of us is the supreme LAW OF LOVE: Love others and you love yourself. This means loving those who are unlovable wishing good to those who are unkind to us... kind and discreet in talking about others.

All this is possible on condition that WE PRAY and that in the SILENCE OF OUR HEARTS we allow our CREATIVE GOD to create in us THE MIND AND HEART OF CHRIST.

Having the mind and heart of Christ is expressed in a poem quoted by Timothy Radcliffe, OP. in his book JUST ONE YEAR: a Global Treasury of Prayer and Worship

**May the anger of Christ be mine**  
 when the world grows hard and greedy  
 when the rich have no care for the poor  
 when the powerful take from the needy  
     in a world of restless change  
     standing for love and justice  
     in a dark confusing time  
     bearing the light, the shining light of Christ.

**May the pity of Christ be mine**  
 when the outstretched hand's not taken  
 when the needy stand in line  
 when the lonely live forsaken.

**May the love of Christ be mine**  
 for the anguished, for the ailing,  
 for the frail disabled life  
 for the fallen, for the failing.

**May the action of Christ be mine**  
 bringing hope, bringing new direction  
 bringing peace in a warring time  
 offering welcome, not rejection  
 (Note: underscoring is mine)

Colin Gibson  
*New Zealand*

### **Taking TIME for PRAYER**

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says “Nothing is more precious than time.” Michael Casey says that time is specially valuable to be offered to God as a our gift of love. Time given to God is time withdrawn from other activities. So much is demanded from us who

are engaged in active apostolate and we are often tempted to skip time for Lectio and time for quiet and solitude with the Lord. I am in great admiration of some of our sisters who really take time for quiet prayer in addition to all the Liturgy of the Hours and the time for Lectio. We have some sisters who get up before 4:00 in the morning to have *prime time with the Lord*.

The demands of our apostolate can take its toll on us and on our life prayer. However, it would be good to learn from the example of some sisters who really take time for quiet moments with the Lord. We need to have the readiness to organize our lives. It is the love of God that inspires this organizing zeal. Time is precious and many things clamor for our attention; we need to create a *vacant space* for being with the Lord.

We easily repeat what Benedict tells us in his Rule: *prefer nothing to the love of Christ*. Michael Casey, OCSO, in his book *Strangers to the City*, has a very moving chapter on Christ. I am quoting portions of a page that speaks on our love for Christ:

**Personal love for Jesus, if it is genuine, is able to withstand the vicissitudes inherent in every interpersonal relationship.** Because the relationship with Jesus is dynamic, it involves us in the uncertainty that springs from not being in control. Spiritual growth works through change, but we instinctively resist change when it involves sacrificing the known for what is unknown. So, we must endure storms...

There are mysterious passages in life in which we move away from that which is pleasantly familiar and are inescapably confronted with the dread of a future that escapes our control. For Bernard, the alteration of experience was the criterion by which the reality of spiritual life could be assessed. **The sign of God's active presence in the soul is an unpredictable mélange of positive and negative experience. Every human life is marked by times of suffering in which only endurance is possible. The surest indication of responsiveness to grace is an uncomplaining serenity in the face of such disempowering reversals**

(Note: underscoring is mine)

### **Asceticism: Selfless giving : A WAY TO LOVE**

*v. 7 let the monastic withdraw something from herself  
some food... some drink... some sleep  
and some chat and ribaldry  
and with the JOY of spiritual desire WAIT for HOLY EASTER*

Asceticism, renunciation, is necessary first of all for creative action, for prayer, for love. Without asceticism, no one of us can live authentically. For genuine growth in monasticism, there has to be an emphasis on simple and austere life. So, Benedict reminds his followers in chapter 49 that monastics have to withdraw something from herself some food, some drink, some chat and ribaldry. In my early years in the convent, asceticism on food was hard... little by little, it even became harder when the concept of poor man's meal was introduced... but now that I am older, I see the meaning of giving up some food and drink especially in the face of starvation and hunger brought about by the global crisis on food and energy.

But more important than food and drink is the asceticism of silence . . . silence in controlling the tongue against unkind and critical remarks about persons... we can value silence more when we realize that silence is the balm for the soul to allow the Holy Spirit speak a word to us.

### *The Asceticism of Humility*

For me the greater degree of asceticism is accepting the reality of our human condition: accepting our own personal weakness enables us to accept the weakness of the others. Allow me to give an example of this from my own personal life.

When I entered the convent, I felt that I was self-sufficient : I thought my family background, my education with the sisters in San Fernando, later, my training in UST and my one-year experience in teaching, prepared me for the life and work that would be given to me in the convent. I was made to teach the first year high school class in SSC, Manila. Oh my God! That was my first experience of humiliation and discouragement and whatever you may call it. I could not discipline the class... no one paid attention to me... my voice was drowned by the noise of the girls. Then, Sister Gertude Brey, the academic supervisor, entered my room, sat in for observation. At the end of the day, Sister Magistra showed me the notes written by Sister Gertrude: *Sister Mary Bernard has a very monotonous way of talking... she lacks the art of asking questions... all her questions are answerable by 'yes' and 'no'.*

Reports from the students reached the Directress' Office. So, after a few days, Sister Liguori, Directress, called me to her office. *"Sister Mary Bernard, I got reports from your class... the window jalousies are destroyed but you never had them fixed. The trash can is filled with paper but never emptied, students throw their paper around the can but you never cared to look after this... etc. etc."* And she continued: *"I know you have been over-protected at home but you cannot live and work like this here at SSC."* She pulled out a copy of the Rule of Benedict from her pocket and said. *"See this? Benedict wants us to be shepherds of the flock entrusted to us... you have not lived this out."*

I left her office downcast, red-faced. Soon after, that the Magistra called me and echoed back to me what was said by Sister Liguori. You can imagine the rest of the story... **Despite the tears that rolled down my cheeks, I felt that this was a moment of grace.** There were many other failures that I experienced but every failure was for me a stroke of the divine. I have learned a lot from my failures. But I can say like our famous Fr. Pepe Calle, SJ, who, in his lectures spoke with emphasis. He would beat the lectern with the palm of his hand and say in his Spanish accent, *"In all humility, I am proud to tell you that I am humble!"*

This enables me to accept the reality of myself and the reality and weaknesses of the others.

### *The Paschal Dimension of our Life: a Living and Dying with Jesus*

The last thought I want to emphasize is that our life is a share in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. We cannot live without pain; we cannot go through life expecting a bright and shining horizon. One of my favorite songs is TRY TO REMEMBER... The last stanza goes like this

*Deep in December it's nice to remember  
although you know the snow will follow.*

*Deep in December it's nice to remember  
without a hurt the heart is hollow.*

*Deep in December it's nice to remember  
the fires of September that made us mellow...*

*Try to remember and if you remember, then follow, follow, follow...*

And what is so consoling in the Rule of Benedict is his emphasis about the JOY in the Lenten life of a monk.

v.6 *each one of his own will offers to God  
with the JOY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT  
something over and above the norm required of him.*

And then, at the end, after enumerating the Lenten ascetical practices, Benedict concludes

v. 7 (end) **and with the JOY of SPIRITUAL DESIRE  
WAIT FOR HOLY EASTER.**

It is in dying that we are given life.  
It is in dying that we can give life to others.

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### **Guide for Reflection and Sharing**

Review the Common Letter# 135 of Mother Prioress, Mary John. How can we, as a Priory and as individuals work towards renewal of the monastic element of our life?

Share how you can create in your community an ambience of silence and solitude. Share your own personal schedule **of time set aside for prayer.**

### **References**

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Strangers to the City. Michael Casey, OCSO.

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JUST ONE YEAR: a Global Treasury of Prayers and Worship. Timothy Radcliffe, OP.

## **Religious Life: The Dialectic Between Marginality and Transformation** by Sandra Schneiders

[Dr. Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., is Associate Professor at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. She is the author of *Women and the Word* and *New Wineskins*.]

THOMAS Merton began, early in his monastic career, to explain religious life and especially the enclosed contemplative form of that life, to what he then regarded as "the outside world." At first his attitude toward the "world" was more than tinged with the contempt and even arrogance of someone who saw himself as having chosen the better part in contrast to those who did not have the spiritual wisdom or moral courage to abandon the sinful context of ordinary life for the purity of the cloister. Toward the end of his life he came to realize that "leaving the world" was more an interior project than a change of geography and that a lifestyle that was obligatory for him because of a personal vocation might not be appropriate for another who shared exactly the same ideals and pursued them with equal zeal and generosity.

In the 1960s, shorn of the insulation provided by a false sense of superiority, Merton began to take seriously the criticisms of religious life addressed to him by people like Rosemary Radford Ruether. He felt challenged to address, inwardly but also in writing, the occupational hazards of the form of life he had originally considered as self-evidently superior. He realized that religious life, especially the cloistered form he had embraced, could easily pander to spiritual narcissism, back to nature romanticism, evasion of social responsibility and moral laziness.

In Merton's time, especially during the socially and ecclesiastically turbulent '60s, the cloistered contemplative form of religious life required a justification that so-called apostolic religious life did not. At that time ministerial religious life seemed adequately justified by the good works religious did, whether in traditional ministries such as education and health care or in more controversial involvements such as social justice activism.

In our own day the situation is reversed. Spirituality is as "popular" today as social activism was in the '60s and it sometimes makes unholy alliance with the self-absorption of "me-generation" narcissism. A single-minded pursuit of one's own spiritual integration and identity, which Merton often presented as the ultimate goal of monastic life and which is integral to the healthy spirituality of our own day, is no longer looked upon with suspicion by the "yuppie" cohort even though they may understand that pursuit in terms Merton would have found obscene. But in any case, it is less the contemplative form of religious life that is questioned today; it is the ministerial form.

The questioning of ministerial religious life comes from several sources. First, Americans in general, including Catholics, have ceased to regard the Church as a quasi-department of health, education, and welfare for immigrant communities. What religious once supplied through Catholic schools, hospitals, and social services is no longer expected primarily or exclusively from these agencies. And even if it were, the depletion of personnel and financial resources within religious orders makes impossible the continuance of these services on the massive scale characteristic of the first part of this century.

Secondly, the adaptations of religious life that were mandated by Vatican 11 and eagerly undertaken by religious orders, especially those of women, have effectively destroyed the mysterious subculture of religious life that evoked a certain fascination in Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Exotic dress, cloistered houses, and quaint if not macabre customs have given way to an ordinary life-style that no longer offers potential members instant identity or social status.

Thirdly, the theology of superiority that made religious life the "best" vocational choice for the spiritually serious as well as the object of a certain admiring awe on the part of those not called to religious life has been seriously undermined by the Conciliar teaching on the universality of the Christian vocation to holiness, the baptismal foundation of ministry, and the sacredness of matrimony as a state of consecrated life for believers.

In short, one can not only save one's soul and serve one's neighbor but also achieve the fullness of the Christian life without entering a religious order. Therefore, it seems to many, the only reason for entering religious life is to escape from the burdens of life in the world while enjoying the security of a congenial lifestyle enclave and meaningful employment coupled with relatively high status in the ecclesiastical social structure. No doubt the fact that religious life has been stripped both of its claim to a unique kind of social usefulness and of its religious mystique' has contributed to the decline in numbers of candidates. But perhaps this stripping away of claims to superiority which were never well founded has also created the providential climate in which religious life can be radically re-examined in terms of its true meaning and role within the Church's vocation to herald, signify, and serve the coming of the Reign of God.

It is not my intention in what follows to defend religious life. For those who are genuinely called to this life, as Merton often pointed out, no defense is necessary, and for the enemies of this life no defense is possible. Religious choose religious life because, in some deep way, they must. Like the artist who has to paint or the poet who has to write, religious have to do what they do, not because it makes sense but because life does not make sense for them on any other terms.

However, it may not be out of place, even in an ecumenical setting, to try to explain Roman Catholic ministerial religious life, not in order to justify it but in order to clarify its potential for contributing to the quest for justice in our world. Throughout his religious life and especially toward the end Merton was convinced that the life he had chosen was significant for the social justice agenda of his time. In his journal for December 22,1964, Merton records a sudden realization. He had, for days, been distracted at prayer in his hermitage by the incessant booming of guns at nearby Fort Knox. Then he notes,

The guns were pounding at Fort Knox while I was making my afternoon meditation and I thought that, after all, this is no mere distraction. I am here because they are there; indeed, I am supposed to hear them! They form a part of an ever renewed decision and commitment, on my part, for peace. But what peace?

I am once again faced with the deepest ambiguities of political and social action.

I, and many other religious in the Church today, are equally convinced that the quest for peace and justice is integral to our choice for religious life.

## **THE MEANING of RELIGIOUS LIFE**

For several reasons the attempt to explain religious life is risky, if not doomed to failure. First of all, religious life is not a Platonic essence realizing itself in accidentally diverse historical instances. It is a life-movement at the heart of the Church which has taken very diverse forms at different periods in church history and is undergoing massive change in our own times. These forms themselves are integral to the life as it is lived by its adherents and so any attempt to separate essential content from accidental form is based on a misunderstanding of the life itself. In other words, it is difficult to talk about "religious life" as such because, in a very real sense, like human nature it does not really exist as such but only in concrete and ever-changing forms.

Secondly, as Merton once remarked about his reflections on Cistercian life and prayer, whatever I say about religious life can and probably will be disavowed by some people who live this life with convincing authenticity. Nevertheless, in order to reflect on the relationship of religious life to the quest for justice in society and the Church I must attempt to explain that life itself.

I have already suggested that religious life can no longer be understood as an ecclesiastical job corps or as an exotic spiritual subculture and that it must not be understood as a comfortable lifestyle enclave for the religious elite. Furthermore, if religious life is to be significant for the Church's identity and mission today it must be so because of what it is and not just because of what some religious, in fact, do (however valuable that may be) because religious life is not merely a collection of individuals who engage in a variety of good works but a distinctive state of life in the Church.

By state of life I mean a permanent, stable, and public form of consecrated life in the Church, such as matrimony or religious life, which raises to visibility in a special way some aspect or dimension of the Christian mystery which all the baptized are called to live but to which all do not witness in the same way. Thus, my first task is to say what I think religious life, as a state of consecrated life in the Church, is and means. To what aspect or dimension of the Christian mystery does this state of life witness in a special way and what is the significance of that witness in our time?

Throughout his life Thomas Merton was preoccupied with the issue of solitude, his own vocation to solitude, the role of solitude in monastic life, and the contribution of lived solitude to the Church and to the world. Although Merton tended to engage this issue primarily in terms of flight from the world and physical isolation, first in the monastery and then in the hermitage, solitude is actually at the heart of religious life as such because that life, whether enclosed or ministerial, is constituted by the vow of consecrated celibacy.

It is perhaps not at all fortuitous that at the end of his life Merton finally encountered the most serious challenge to his vocation to solitude not in his voluminous correspondence, his frequent visitors, his world-wide reputation as an author, his social involvements, or his travel but in the experience of falling deeply in love with a woman. At that point, he had to choose celibacy not as he had in entering the monastery, i.e., as a flight from his own immaturity and self-centeredness, but as the free sacrifice of a relationship which could have become the center of his life. On May 11, 1967 he wrote that his love for this woman was "part of me" and that it revealed "[m]y need for love, my loneliness, my inner division, the struggle in which solitude is at once a problem and a 'solution.' And perhaps not a perfect solution either."

Celibacy, chosen as a public and permanent state of life, establishes the religious in an existential solitude which no bonds, however deep, of friendship, community, or solidarity in mission can mitigate. Aloneness is, in a certain sense, the inner structure of the life of the religious as faithful and fruitful mutuality is the inner structure of matrimony. This aloneness, if cherished, attended to, and dwelt in as the heart of one's vocation, finds its positive meaning in contemplative prayer. The solitude which religious choose through their public and lifelong commitment to celibacy raises to visibility in the Church the fundamental aloneness of every human being before God. I would like to explore two particular aspects of religious solitude, experienced as characteristics of this state of life, which have particular relevance for the relationship of religious life to the quest for justice: *immediacy* to God as a mode of Christian experience and *marginality* as a position in the secular order. It will be my thesis that immediacy and marginality are the foundation of the vocation to prophecy which Merton regarded as essential to the religious vocation.

### **IMMEDIACY AS A MODE OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE**

The characteristically human way of seeking God and working for the transformation of the world in Christ is through material mediation. As incarnate spirits, born in the flesh and immersed in history, we work out our salvation in and through the material universe in which we live and move and have our being. This is our natural element. Nevertheless, natural and good as this approach is, there have always been some people who have felt called to bypass, as much as possible, the earthly mediations of the divine and to seek God with an immediacy that would be as foolhardy as Hosea's marriage unless it were a response to God's own invitation. In the Christian tradition we find such people from the very beginning of our history. They were the Christians of apostolic times who chose virginity rather than marriage; the men and women of the fourth century who abandoned the city for the starkness of the desert wilderness; the monks and nuns who roamed the roads of medieval Europe; the missionary religious who set out alone for regions where the name of Christ had never been heard.

For Merton, as for most religious of his time, the immediacy of the religious' search for God was expressed in terms of "leaving the world," because the secular order is quintessentially the mediation in and through which human beings naturally live and seek God. But toward the end of his life Merton himself acknowledged that leaving the world was less a geographical than a spiritual project. And since Vatican II religious, especially those in ministerial forms of religious life, have come to a new realization that leaving the world is not a matter of physical flight from, much less condemnation of, the secular order. It is a matter of choosing, affirming, and trying to live the immediacy to God which celibate solitude announces and involves and to do so in solidarity with other Christians whose primary orientation is to the secular order as the mediation of God's will in their lives.

It is difficult to say what immediacy as a mode of Christian existence means. It certainly has nothing to do with an artificial "separation of powers and functions" in the Church which would charge clergy and religious with the sacred sphere and laity with the secular sphere. Rather, it has something to do with where one starts, regardless of whether one is dealing with specifically religious or explicitly secular matters. The religious who is true to his or her vocation starts with God, not primarily as the ultimate horizon in terms of whom everything is done, but as the first point of reference in which being and action originate. One comes to every historical experience out of one's immediate involvement with God rather than seeking God primarily through one's historical relationships and activities.

Obviously, such a stance is more than a little ambiguous in itself and it is a lifetime project to develop such an approach as habitual and consistent. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that this approach to the relation between God and creation is non-natural and therefore very dangerous. I do not say this it is unnatural or anti-natural for nothing is more fundamental to our humanity than the quest for God. But because it involves at least a partial bypassing of the natural mediation of God which our condition as incarnate spirits demands, it is a dangerous path. Merton realized this and often acknowledged that he was both utterly incapable of living this way and even more incapable of abandoning the attempt to do so. Religious life is not the heroic quest of the spiritual athlete but a wrestling in the dark of ordinary human beings who, for some reason known only to God, have been attacked by a messenger who holds the secret of their name and will not release it without wounding them.

### **MARGINALITY AS A POSITION IN THE SECULAR ORDER**

The attempt to live such an immediacy to God on a day-to-day basis has led to the development of a lifestyle in the Church which places religious on the margins of the social order. I am not speaking here of any attempts by ecclesiastical authority to enclose the daily lives or suppress the political involvements of religious, but of the marginality that derives from the choices religious themselves make and even institutionalize for the sake of maintaining their immediacy to God. Religious choose not to forge a common destiny with any other individual human being through marriage and not to integrate themselves into the world's historical process by procreating and raising the next generation of human beings. They choose not to participate personally in the profit economy either by working for personal gain or by making independent use of what they earn. They seek to guard an inner and ministerial freedom that is often incompatible with ordinary involvements in the political order. They choose a form of community life that transcends personal taste or advantage and intends to witness to the transcendent inclusivity of Christ's universal reign. These foundational choices are the coordinates of a lifestyle which places religious on the margins of the secular order as what Merton called "guilty bystanders" rather than at the center of secular life where they might exercise the leverage of tax-paying and draftable citizens.

Religious today share the anguish Merton often expressed over the ambiguity of their marginal position. Just as no one living in the flesh can retreat into total immediacy to God so no one living on this planet can stand fully outside the secular order. Religious not only eat and sleep and play; they also vote, serve on juries, hold jobs, and corporately own stock and real estate. And it is rarely absolutely clear when and whether marginality is the condition of prophecy or an excuse for self-protection. As Merton well said, religious life is "neither worldly nor unworldly. It is not artificially 'other-worldly: It is merely intended to be liberated and simple."

But as the monk realized, the more complex life in contemporary society becomes, the more difficult it is for one to live freely and simply, and the more important it becomes for some people to attempt it and to create a lifestyle in the Church which witnesses publicly to the desirability and possibility of living that way. By describing this attempt in terms of immediacy and marginality, rather than in terms of flight from the world or a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, I am attempting to avoid fruitless arguments over words and even ore fruitless involvement in ecclesiastical politics while continuing to affirm that religious life involves an inner stance and a public lifestyle which witnesses to the primacy and all-sufficiency of God and grounds a vocation to prophecy.