

THE FUTURE OF TRADITIONAL MONASTIC CONTEMPLATIVE COMMUNITY LIFE

By MARY ALBERT HUGHES

THE FUTURE of the traditional monastic contemplative community life for women in Great Britain is closely bound up with the communities represented, or not represented, at the Roehampton meeting at Easter 1986.¹ They will be the starting point of possible developments in new directions. The 'New forms of contemplative life' envisaged in *Venite seorsum* (the *Instruction on the contemplative life and on the enclosure of nuns* issued by the Vatican in 1969) are distinct but at the end of the day perhaps not unconnected.

Future prospects of the individual communities?

Some of those present have already decided on closure. The future of others, top-heavy with aging sisters and without recruits, is in the melting pot—and the hands of God. A few look healthy and are attracting vocations. I am in no position to hazard a guess about their long-term prospects.

What of the monastic orders as such?

Some people will no doubt argue that the monastic orders themselves have many strengths. They enshrine the quintessence of the wisdom and know-how of so many centuries of the human search for God 'in the desert'—and a radical response to God's unrelenting search for our love and total commitment. They are guardians of transcendent values and a precious element of continuity and stability, community and security, all the more needed in our materialistic and rapidly changing world. Amid the flux of time, they are a sign and a 'sacrament' of eternity. They represent

an irreplaceable part of the Christian heritage and the Western culture which they have done so much to create and preserve. They have been there so long, almost as long as the Church itself. Surely they *must* last as long as the Church does?

And yet: given the present age-ranges and the rates of recruitment and fallout, it seems inevitable, humanly speaking, that this type of monastic contemplative community will die out in the foreseeable future. The relatively few women who are attracted to this way of life and the large percentage of fall-out among those who try it, raise the question of whether it is ill-suited to the modern temperament, physique and mentality. Trends in society such as materialism; instability in family and other relationships; mobility in jobs; habits of travel; instant satisfactions of every sort; the environment of noise—all these would seem to offer no promising seed-bed for vocations to this way of life. And yet there is a ‘God-shaped hole’ in every human being, and a reaction could set in, leading to a new ‘flight from the world’ into the monastic deserts of today and tomorrow.

Does it matter if it has a future or not?

In traditional form, monastic life represents something precious in the Christian heritage. But ‘the old order changeth yielding place to new, and God fulfils himself in many ways, lest one good custom should corrupt the world’. If it dies out, a unique vocation and life-style will have been lost (as the Travelling People say of theirs!). But it may be that other essential values of the monastic vocation are obscured behind out-of-date cultural laws and customs, and that this ‘traditional’ expression will have to die to allow the gospel values, which inspired both the first monks and all subsequent monastic reformers, to be re-incarnated in our times.

Diversity in unity

Those present at Roehampton had a strong sense of being *one body* of contemplative women in Great Britain and strongly affirmed the value of the contemplative vocation. But underlying the somewhat euphoric experience of unity, many of the participants and observers sensed differences of understanding and meaning concerning both the essence of the monastic contemplative life and the sort of life-style and relationships compatible with it.

Some of the differences of opinion and seeming differences of position stem from differences of languages. We do not all mean

the same thing by such words as 'traditional', 'monastic', 'contemplative', 'enclosure'. In different contexts, cultural, theological, philosophical, canonical, psychological, or in different schools of spirituality 'people are saying different things about different things while thinking that they are talking about the same thing'. 'Monastic' does not have the same meaning for the Benedictine as for members of the medieval mendicant orders whose founders deliberately dropped some traditional monastic observances, as for example the vow of stability or the abbatial form of government. For many Dominicans 'contemplation' is primarily an intellectual activity; others would see it as affective or even imaginative. Perhaps it would help if, through the experience of what they have in common, the various traditions became more aware of their individual emphases, and asked whether they are sometimes clinging to structures and practices which in fact conflict with their own tradition, having originated later and perhaps with different goals.

But there are differences going deeper than language. The Council document *Perfectae caritatis* (7) said that 'the contemplative institutes are entirely ordered towards contemplation, in such wise that their members give themselves over to God alone in silence and solitude, in constant prayer and willing penance'. This was followed up by a further *Instruction on the contemplative life and on the enclosure of nuns* (*Venite seorsum* 1969) which states that the distinguishing mark of contemplative life is 'withdrawal from the world for the sake of leading a more intense life of prayer in solitude' and which sets the silence and solitude physically and canonically within 'papal enclosure'. This 'is to be regarded as an ascetical regulation particularly consistent with the special vocation of nuns, in that it is the sign, the safeguard and the characteristic form of their withdrawal from the world'. If withdrawal and strict enclosure are the keynotes of contemplative life, I find it difficult to envisage any long-term future for the monastic life for women in this form—unless some outstandingly 'traditional' communities can be kept going by a sort of 'preservation order'.

When 42.2% of the contemplative communities did not accept the invitation to the Roehampton meeting, many were affirming this understanding of the monastic contemplative vocation. Some were too few in numbers to spare the people; some voted to stay away and then regretted it . . . 'But some again did not come out of a genuine conviction that meetings are in general incompatible with the contemplatives' commitment to silence and recollection'.²

Withdrawal and enclosure in the monastic tradition

'Withdrawal from the world for the sake of leading a more intense life of prayer in solitude' (*Venite seorsum* S 1) is all of a piece with the flight to the desert of the first monks, and today it appears to be the more 'traditional' communities with a stricter enclosure and ascetical regime who are attracting recruits. Some spiritually generous persons still feel that for them the way to holiness and a deeper prayer life is to escape from the smothering materialism of a secular society, challenging its assumptions and goals by a regime of radical renunciation and austerity.

Yet this withdrawal is only one element in the monastic tradition, originating in a particular religious and cultural context which is by no means the same as the present one. Today's world may call for the witness of other strands of the tradition: the reality of the spiritual; the invisible world of faith; the thirst for the Absolute, that is God, under whatever guise he may be sought; the basic human need for community and the value of a family life-style even in religious institutions.

And what does the sign of material enclosure signal to the world today? Sociologists will associate it with 'total institutions' like prisons and hospitals. For a nurse friend it conjured up images of pregnancy, being chairbound or under house arrest, agoraphobia, schizophrenia, compulsory confinement in a mental hospital, complete self-centredness—that is to say looking inwards in the wrong way. And what does it say to those who know from personal experience of racism and apartheid, the evil and inhumanity to which exclusive, separatist and elitist principles can lead?

It has been said that 'the strength of a tradition can be measured by its openness to criticism'.³ Vatican II, with its statement that 'the manner of life, of prayer and of work in religious communities should be in harmony with the present-day physical and psychological condition of the members' (*Perfectae caritatis*), threw open to criticism the whole style of monastic asceticism, not least of enclosure. At the end of the day some contemplatives can still say with conviction 'if the Church wants it, we will do it'.⁴ Others, like myself, believe that an alternative and complementary orientation is called for, and that the monastic tradition is strong enough to bear this: an orientation that makes visible, and is a sign of the positive, incarnational values of the gospel message; that affirms that when God made the world God saw that it was very good;

that he loved it so much and sent his Son to redeem it by becoming part of it, and transfiguring it into his heavenly kingdom.

It is true that Christ was 'a sign that shall be contradicted' so that Christian and monastic 'prophecy' can expect to share in that ambivalence. But he came 'breaking down the walls of partition', removing barriers, not setting them up. How can monastic contemplatives be a sign of this?

That they all may be one

Movements of convergence are at work in the contemporary world. People of all faiths and none are being brought closer together by threats to the future of our civilisation and even to the survival of life on our planet. There is a growing awareness, greatest among young people perhaps, of our solidarity with and responsibility for the poor and the suffering, whoever they may be.

Pressed tightly against one another by the increase in their numbers and relationships, forced together by the growth of a common power and the sense of a common travail, the men of the future will in some sort form a single consciousness.

So wrote Teilhard de Chardin, prophetically, in 1924.

Theology matches this concept of solidarity, togetherness, with its own *koinonia*—'communion, fellowship, partnership'—ultimately our oneness with God and each other 'in Christ' in the family of the Blessed Trinity. All this is at least part fulfilment of Jesus's preoccupation and prayer during the last hours he spent with his own, on the eve of his death.

The editor invited me to write this article in the belief that my thinking about the future of the monastic contemplative life would be 'of enormous interest and value to our readers'. Ever since the media brought into our monastic enclosures the unforgettable images of Pope Paul VI embracing Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras, and kneeling in prayer close to the spot to which Jesus brought his disciples to watch and pray with him, my thinking has centred on the idea of the contemplative as the 'sacrament of the praying Christ'. It coloured and gave new meaning to our whole life—almost like a new vision. But now, as I try vainly to find words to express it, the poetry and the magic are gone and the light of glory has faded. The best I can do, I fear, is to make a series of affirmations, acts of faith in things

which appeared radiantly self-evident when the 'vision' was there, and pray that the Kindly Light may shine through them for some people and lead them on . . . wherever God wishes to lead us.

As I see it, the monastic contemplative community life is the visible, ecclesial embodiment of the 'contemplative dimension', that is, the personal relationship with God at the heart of Christianity, and indeed of all religion and even of our common humanity. Its place is at the spiritual centre of the Church and the local community. I believe that it can be situated there if we re-interpret the concept of 'withdrawal' and work from the 'sacramental' model of the Church found in *Lumen gentium* (1) complemented by *Gaudium et spes* (1). 'In Christ the Church is, so to speak, the sacrament of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race' (*Lumen gentium* 1).

Intimate union with God: that is, the contemplative dimension, is the end of every human being and at the heart of the monastic vocation: Christ's union with the Father through prayer. In Christ we are united to the Trinity and to each other. There is no distinction of persons. Any Christian community should start from here. There are different gifts, ministries, functions within the organic oneness in Christ. To the extent that we work from what distinguishes and divides rather than from what unites, we are surely under judgment. In Christ there are no dichotomies between lay/clerical/religious, active/apostolic/contemplative, spiritual/secular. In Christ means that Christ lives in us and we in him. The Christian/religious monk does not have to follow some exotic life-style. According to St Paul, they go on living their own ordinary lives, but no longer 'in the flesh'. It is now 'in the Spirit', 'in Christ'. In Christ the love of God and the love of others are one, as are membership of the divine trinitarian family and the human one created in its image. To the extent that we are living out our life in Christ there is no dichotomy between the one and the other, between contemplative and apostolic. If our apostolate, that is making our own the concerns of others (cf *Gaudium et spes* 1), is an expression of the contemplative life, hidden in Christ with God, it will never be a distraction or weaken our union with God. On the contrary, if the contemplative life is deeply centred in Christ in this way, it can open up to whatever human concerns can be integrated into this abiding God-centredness, acting as a sacrament of God's own loving concern. Insofar as we go out to

others in and with Christ, 'outreach' does not draw us away from our union with God; it draws others into it.

The contemplative dimension affirms *life*, the fulness of the life of the Trinity into which we are adopted in Christ, but also human life, especially family life, created to image the divine life lived divinely by the Word made flesh.

POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In a talk to the Conference of Major Superiors, Sr Margaret McHard S.N.D., Radio and Television Officer for the Bishop's Conference, says that some evaluation of the communications structures within a religious congregation could form a good starting point for looking at future developments. This comes too late to be taken into account in the first part of this article, but it adds another dimension to what has been said about monastic enclosure. Sr Margaret also speaks of the use of communication to create a community's self-image. This supports my contention that a fresh self-image for monastic contemplatives is possible if the traditional image of 'enclosure = minimum communication' is replaced by one of *koinonia*, communion. Sister Margaret concluded: 'there is a real longing for community in the Church and the world today. People need to belong. Maybe the charism we religious have to offer to the people of our own age is the creation of community through communication'. For contemplatives this would be primarily through communication with Christ and his members in a life dedicated to the search for union with the Father through prayer: *sacraments* of the praying Christ.

Communication through cases of stillness and prayer

'In the old days' it was comparatively easy to find time and a quiet place for prayer; in church outside service time (or even during a 'silent' Mass!); in one's own room at home or in a quiet corner of a garden or park. In these days of closed churches, bed-sitters, perpetual noise and the danger of mugging after dark, finding time and place for prayer is less easy. This is one reason for making and seeing contemplative communities as *oases*, places of silence and stillness to which people can come to spend time with God. Though still 'apart' physically, they would be *seen* as an integral part of the local community, religious and secular: a concrete, visible *representation*—'sacrament'—of the contemplative dimension of the common baptismal vocation. Their mere existence

would be a standing reminder of this. Not a few contemplatives feel, like Cardinal Pironio⁶ and other bishops, that the order of contemplatives is also being called to a further aspect of 'the ministry of prayer': to act as support and resource for people 'in the world' who need company, reassurance and guidance in the ways of prayer along which God is leading them.

If such a role is accepted, what happens to the physical hiddenness of monastic contemplatives by which they, their legislators and preachers set such store, building on St Paul's statement to the Colossians (3, 3): 'You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God'? The 'enclosure' interpretation may be an attractive 'accommodation' but it is certainly not what Paul was saying to those early Christians.

The hiddenness lies in the 'mystery'—translated *sacramentum* in Latin, 'hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints . . . this mystery is *Christ in you* the hope of glory' (Col 1, 27). Paul wrestles with language and invents it as he tries to convey to his converts the intimacy and uniqueness of this relationship, what it *means* to be 'in Christ Jesus'. It is something quite new, a new creation, a *new creature*, consisting of Christ the Head and all his members bonded together in a unity analogous to, but of a different quality from, the unity of the humanity of Christ with the Person of the Word. Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, that young Carmelite whose penetration of Paul's thought is second to none, coined an untranslatable phrase, *une humanité de surcroît*. 'Spirit of Love', she prayed in her act of consecration to the Blessed Trinity, 'descend within me and reproduce within me as it were an *incarnation of the Word* that I may be to him another humanity wherein he renews his mystery'. 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2, 20).

Faith communities: witness to the invisible

My tentative suggestions about possible future directions all flow from that key text from Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* (1): 'In Christ, the Church is, so to speak, *the sacrament of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race*'. As Aloys Grillmeier points out⁷ there is no definition of the expression and no explanation of how the term 'sacrament' is to be applied to the Church. Yet it is basic for the ecclesiology of the Constitution and indeed of the whole Council, and the notice of the Church as the sacrament of

salvation forms a close link with both patristic and modern theology. Other models for the Church are proposed in Council documents or by theologians writing later, but this seems to me one of the deepest and potentially most fruitful in the search for a fresh ecclesial model for the contemplative life.

Situating this life within this sacramental model of the Church sets it firmly in the perspective of the invisible spiritual realities, and could perhaps also provide a meeting ground with those who are seriously seeking an inner life and faith in the invisible, but who do not find them in the experience available in organised Christianity as they meet it 'outside'. I also envisage 'fellowship' with contemplatives of other faiths and see this as a 'contribution to the development of the world community'.⁸

A recent *Pro Mundi Vita* bulletin on *The child and the spiritual void today* (105, 1986/2) makes the point that in today's world, the spiritual should not be confused with the religious: 'the spiritual goes beyond the religious and the religious can also cover the non-spiritual when it limits itself to beliefs and practices which have no interiority'.⁹ (A good test of the continuing value of peripheral monastic traditions?) 'One can belong to a religion without being open to interiority', and, on the other hand, 'concern for the invisible, meditation, reflection on the meaning of existence, contemplation, prayer itself, are to be found among non-religious people and serve to inspire their action, their devotion and their sacrifices. They can moreover be the subject of non-religious formation, techniques and guidance'.¹⁰

STAND ASIDE TO GO DEEPER

Hearers of the Word. 'Sacrament of the Christian community as it listens to and reflects on God's Word to the world'.

Lectio divina—prayerful reflection and study of the scriptures and other spiritual writers (i.e. tradition) is another strand by which the monastic tradition could profitably be integrated into the wider Church today.

Mary, the Mother of God, hearing the word and keeping it in her heart, and Mary of Bethany, sitting at the feet of Jesus in the characteristic attitude of the disciple, are favourite models for this aspect of the contemplative vocation. Since the introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy and the opening up of the world of the bible Christian to Roman Catholics by the ecumenical movement,

its importance in the common Christian vocation and spirituality has been better appreciated and catered for.

The Vatican II statement on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*) says that as the apostolic tradition is received and handed on through the ages, the Church contemplates God in it and deepens her understanding, not only through ministerial preaching, but also by 'reflection and study on the part of the faithful who ponder them in their hearts and from a more profound experienced penetration of spiritual matters' (7&8).

In his Encyclical Letter on development (*Populorum progressio*), Pope Paul said that the Church's special contribution to this process is 'what she possesses as her characteristic attribute: a global vision of man and the human race' (13) so that if

further development calls for the work of more and more technicians, even more necessary is the deep thought and reflection of wise men in search of a new humanism which will enable modern man to find himself anew by embracing the higher values of love and friendship, prayer and contemplation (20).

Today the contribution of feminist theology has to be taken into account, so that the thought and reflection of wise women, not least monastic contemplatives, may add a new dimension to the thinking of wise men!

Giving access to their libraries in some way, as well as sharing their reflection and contemplative experience, with prayer and study groups and individual seekers, could be a practical expression of monastic *koinonia* in this area.

Communication through community: 'monastic experience'?

The Third National Congress of the (British) National Centre for Christian Communities and Networks will be devoted to studying: 'A pattern of possibilities: sharing a new vision of Church'. Unfortunately it takes place in July, too late for our purposes. Without knowing very much about NACCAN, I feel that anyone thinking about future possibilities for contemplative communities ought to be in touch, as some are already. We are all in the same boat, trying to find fresh ways of expressing the community dimension of Christian living. This is necessary in every generation and vital in our time when old patterns of relationship have broken down. Young people especially are experimenting with new ways

of living together as in basic communities in the Third World and increasingly elsewhere. *They* are the future. If the monastic tradition lives, it will be through them. How can their 'truth' and that of traditional monasticism meet and become integrated before it is too late?

Perhaps this can happen only in existing communities. And to be acceptable the monastic community must be seen to be what it represents; intent on union with God through prayer and open to unity with all humanity and to empathy with its needs and concerns. But it must also be seen as warm, caring, welcoming; called together by God to share in the life of the Trinity, but well aware that every human family is made and must be built upon that divine image.

Some contemplative communities retain much of their traditional life, while running a conference or retreat centre; others run 'houses of prayer'. Could there be a third option, that is, some communities open to receive people for longer or shorter periods of 'monastic experience', to share fully in the ordinary life of the community, with or without some form of commitment or covenant? Could we envisage some sort of network, however small, of monastic communities willing to pioneer such an experiment: to serve as 'open enclosures' of silence and contemplative prayer, supporting and supported by the various types of prayer and meditation groups which have sprung up all over the country during the past twenty years? A certain mobility within the network would be desirable, and at least one community composed of representatives of the different monastic traditions and of other ecumenical groups with similar goals. To live and work and pray together and study at depth the contemplative dimension of human living and the role of the monastic tradition within it, could be a valuable expression of the ministry of reconciliation (cf 2 Cor 5, 18) and evidence of our seriousness to *be* what we represent: 'one in Christ' and 'sacraments' of his prayer for this unity.

Would it be possible to be open to this form of 'monastic experience' while preserving the essentials of the traditional atmosphere of silence and prayer? One of our friends says:

Yes! We *know* it works; we have tried it.

We in the 'world' find it increasingly difficult to find time or space or place for quiet prayer or meditation, but there at Carisbrooke the whole day, be it ever so busy, is spent in prayer and meditation.

Prayer is sort of made manifest, in some way becomes part of everything, so that one goes about normal everyday things and prayer is at one's side and in one's being.

Here I must say a word about the healing power of Carisbrooke. Both E. and I have experienced amazing changes in family situations which had us in despair. This I'm convinced is the result of prayer and the healing effect of Carisbrooke upon us which has carried over into these situations.

Now it came to me as we followed through all the prescribed customs at Mass: we (the outsiders) have lived out our vocations in the hectic and frenetic market-place of the world, while the nuns have quietly and hiddenly offered themselves throughout the years in dedicated prayer and service, and now, in their charity, they have invited us to 'come away and rest awhile', 'watch and pray with us' and brought the two vocations together in unity, like two rivers converging to form one lake, a natural convergence of spirits pursuing the same goal . . . Bishop Kallistos Ware said of Christian unity that it's like a wheel . . . God is the hub at the centre; we are at the rim . . . the closer we come to God, the closer we come to each other. We can see this happening in many situations . . . and I don't think there is any reason to fear this closer unity among us . . . If we are God-centred all will be well.

If Sr Margaret McHard is right in believing that community is built up through communication, perhaps we contemplatives, especially the older ones, who were formed rather for non-communication, will need retraining in communication skills. This need not involve much speaking or media publicity. Primarily it would call for clarification of our thinking and understanding of the monastic vocation, so as to be able to give a coherent account of it to those who know nothing of its background and tradition. Our thinking about the future of the contemplative life must be open to the stars and comprehensible to those who know nothing of its history. Wherever it may be led, its goal and centre will be there: the God in whom we live and move and have our being, the Love that moves the sun and the other stars¹ and which holds God and humankind together in an inseparable embrace in the heart of Christ.

NOTES

¹ The ecumenical meeting of members of contemplative communities at Roehampton, near London, at Easter 1986 was to commemorate 'Twenty years on' from Vatican II, to evaluate contemplative life in Britain in those years, and to look to its future.

² *Review for contemplatives*, Summer 1986, p 10 (italics mine).

³ 'Living with Tradition' by Frederick Moriarty, *The Way* vol 21 no 2 (April 1981), p 91.

⁴ *Review for contemplatives*, Autumn 1986 (Winter 1987), p 4.

⁵ Chardin, Teilhard de: *The future of man*, (Collins, 1964), p 306.

⁶ Cf *Joyful in hope*, (St Paul Publications, 1979).

⁷ *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* ed Herbert Vorgrimler, vol 1, pp 138ff.

⁸ See the Archbishop of Canterbury's Preface, in *All their splendour* by David Brown (London, 1982).

⁹ *Pro Mundi Vita*, 105, 1986/2, p 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 12.

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*.