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Benedictine Life as School of Communion

by: Armand Veilleux, O.C.S.O.

Every year the Benedictines at the Primatial Abbey of Sant'Anselmo in Rome invite the Benedictine monks and sisters of the area of Rome on the occasion of the feast of St. Benedict, and they usually ask someone to give a talk. On March 23, 1996 I was asked to speak. I spoke on various aspects of monastic life, around the theme of Communion.

Of what can one speak to an assembly of the *fortissimum genus coenobitarum*, except the reality that constitutes the heart of the cenobitic life, namely, communion.

It is not my intention, however, to present you with a theological or spiritual dissertation on the theme of communion, but rather with a simple series of reflections of a practical nature on the present situation of the monastic life, as I see it, grouping these reflections around the theme of communion. By the expression "monastic life" I mean first of all Benedictine monastic life, that is to say, that of the great family of nuns and monks who live under the Rule of Saint Benedict, which constitutes almost the entire *Ordo monasticus* of the Latin Church, and to which I have the honor and pleasure of belonging, though I am not a member of the Benedictine Confederation.

Benedictine monks and nuns are called to live communion at many levels. First of all, communion with God in prayer and contemplation, then communion with the sisters or brothers of the local community. Then comes communion with the local Churches where their monasteries are established and the universal Church, as also communion with Christians of other confessions and members of non-Christian religions. Lastly, we must not forget communion with civil society and with the entire cosmos.

A) Let us speak first, then, of **communion with God**, that is to say, of the contemplative dimension of the monastic life. I deliberately use the expression "contemplative dimension" rather than "contemplation", since this latter word is used in our day with such a variety of meanings that it has become terribly ambiguous. Equally ambiguous is the expression "contemplative life".

If there is one constant and clear teaching in primitive monasticism, it is that the form of prayer proper to the monastic life is continual prayer. All the observances, such as reading of the Word of God, the *Opus Dei*, meditation etc. are either expressions of this continual prayer or means of nourishing it. By this continual prayer the monk or nun seeks to arrive at a union of heart with God that is as continual as possible, which is precisely what is called contemplation.

When the Fathers of monasticism speak of the active life and the contemplative life, they have in mind two inseparable dimensions of the spiritual life which are both necessary. From the time of the scholastics, these expressions -- as also that of the "mixed life" -- began to describe states of life. And we come to the present situation where we speak of active communities and of contemplative ones, then of Institutes wholly dedicated to contemplation. Almost all the documents of the Holy See that speak of those communities "wholly dedicated to contemplation" seem, however, to be thinking solely of communities of women with papal enclosure.

This terminology seems to me totally inadequate, since it can easily lead monks to forget that they too are called to the contemplative life, not only because that is the vocation of every Christian, but also because all the other forms of communion to which they are called as cenobitic monks have no value and no meaning without a life of profound

communion with God. And if a life of profound communion with God cannot be called "contemplative life", I don't see what valid meaning can be given to this expression.

B) For a cenobitic nun or monk, communion with God is not only expressed but also incarnated in **communion with a community of sisters or brothers**. This is so true that, when profound communion of heart with God is not consciously perceived as the end of the monastic life, the meaning of fraternal communion becomes blurred, and a community is easily transformed into an institution simply gathering together a number of persons around a common work or a set of common interests.

A *coenobium* is more than a group of persons living together and united around common tasks, be they the celebration of the Opus Dei, teaching, or earning a living by a material activity of an agricultural or industrial nature. Saint Benedict wrote his Rule for a community of persons who, after mature discernment, promised their stability in a community of brothers living under the same rule and an abbot, and who also practiced mutual obedience as a form of communion.

These three elements: community, rule, abbot, are for Benedict the three elements which constitute the cenobitic life, and the order in which they are expressed is very important. The history of the cenobitic life shows us that each time the balance between these three elements, or the order of their subordination was modified, there was a deviation from the charism. In certain centuries the Rule was given such prominence that legalism resulted, at other times community was stressed to the point of arriving at a kind of parliamentary democracy, while at other times again, the role of the abbot was accentuated to the point of transforming it into a monarchy. And, whether we like it or not, the conception of community and the role of the abbot are always conditioned by the sociological situation of each epoch.

The great French historian, Dom Germain Morin, studying the eleventh century, speaks of a "crisis of cenobitism". It seems, indeed, that there is a "crisis of cenobitism" each time the monastic life finds itself confronted with an important cultural change. Thus we can ask ourselves if there is not in our time also a crisis of cenobitism.

In Benedictine tradition, the role of the abbot as the one responsible for communion is fundamental. Consequently, a crisis of cenobitism in any century always implies a redefinition of the role of the abbot in the community. We may ask ourselves whether, paradoxically, the scientific studies of the past forty years have not contributed to this crisis. The energy devoted to the study and analysis of the sources of anachoretic and semi-anachoretic monasticism has been enormously more considerable than that devoted to the study of the cenobitic tradition.

In particular, the numerous studies made on the tradition of the abbot have been confined mostly to the tradition of the charismatic Father of the Desert, who transmits his personal spiritual experience to a group of disciples (who will eventually leave him, to advance further on their solitary journey). This is a figure very different from that of the cenobitic abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict or already in Pachomian cenobitism. Each time that, in the course of the centuries, these two figures have been confused, that is to say, each time anyone has tried to institutionalize the charism of the spiritual father, the end result has been disastrous.

What we expect of the father of a coenobium, is that he weave the web of the community, that he help the community to develop and to cultivate its own collective identity. In such a community the monk receives his spiritual orientation most of all from the very life of the community, which is of course directed by the abbot. We speak sometimes of "great abbots" or "great abbesses". They are of two kinds. There are those who have a real charism of spiritual paternity or maternity, and who exercise it as would the guru of an ashram or the father of a colony of hermits. For the most part, the members of the community depend to such a point on their direction and their charism that they could not imagine having another abbot. When the father dies or resigns, the group of disciples that he has formed often has great difficulty in regrouping around another "father". A spiritual father of the desert had strayed into the cenobitic life. There are also other great abbots whose charism is to build up and to guide a community capable of forming its own members. In these communities, it is truly Christ who is the abbot. And when the one who represents him for a time in the midst of his brethren dies or resigns, the life goes on without problems arising from the transition, around the same Christ whose representative another becomes.

C) This leads us naturally to another dimension of communion: **communion with the Church**. One hesitates somewhat to use this expression which would seem to give the impression that the monk is not a member of the Church... If the monastic community is an autonomous cell of the universal Church and therefore of the local Church, it is linked not only to the universal Church in a canonical fashion, but also, spiritually and sacramentally, to a diocesan Church and a national Church.

Since Vatican II, the Church has had a certain amount of difficulty in getting used to a language of communion. The attempts of collegiality in the years following the Council have not always been felicitous. There have been hardening on all sides, and we have arrived at a situation where it is often difficult to find the possibility of an intermediary attitude between passive submission and rebellion. True communion lies, however, between these two. In the preparatory documents for the last Synod on the religious life, for example, there was much talk of "communion of religious with the Church", but the expression seemed to signify in almost every case simple submission to the decisions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This submission is obviously necessary, but it is only reasonable when it is one of the elements of a much larger reality which is called communion.

I think that monks, with their centuries of experience of communion, have much to bring to the Church in this domain, even though we know that this experience has not always been without problems. Already in the fourth century, Athanasius wrote the Life of Antony, not only to give a pastoral orientation to the masses of monks of his Church, but also to get the somewhat primitive monastic movement accepted and taken up by the official Church. Basil did something similar in Cappadocia. From this time on, despite periodic tensions (inherent to communion), the monks lived in profound communion with their local Churches and with the universal Church. Later, however, in reaction to the domination of the monasteries by secular and ecclesiastical lords, the monks gained their independence and their exemption from episcopal authority, considering themselves directly under the authority of the Bishop of Rome. It seems that a new equilibrium needs to be found in this domain.

In the great monastic families there has always been a communion between the monasteries of nuns and those of monks. Even if, under the influence of different cultural and ecclesiastical contexts, this relationship could be transformed in certain cases into passive submission on the one hand, and domination on the other, fundamentally it is a relationship of communion which has always been fruitful for both parties. In our days, while a new sensitivity makes us more aware of the domination to which women have been subjected by men in every culture, and this for thousands of years, and while the Church is having difficulty in finding a role for women among its ministers, monastic communities have certainly an unique contribution to offer to the Church and to society.

The discussions on the nuns' enclosure, which occupied what seemed a clearly disproportionate amount of time during the last Synod on the consecrated life, is an indication of the degree to which this is a hot point. In certain religious Orders, a very strong tension has developed between one sector defending and maintaining absolutely the medieval legislation with all its keys, its grilles and its male controls, and one sector which would wish to reinterpret this tradition.

For the nuns as for the monks solitude has always been an important part of monastic life. In centuries of war or of barbarism, it was at times necessary to defend the monasteries of nuns by a material separation more strict than that of the monks. Later, with the appearance of new types of communities of women, the Holy See judged it necessary to draw up a uniform legislation for all cloistered female communities. As a result, there developed in these new Orders around the material enclosure a certain mystique wholly foreign to the great monastic tradition. Perhaps nuns of the Benedictine tradition will be able to help other communities, and also the Roman Congregations, to rediscover in all its demands, but also in all its simplicity, the spiritual value of solitude, purified of all the recent ideological constructions which want, for example, to make of a grille or a bunch of keys a mystical symbol of the spousal character of the Church.

D) Man and woman of communion, the monk or the nun must be specially prepared for **inter-religious dialogue** as well as for **ecumenical dialogue** with Christians of other confessions.

If a monk is truly what his name signifies, that is to say, a unified person, having one sole preoccupation, one sole love, one sole aim in life, he must be also a free person, entirely possessed by the truth, possessing nothing, and above all not claiming to possess the truth. If such is the case, he is living on a level where he is united with everything and everyone.

This is why the Holy See gave monks and nuns a very particular role in the dialogue between Christianity and the other great spiritual traditions of humanity, especially those where we find a long monastic tradition, sometimes more ancient than that of Christianity.

E) The communities of the great Benedictine family being spread over the whole world, the question of **inculturation** and the **new evangelization** obviously arises in a very special way for them. Here too we find a challenge to communion: the communion with cultures. I have mentioned in the same breath "inculturation" and "evangelization" because it seems to me that these two names express the same reality. Inculturation is the

encounter of a culture with the Gospel in the process of evangelization. But each time a culture changes -- and we know that all cultures change rapidly in our days -- this culture must be confronted once again with the Gospel, that is to say that it has need of a new evangelization. In this sense, our Churches of the West, beginning with those of Western Europe and North America, have need of inculturation just as much as those of Africa, Latin America or Asia.

An inculturation is true only when it is in communion with the culture and not a lofty judgment passed on it. In this, too, monks have a great contribution to make.

Here, however, there is a danger. In our western societies the monasteries recruit for the most part among the dominant classes of society, who tend to be the most reactionary. In an epoch of profound cultural transformation, where in every culture are found elements of death and elements of new life, there is the danger of monks adopting a haughty attitude in the face of cultural changes and of setting themselves up as a counter-culture, which is totally foreign to the great monastic tradition. We speak too easily in our days of post-modernity, sometimes celebrating, in this hypothetical reality, a victory over a modernity that is judged to be dead or obsolete, without realizing that, for most philosophers of this so-called post-modernity, this would mean the end of strong thinking and therefore of all metaphysics and all form of dogma.

In today's society, I think the true desert, the desert where monks and nuns should perhaps take refuge, is this space which is growing ever smaller -- in civil society as in the Church -- between the extreme right and the extreme left. Traditional Benedictine *discretio* invites the monk of today into this desert. It is perhaps the place where, following the young Benedict, he must live out his *habitare secum*.

If the space between the ideologies of right and left is becoming ever smaller, the number of poor and oppressed who occupy this space, that is to say, the victims of these two extremist attitudes, is becoming ever greater. The mission of monastics to be men and women of communion calls them today to communion with the enormous masses of expatriates, of refugees, of unemployed. Benedictine hospitality is needed more than ever. Benedict had foreseen this hospitality for the poor, the pilgrims and the homeless. It would be sad if in certain places it were reserved primarily for the programmers of movements belonging to right or left.

F) Another dimension of communion which assumes a special importance in our day is **communion with the planet** and with the whole cosmos. Called to unity, the monk is by vocation sensitive to the links which join him to the whole of creation, which has come in its entirety from the hands and the love of the same creator. Concerned with restoring everything to the harmony it enjoyed before the fall, the monk is concerned also with restoring harmony between himself and nature, exploited and in peril. An attitude which implies rejection of uncontrolled consumerism of resources and thus obliges us to make concrete economic choices.

Conclusion

As I said in the beginning, rather than a spiritual treaty, beautifully prepared, on the reality of communion, I have preferred to offer you some personal reflections on communion, as I perceive it in its concrete reality today. These reflections, to be sure, are entirely subjective. But I think I can say that they are born of communion: of my communion with the Church and with the great Benedictine family as with the world of today, but above all -- at least so I hope -- of my communion with God.

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