FOUR

The Monastic Legacy

Although the days when monasticism was a formative force in both Christianity and western civilization are now several centuries in the past, its impact remains, often in ways we are not aware of. On the whole the legacy of monasticism has been richly beneficial, but there have also been negative aspects to its legacy which need to be acknowledged.

Monasticism after the Reformation

After the Reformation the story of monasticism is chiefly the story of new religious orders which turned their focus from personal spirituality to institutional service to the Church and the world. The original monastic commitment to conversion and prayer was not abandoned, but after the Reformation monasticism became an almost exclusively Catholic activity, and the emphasis in it shifted to combining spiritual development with specific institutional activities.

In the Protestant world monasticism would in effect be eradicated. Despite their many other disagreements the Protestant reformers were in complete agreement on two things. One was rejection of any allegiance to Rome, and the second was an absolute rejection of monasticism. In every nation where the Protestant Reformation took root the monasteries were closed, their members turned out to fend for themselves, and their lands and buildings sold off to the highest bidder. Much of the capital that initiated the present western economy came from these confiscations.

In Catholic nations the old monastic institutions continued to exist, but their influence and power were greatly diminished. There were

new post-Reformation religious orders founded to defend the Catholic Church against the new Protestant challenge, but increasingly the monastic impulse was absorbed into the institutional Church. The Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, was preeminent among these new orders.

Other new Catholic orders would be formed to carry out evangelism in the newly discovered parts of the world, especially Asia, Africa and Central and South America. This was not an entirely new development by any means. Gregory the Great had initiated it in the early 600s, and it was a crucial component in the evangelization of Europe. Even in the medieval period, when monks had largely remained in their monasteries, they had played a key role in evangelizing the areas immediately around them.

But missionary activity became a major focus of Catholic monasticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with numerous new religious orders formed specifically to engage in evangelism in previously non-Christian areas. The impact of these monk-missionaries has yet to be fully measured and appreciated, but it is difficult to imagine the present process of globalization having occurred without the contributions of the missionaries in creating many of the first trans-national links.

Many other Catholic religious orders were formed to staff the Church's numerous schools and universities, and still others were founded to carry out the Church's charitable activities, including hospitals and service to the poor. The best known member of a Catholic religious order in the twentieth century was Mother Teresa of Calcutta who devoted her life to serving the poorest of the poor in her adopted nation of India.

There were a few attempts to revive monasticism within the Protestant world, but none achieved great popularity. Perhaps the most successful were the Lutheran orders of deaconesses.

The Monastic Accomplishment

When the Egyptian monks went into the desert in the 200s they did not know what they would find or what the consequences of their actions would be. They knew only that this is what they were being called to do. Surely they could not have imagined the vast impact which the movement they began would have on the development of human civilization.

Many of western civilization's most fundamental features come from our monastic past. Most are positive, but some are not. We must confront

and understand both if we are to continue moving forward. The past does not control the future but the future is always built on the past, whatever it is. Everything else is a utopian dream.

Monasticism as Intentionality

Although seldom recognized, there has been a foundational assumption upon which all monastic life has been based from its beginnings to the present. It is the belief that human persons can choose their actions. This belief is also the basic assumption upon which all intentional behavior is based, and the belief that intentional behavior is possible is fundamental to western civilization.

Monasticism is in fact the earliest form of institutionalized intentionality in our history. The members of monastic orders are by definition persons who live a highly intentional life style, and the monastic communities have always assumed that those who wish to do so can follow Christ without compromise, that they have the capacity to live their lives in a way that conforms to certain specific expectations.

Today that expectation is pervasive in western society. People everywhere cooperate in staffing very large institutions which are governed by rules, and which assume that people have the capacity to follow those rules. Large business corporations employing hundreds of thousands of people scattered throughout the world would be impossible without this assumption. The same is true for large government agencies. The military could not function without it.

This assumption is now so firmly embedded in our cultures that we cannot imagine a time when it was not the case. But such a time has existed, and it still does exist for a large portion of the world's people. It is possible our ancestors might have acquired their capacity for intentional activity from some other source. We will never know. What we do know is that they learned it from the monks who were in effect their teachers for more than a thousand years.

Fundamental to our way of life as this part of the monastic legacy is, it does however have a dark side. Almost inevitably people will want to have the benefits of intentionality without bothering with the spiritual development that makes it possible. When this happens intentionality becomes a grim burden, not the freeing of human capacity it is intended to be.

Humans cannot simply decide to become intentional. Like any other human ability it must be acquired, and doing so requires long and sustained effort. Above all it requires courage to live intentionally, since doing so makes one responsible for what happens. It is always much easier to assume the role of a passive victim who has no real control over events. This courage can only come from a sustained belief that the universe itself has been created in such a way that it enables and rewards intentional behavior.

If it was possible for Jesus of Nazareth—who lived as a human at a certain time and a certain place, both known to us—to have been both fully human and fully divine, then surely it is possible for other humans to be at least partially divine. And if it is possible for us to be divine in some way and to some degree—if it is possible for us to claim to be "children of God"—then surely it is possible for us to behave intentionally.

That realization is the great gift of the monastic movement to western civilization.

Monasticism and the Ordering of Time

An equally basic development which we now take for granted is the ordering of time. Everything for us now happens according to certain pre-determined schedules. We go to work at a certain hour. We eat at certain times. Our children go to school at certain times. Certain days are work days, and others are weekend days. We meet both for business and socially at previously arranged times. Without the clock our way of life would be unimaginable.

Furthermore we study history. This book is an example. We recognize that time is real, that what has happened in the past has produced what is happening in the present, and will play a major role in what will happen in the future. As a civilization we have acquired a strong sense that human life takes place in linear time—a time that has a beginning and will have an end, a time in which events matter.

But when the first monks came on the scene time was regarded in a very different way. Rather than being linear time was assumed to be an accidental and unimportant byproduct of unordered and essentially meaningless cycles of constantly repeated events—not at all what we would think of as time. Last year was no different than the year before it,

and next year would be no different than this year. Time had no destination, no purpose.

The monks changed this view. Their time started at creation, and would come to an end when Christ returned to earth. God in person had chosen to participate in history, at a particular time and place, and with that overwhelmingly important event all time everywhere had acquired new significance. The result was that the universe itself became charged with a numinous energy. No longer was existence a dreary succession of nearly identical days, punctuated only by changes in the seasons, and marked only by occasional feasts, remembered more for their unrestrained passions than for their meaning in history.

By contrast each day in the monastery was viewed as an opportunity for prayer, for reading Scripture and the writings of those who had spent their lives praying and reading Scripture. This work was holy; it had eternal meaning. It was part of a great movement which had begun with Noah and Abraham, and with Moses and the people of ancient Israel who had been formed by the Exodus—a movement which continued with the prophets, and after the prophets with Jesus and the apostles, then with the martyrs and saints—and now with all who believe, and with all who will believe in the future.

Each day brought this new people nearer to a place where humans had never been before, a place where justice would reign. It was for this reason that every day mattered. It was to be occupied, to be used, not simply endured. At the end of each day one could be closer to God, and that had eternal significance. If one was not closer to God a precious thing had been wasted.

And so each day gradually came to be named, and incorporated into a vast liturgical system, a cycle proceeding toward heaven itself. Either the monastic community was celebrating some great event in the history of Christian belief or it was awaiting such an event. And at the end of each cycle the community was nearer to its goal, to its homeland, than it had been when the cycle began.

Each hour was also named. Either the monks were at prayer or they were looking forward to the next time of prayer, which at the most could be only a few hours away. There was no time to kill here, no empty dead time with nothing to do. Every action mattered and every moment mattered.

Is it any surprise that the clock—as basic to western civilization as the wheel—should have been created in the monasteries of medieval Europe?

Monasticism and Work

The monastic contribution to our attitudes toward work has been equally as significant as the monastic contribution to our appreciation of time.

When one joined a monastic community in the formative years of the Benedictine movement it was not to withdraw from the world of manual labor but to enter into that world in an entirely new way. By creating a culture that combined spirituality and economic activity, and successfully maintaining it over sustained periods, the Benedictine communities contributed to western civilization a new attitude toward work, one in which the work which humans did was regarded as equally significant to prayer.

In these communities prayer was no longer regarded as a fearful and ultimately self-centered plea for mercy from an angry and inscrutable god or gods. It was now a free and mutual exchange with a divine being whose primary characteristic was love. In the same way work was no longer a dreary and unpleasant obligation imposed on us by malevolent fate. It was now an opportunity to serve the world, to create as God had created—a gift given us by an ever-present God who wishes only good things for the humans who have been created by God.

The impact this has had on the formation of western civilization is enormous. Rather than regarding work as a lowly thing to be avoided at all costs, something fit only for slaves and servants and those able to do nothing else, manual labor of all kinds has come to be regarded as a noble thing in the western world, something that contributes to the good of society and which should be appreciated and rewarded appropriately.

This in turn has enriched all the societies which have come to adopt this new attitude by bringing many more people into the productive economy, eventually enriching everyone in that society. The emergence throughout the western world of labor unions, and of laws which recognize the importance of labor of all kinds, is the ultimate consequence of this revolution. The self-evident prosperity and vitality of western civilization is based on it, and the monks laid the foundations for it.

Monasticism and Rationality

From the very beginning the European monasteries were places where learning and rationality were promoted and prized. The Rule of Benedict is very explicit that growth in holiness includes both prayer and intellectual development, and throughout its long history the monastic movement has been at the forefront of intellectual life.

Before the monastic era learning was largely the privilege of the wealthy and aristocratic, but in the monasteries everyone was expected to learn, to the extent of their capacities. Everyone in a monastery was assumed to be capable of becoming holy, at least to some degree, and everyone was assumed to be capable of becoming learned to some degree.

Furthermore a new intellectual tradition emerged in the monastic community. It was based on viewing reality in historical terms rather than in mythical terms. This new attitude had originally formed around the practice of viewing the stories in Scripture as history rather than myth, in contrast to the traditional religions whose stories were regarded as conveying timeless truth rather than as accurate descriptions of past events.

By regarding themselves and their movement from an historical perspective the monks would slowly but surely create an intellectual world in which evidence mattered above all. Timeless truth was regarded as existing, but timeless truth was always expected to be verified in the events of history. That unique combination would have immense consequences for the development of western civilization, by allowing us to combine vast general concepts and laws with the evidence of ordinary experience.

The mendicant movement opened up a new world to the Christian laity by enabling St. Thomas Aquinas to produce the great philosophical synthesis which embodied this combination. No longer did one have to choose between being a Christian believer or an intellectual, and no longer would one have to choose between the spiritual and the material. They were now part of a single whole, both available to be understood by human intelligence, and both available to be applied in ways that benefited everyone.

Although the tension between Christian belief and Greek rationality would continue to the present, the ultimate outcome was now decided. Despite occasional reactionary efforts to reverse its course, rationality

would thrive within western civilization as it had never before thrived. And that would give enormous power to the laity.

Monasticism and Democracy

The legacy of monasticism also includes its contribution to the major political event of recent centuries, the emergence of democracy.

With the benefit of a thousand years of historical perspective we can now see that the central issue during the entire 1,500 years from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the collapse of Communism in 1989 has been the struggle between two very different ways of organizing human society. It was the monastic movement which pioneered the one that eventually prevailed.

The old way of the pyramid and the empire had prevailed for so long that no one could imagine an alternative. It had maintained social order by giving unlimited authority to male military commanders who occupied the apex of clearly defined social pyramids. These military rulers derived their power from two sources—the common desire for social order, combined with their ability to inflict unlimited amounts of morally sanctioned violence on anyone they deemed necessary in order to maintain order.

Ultimately these great pyramids rested on the people at the base—women, children, peasants and slaves. Although such persons constituted the vast majority in their societies, everyone else ranked above them and no one ranked below them. And for pyramidal societies to function effectively it was essential for everyone at the base to do what they were told, expecting little or nothing in return but survival itself.

A person's position in this rigidly organized society was determined by birth. If one's father was a king, he would be a king, or at the least a member of the aristocracy. If one's mother was a slave, he or she would be a slave, regardless of the father's status. If one's father was a soldier, he would be a soldier, or if a daughter, most likely the wife of a soldier. If one's father was a peasant, he would be a peasant and till the land his father and grandfather had tilled.

If one were a woman her life would be determined by her father and her other male relatives, and lived by the clearly established rules of her society. A husband would be found for her, selected on the basis of the benefits that marriage would bring to the extended family with little or

no regard for her well-being or wishes. If one were a child, she or he had virtually no rights at all. Until one reached adulthood, which came early in this world, the child was simply a liability.

The monasteries were a decisive break from this old and long-established pattern. By the very act of joining a monastery one rejected the fundamental assumption upon which it was based—that one's place in society was determined by birth.

But that act of freedom was only the beginning. A way of life based on prayer and study of the Scriptures simply could not be reconciled with the basic assumptions on which the ancient social pyramid was based. Everywhere in Scripture one encounters the belief that any human person can communicate directly with God, and every time people pray they act on that assumption—actualizing it, making it real, declaring that they believe it to be true.

This belief in the fundamental dignity of all humans is the foundation upon which all successful democracies have been based. Our belief in human rights is now so widely held that its origins in religious faith are largely forgotten, but forgotten or not the record of history is unambiguous—the first western institutions based on social equality and elected leadership were the European monasteries.

Monasticism and the Laity

Monasticism's impact on lay Christians is an important but seldom discussed topic, but even though it is clear we have much to learn there is little question that the impact is considerable. How could it be otherwise when monasticism was one of the most powerful institutions in Europe during the formative centuries of western civilization?

The medieval monks maximized human potential in a way that made lay Christians want to imitate them, and that was a clear benefit. But with that benefit there came a serious problem: how were people to share in the monastic way of life if they were married and had responsibility for children? For that matter how were they to share in the monastic way of life even if they were single but for one reason or another could not live in a monastery?

Various answers to this dilemma evolved in the medieval centuries. People, especially the wealthy and politically powerful, supported and even established monasteries in order to have their children educated

there, and in order to receive counsel and spiritual support from the monks. The emerging middle class—small farmers, merchants and artisans—for their part often settled near a monastery in order to share in its life, both spiritual and economic.

But despite this the very success of the monastic movement had introduced a sharp divide into the medieval Christian community. Either one was 'religious' or one was 'secular'. Either one lived in a monastery, or one lived in 'the world'.

In the monastery there was order and moral perfection (in theory, never fully in actual practice), and sexuality was thoroughly sublimated (again in theory, not always in practice). By contrast, in the secular world social and moral chaos prevailed. Violence and treachery of every kind were endemic, and undisciplined sexuality dominated the lives of many people. Clearly the monastic way was preferable, even given its failures.

But just as clearly not everyone could live the monastic life. Someone had to conceive and bear children. Someone had to create and maintain stable families for children to grow up in. Someone had to provide them with food and shelter. Someone had to establish the political order on which every family depends for its wellbeing and survival. Someone had to deal with the ugly and often intractable disputes which threaten the order of every social and political community.

The end result of this dilemma was to inject a deep dualism into Western Christianity, one that has had profound and tragic consequences to the present time. In order to maintain the split between 'religious' and 'secular' the Church has been forced to develop a double set of ethical standards—one for its members who are religious and another for its secular members.

This difference is especially apparent in warfare, where the religious are forbidden to participate, while secular Christians are virtually required to do so. This duality also extends to the realm of sexuality, where intercourse is strictly forbidden to the religious but virtually required—or at least regarded as the normal condition of life—for those who are married.

There are many other areas of life where the differences are equally as stark. Greed and avarice—indeed personal property itself—are institutionally prohibited for religious Christians, whereas the pursuit of wealth has become the de facto primary measures of success for Christians living in the secular world.

What this has produced is a prevailing belief that full Christian morality is meant only for the heroic few, and that everyone else must live by an essentially Darwinian morality, in which virtually any action is considered legitimate so long as it results in the short term survival of that person and his or her social group.

The Franciscan Legacy

Because the impact of St. Francis and the movement he inspired have been so great it is especially important that we confront the way his extraordinarily popular example, and the extensive influence of the Franciscan orders, have impacted subsequent lay Christian development.

We must begin with the tendency toward a spirit-matter dualism which is inherent in the entire monastic legacy, and which is an especially troubling part of St. Francis' legacy.

Francis identified with the poor so completely that he became poor. This has inspired millions of Christians in the centuries since to make care for the poor a part of their lives as Christians, and that is obviously a major gain. But at the same time we have learned that we cannot give what we do not have, and that our becoming poor is not really helpful to those who are already poor.

In retrospect it appears that Francis' response to his father's aggressive materialism was an equally excessive anti-materialism. No one after him has been able to live out Francis' ideal of living in society without owning anything, not even the religious order which he founded. It is simply impossible, and the attempt to do so verges on an un-Christian dualism which holds that the material domain is inherently evil. The result has been that many Christians have justified their materialism by pointing to the impossibility of its opposite.

Francis' approach to peace has proven to be equally problematic, despite its being rooted in the Gospel and in a deep commitment to the sacredness of all life. He was essentially a pacifist, who believed that good will could solve all political conflicts, even those embedded in hundreds of years of history—such as the conflict between Western European Christians and the Muslims of the Middle East which dominated foreign affairs in his lifetime as it does in ours. His efforts to end this conflict by converting the leader of the Muslim forces to Christianity is notable equally for its courage and for its naiveté, and has bequeathed to our civi-

lization the widely held view that being in favor of peace requires one to ignore the realities of injustice, inherited conflict and cultural factors.

Francis' attitude toward institutional matters was of the same type. He appears to have believed that everything could be governed by personal relationships, a belief that proved to be seriously mistaken when the order he founded expanded across national and cultural boundaries.

His negative view of institutions forced him to leave the organization of his movement to others, and the result was that after Francis' death his movement split into numerous warring factions. Within a hundred years after Francis' death members of his order were burning each other at the stake, and it has remained seriously divided to this day—surely a counter-witness to its central message, and a dangerous inducement to individualism for those who have adopted Francis as their model.

Francis' adoption of celibacy as a requirement for uncompromising Christian intentionality must also be questioned. It is now obvious that a major evangelical crisis was developing in medieval Christianity, and that the tradition of clerical celibacy was a major cause of this crisis. But rather than helping resolve this crisis Francis and his associates, without intending to do so, in effect extended the life of the clerical subculture for several centuries, and in so doing unintentionally contributed to the belief that sexuality is inherently evil.

Had the early Franciscans found a way to carry out their mission without adopting the discipline of forced celibacy it is conceivable that the Protestant Reformation would not have been necessary.

Francis' great poem in celebration of creation, written at the end of his life, indicates he had come to realize, at least intuitively, that for Christianity to progress it must develop a more robust integration of the spiritual and the material. It is entirely conceivable that if he had lived longer his legacy might be very different.

The mendicant orders which Francis and Dominic founded offered conversion and Christian intentionality to everyone, but this conversion was almost exclusively spiritual. It was a personal conversion involving the inner life, not a cultural or political change. But that is impossible. Humans cannot change their spiritual beliefs and leave their political and cultural behavior unchanged.

Monasticism had thrived because it had formed stable communities, but there were very few communities for intentional lay Christians—places where they could combine prayer and work, *ora et labora*. The

result was an increasingly self-absorbed monasticism, and an increasingly frustrated laity—both of which could quite possibly have been avoided had the Franciscan movement taken a more balanced approach to human existence.

That of course is speculative. What is not speculative is that Francis was a pioneer of the first order, confronting problems which had never before been confronted. If he had made no mistakes he would have been the equivalent of Christ, which he was very conscious he was not. Francis was one of the greatest Christians of all time, but for that very reason we must be careful to recognize his errors so that we do not repeat them.

Monasticism and the Future

Even the negative legacy of monasticism can be a gift to us if we will let it be. To recognize that a major element of dualism is embedded in the monastic legacy can help us recognize that for Christians neither spirituality nor materialism is the goal—that what matters is integrating them, in imitation of the incarnation itself.

Surely the task of the future is to combine our spirituality and our existence in time and space into a single harmonious whole, making what we feel and think and desire consistent with what we actually do. If we wish to continue on the path Christians have followed for the past two thousand years we will need to make increasingly intentional efforts to conform our work to our beliefs, to actually live day by day in new ways, establishing relationships with our family members and with the citizens of other cities and nations which are consistent with our spiritual commitments.

We all experience a constant inclination to make life simpler and easier by either privileging the inner spiritual world or the outer material world, but when we do either life only becomes more difficult. We have been created as an integrated whole which combines the spiritual and the material in ways we do not yet fully understand, and only when we embrace that combination do our lives become successful.

St. Benedict understood that, at a profound level, and he initiated a tradition in which prayer and work are integrated into a single way of life. That combination is what has made our civilization so successful. To go on we must continue to make that connection in new ways.

That is why we await, in the words of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, a "new Benedict". Just as the first Benedict gave the world a new vision of virtue and a new way to institutionalize following Christ—a way that combined the inner and the outer, the spiritual and the practical, the ordinary and the eternal—we are being called 1,500 years later to a new way of following Christ which combines the feminine and the masculine, the scientific and the mystical, the personal and the political, the family and the prophetic.

Jesus has already accomplished this, in a profoundly life-giving way, and he continues to invite us to "Follow me."