

## **Growing Up in a Somewhat Different Way**

I was fortunate enough to have known several monks belonging to an enclosed monastic community going back to around the year 1969. This acquaintance was not piecemeal but consistent over an extended period of time. Like most enclosed religious communities, the effects of the Second Vatican Council came later compared with active religious communities as well as the church at large. In sum, enclosed communities suffered the consequences more severely. I guess this was in part due to limited resources at their disposal and a certain hesitation to seek outside help. On top of it you could add uncertainty as how to handle new approaches to liturgy which plays a large part in such communities. As for the community at hand, from 1969 until the present it had witnessed a steady decrease in numbers and like so many others, its future is uncertain. One general malaise...and this is a fairly new one...is the inability of younger members to apply themselves to manual work.

What struck me was the witness of some five monks through good times and bad and whose memory remains as fresh as the day I had met them almost sixty years ago. That means they've been faithful to their vocation for some eighty years, an unfathomable time frame for us moderns. While those venerable monks maintained that the four decades flew by, I found from the get-go that for them the passage of time was irrelevant. Then finally the inevitable arrived One by one these monks passed on to their reward, the last one having died some fifteen years ago.

Naturally a long bond of friendship makes you wonder about the separation between life and death...or better, if such a separation exists. On the surface it sure looks like there is one, but sometimes you wonder. Perhaps that perception isn't as hard and fast as it appears. There does seem to be a connection which isn't a product of wishful thinking.

Shortly after getting this document under way, I had wondered why over an extended period of time these men stood out. No doubt about it. The community to which they belonged had an abundance of fine examples from which to choose. So what was different about them? First of all, each of the five (the others included, of course, but perhaps not to such a noticeable degree)

lived on the surface what could be called unremarkable lives. Nothing stood out, not even a ripple. At the same time they had keen appreciation of the monastery as a claustral paradise, an enclosed garden, which was a foretaste of heaven. I could compare them, albeit unfairly, with other members of the same community who for some reason or other simply drifted into the past. Interestingly these monks were gifted individuals and held positions of authority or influence. Not only that, I'd say this fading from memory happened with remarkable speed. Indeed, there's nothing like the passage of time to sort things out.

In a word, I'd say anyone would come to an appreciation of these monks as soon as you'd meet them. This infers something exists...is already present...within the person doing the appreciating which acknowledges the same with regard to those at hand, in this instance the five monks That faculty I prefer to call one of touch...*aisthesis* in Greek which has a broader application...is where we reach out and make contact with another person. It's not physical but more real than what we're accustomed to call physical.

In a situation like this I'm fond of using a description which is somewhat humorous but applicable in real life, that is, taken from Ps 110.1, "The Lord says to my lord." In other words, I like to consider this as the transcendent Lord mirroring himself in a person where this reflection recognizes a similarity, a connection at the hip, if you will. You don't do this every day; only on somewhat rare occasions this holds true which means an example is difficult to miss. However, this is possible by reason of a mind which is not focused and full of distractions.

Not long ago I had an experience based upon this verse or more precisely, where a recognition took place under a somewhat unusual circumstance. A friend from Ireland told me about several people not unlike those monks I had just mentioned but are now deceased. He briefly described them as somewhat eccentric yet deeply committed to following a spiritual life. If you were to press them as to their commitment, they'd respond in a fuzzy, almost Socratic manner that's leave you both confused but at the same time certain as to what they had described.

While some have teetered and others have tottered due to somewhat bothersome deficiencies, all managed to adopt a comfortable relationship with transcendent reality. While sometimes they'd call this reality God, for the most part they preferred avoiding it. I don't know why but figure they're being somewhat coy about all this. They had pursued such a relationship despite having been sorely tried. What makes this so strange is that never have I met these good folks. I just heard about them in a passing fashion but felt closer to them than even family members. While the latter are fine, when it comes to spiritual matters they're at a complete loss. Indeed, a sense of touch, of *aisthesis*, was operative here.

This contact with people who now are deceased lacks conventional verification but is as real if not more so than any other relationship. Indeed, it sounds strange if not completely alien. As for my own family members, never did I experience difficulty with such relationships, far from it.. However, they lacked that imperceptible "something" which belongs to these who are on the surface total strangers.

Members of one's family are pretty much engrossed in the world around them. While they may be upright and attend church on a regular basis, that's the sum total of their world. Indeed, it turns out that air (i.e., spirit) is thicker than blood. I can't help but recall Jesus' words in Mt 24.38-39: "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man."

While this example may come across as somewhat harsh and perhaps unfair, it conveys an uncomfortable truth. For millennia people have engaged in what we call natural relationships which are normal and expected. At the same time, Jesus' words put out notice that this doesn't necessarily have to be so. There is an alternative. As for the example of Noah, normal human activities took place after the flood right down to the present day. In other words, the flood was simply an interruption. However, it served notice that few people took to heart. What could that possibly be? In addition to putting the human race on notice as to the fleeting nature of existence, it showed that there are deeper

relationships than the ones familiar to us. While undoubtedly true, try passing that by someone you know, let alone a perfect stranger!

By any standards this type of relationship is difficult to grasp since the ones familiar to us are comforting and to step away from them is equivalent to losing something precious. I think once more of those persons just noted whose contact was so fleeting despite that never have I met them. They stood out in a real way as having not need to eat, to drink, to marry and not to give in marriage let alone other things so familiar to us. I venture to say they had no clear idea of why they were doing this except that they had to do it. Their life style, if you will, didn't follow conventional norms. How could they? they must have asked themselves this while at the same time remaining true to themselves which was no easy task.

There's a tendency to label such persons because they are so unlike others. Despite efforts in that regard, no category seems to stick and thankfully so. To some degree they are not very attractive, never having done anything notable. In fact, I know one who claims to be a hedonist. By that he means taking advantage of everything that comes his way and is not in the least bit shy about it. At the same time he follows a lifestyle centered around the Church's divine Office and is faithful to *lectio divina* on a daily basis. As for his relationships with those nearby, nothing special stands out. One day I decided to press him and asked what keeps him on the straight and narrow as best as he can. I loved his response, having been taken back by it somewhat. Right away he cited a verse from Baruch of the Septuagint: "The stars shone in their watches and were glad; he called them, and they said, 'Here we are!' They shone with gladness for him who mad them."

According to this delightful text one can't help but be drawn to God in a spontaneous, almost unreflective way. There's sheer pleasure at the thought of being with God without any fear or being bothered by the other baggage we're accustomed to bring. We're at our designated posts, the ones given us whether we like them or not, shining away as we should. We do this with gladness, this being our rightful heritage, if you will. As soon as God calls us, unhesitatingly we respond according to the Greek text *paremen* or "Here we are!" That verb *pareimi* more specifically can be rendered as being beside or near. The idea is

that God is right there with us and to behold him we have to look slightly askance for this, never directly. Such is the inference of the preposition *para-* or beside according to the verb *paremen*. Once the stars say this, they continue shining with gladness having concern for nothing else.

So concerning all the people I've met this person had everything and then some. To live in accord with those two verses from Baruch was both the source and summit. It revealed to me that's how we are to live and comport ourselves. As for the person tied in with these two verses, there's nothing noticeable nor attractive about him. In fact, the more I looked into his life the more turned off I was. It wasn't because he was morally deficient, just bland and never was able to relate with people in a meaningful way. Still, he had The Prize. The best part about having The Prize is that you don't care about your past. I think that has something to do with the way he identifies himself as a hedonist or better, being an Epicurean. Tie this in with the Baruch verses, and I think you have something worthwhile albeit slightly unusual!

What I liked about this self-identified Epicurean is that he discarded all ideas concerning holiness. It didn't even fit in with the way we've been thought to consider people close to God. In fact, if I pressed that fellow, I'm sure he would be rather confused, wondering why all the fuss about what we're talking about. That puts him in the same category as those people whom my friend from Ireland had recounted. Again, brevity of contact is secondary, so if you ever run into him, keep it brief. I'd almost say it's necessary so we don't get tied down in human relationships as described by Jesus when he referred to the generations before Noah had entered the ark. Despite the brevity, we have the ability to grasp what's essential and move on as we should.

This leads to another trait worth examining. Persons whom we're considering as noteworthy examples are not only hidden, they're constantly in motion, actually passing us by in a rather swift sort of way. Not that they move about from place to place and are difficult to track down. I believe they have an acquired slippery-ness about them in which they take great great delight. Nothing seems to stick, even good qualities. In fact, I know two of them who abhor attributing anything worthwhile to themselves. This has nothing to do with a false humility. It's just that they have a distinct aversion to being labeled

either this or that.

In fact, not long ago one of these fellows told me outright that he had nothing to do with divine reality, even getting somewhat worked up about any potential association. Admittedly I reveled in the way he described this in a genuine, child-like fashion which was as genuine as could be. Clearly I could see he had a keen sense of unworthiness, knowing that by its very nature the transcendent realm can have minimal contact with the created one. The two are pretty much alien to each other or better, the former is more inclusive whereas the latter is not and tends to grasp and therefore appropriate anything it comes across.

As for human representatives of the created order, they imitate their transcendent source not so much by belittling themselves (that would be contrary to both the divine and human order) but by allowing people to belittle them. They don't go out and seek this in an active fashion. In a way, they have an uncanny ability to displace their environment. This is a difficult ability to articulate. Let's say that they know how to exert the right amount of indirect action which in turn allows the right amount of misunderstanding to come their way. And so this gesture turns out to be a source of protection. Actually such misunderstanding is a gift which forms a unique type of armor—a protection which seems devoid of protection—thereby diverting what's really harmful, namely pride. At the same time it allows the right amount humiliations in to maintain the order proper to each person involved.

A cautionary note, if you will. Should you be in a conversation and happen to mention one of those persons whom you had met in a fleeting yet real way, chances are you'll find the response to be overwhelming. However, you have to be on the lookout so as not to go down the path of describing them too much. Instead, you have to be ready to cut the conversation short because no amount of explanation about them will avail.

I'm reminded of a common situation where the element of religion comes up. Almost always the person involved will say that he or she is spiritual, not religious. I still haven't figured out what that means. I take it as a kind of convenient cop-out as well as a means of self-defense, depending on the situation. I also take it as a sign that continuing the conversation would go

nowhere and be a source of embarrassment. Also it can be a source of hostility that would erupt right on the spot.

One theme, if you will, I've come across many times and which is along the lines delineated in the paragraph above. It consists of a person who claims to have been raised in a generally religious household. The family went to church regularly, and the children had attended Sunday school. Somewhere along the line religion got left by the wayside which created the perfect condition for one to claim to be spiritual, not religious. Sometimes the person had a negative experience of his or her church whereas others have not. They simply drifted away which seems to be the most likely scenario.

Like everyone else, these good people—and they are precisely that though they live in a kind of middle non-descript land—are looking for guiding principles by which to live, hence their default spiritual-but-not-religious position. They tend to lean toward psychologically oriented guidance and reading material. This is a perfect basis from which to make a claim we hear often that all religions are the same. God is God regardless. We just happen to be deposited in one religion whereas someone else is equally fine in another religion. Big deal. So what.

You can live your entire life in this psychological orientation. However, after a while it doesn't satisfy and those following it know this to be true. The problem is they don't have the tools to appreciate it. Those favoring such a position enjoy an apparent freedom when it comes to talking about life's problems and ultimate questions pertaining to life and death. At the same time a person can run around around his or her entire life with a vague though persistent dissatisfaction. Thus it's impossible to hold down a meaningful conversation about ultimate questions. They lack not so much the capacity to do so but the willingness to follow through and admit their mistaken position.

With this in mind I get the impression that the real problem in life is not psychological but theological. Most people are comfortable centering their lives discussing the former because term terminology is sufficiently vague while at the same time attractive and hence neutral. In many ways the psychological and theological touch each other which if you're not sufficiently grounded to

distinguish between the two, the situation can be quite confusing. The biggest barrier consists not in theological issues *per se* but with an identification with how one had been indoctrinated. That turns out to be the default position. It includes all the familiar jargon ranging from Sunday school to quasi-dictatorial teachers and clergy who, despite their position of authority, have been sorely lacking.

For some reason or other—and I garner this from many people over a long period of time—this is a sticking point they're not willing to overcome. The means to do it is right there, but there's a satisfaction being fenced in by one's own prejudice and ignorance. Often it's a sure fire way to garner sympathy. On top of this we can add the litany of problems associated with a religious institution. While there's a lot of abuse and things needing to be set aright, in essence much of the talk is pure nonsense. So if you want to pick someone's sore spot, go no further.

If you can cut through the gibberish, most people would jump at the chance to discuss as well as read good material about theological principles. They touch our very being like nothing else. On the other hand, psychology is more descriptive of the human condition. It's language is attractive by reason of being more flexible compared with anything theological or theological commonly perceived. When dealing with topics related to the absolute, an automatic, unfortunate mode of presenting material somehow rises or better, boils up to the surface. It's not unlike being clothed in a suit of armor trying to walk about. You feel clumsy (and really are such) but can't figure a way to get out of it. This is an ideal situation for someone versed in psychology to have fun with. Apart from taking advantage of such a person, one can use descriptive language with great ease and conviction. Your opponent can only come off with disjointed statements that can be quite embarrassing.

So if you want to use theology in the right way, one step forward would be to appreciate the meaning of this very word compared with spirituality. The former deals directly with God (*Theos* obviously meaning God) whereas the latter is more loose and can be more subject to gnostic influences. Besides, as noted above, spirituality is a favorite word of those who lean more towards psychology. The two often are interchangeable resulting in a jumble.

I may not have the right tools of expression which favors theology, but through out reading scripture as well as Church Fathers in the spirit of *lectio divina* might be one way to go. I've written oodles upon oodles of information about that subject on this homepage so won't go into it here. The only thing worth mentioning is that it demands using texts as a handmaid for prayer or contemplation. Another element I've found is making a shift, if possible, from the Latin tradition to the Greek one which is often associated with Orthodoxy. That, of course, would require an article unto itself.

Good enough, but allow me to add the Syriac tradition which is quite different from both the Latin and Greek. It's more Semitic and in greater contact with both testaments of the Bible because of its poetic leaning when describing the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, by reason of heading East instead of the Mediterranean world and further West, it's more adaptable for any meaningful contact with Buddhism. What this revealed to me—and I could be way off base on this—is that Christianity is just starting to emerge from its diaper stage. It needs to come in contact with one of the world's most advanced religious traditions to reach maturity. A single Thomas Aquinas isn't enough. It will take several teams of such theologians over an extended period of time to bring about such a goal. Theologians may not be enough. I'd say the task at hand requires those living a monastic life.

That seems to be the way we're headed provided we can avoid self-destruction. The anonymous persons whom I've noted are sign posts along the way. Always they have been such persons who haven't eaten, haven't drunk, having married and haven't given in marriage. In a way, they are more than sign posts. They represent what the church always had been at its core, is at present its core and will be at its core. Such is the cloistral paradise they represent which is attractive to all men and women.

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