

HOPE WITHOUT ILLUSIONS: COPING WITH THE VOCATION CRISIS

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THE PRESENT SITUATION

Anyone with direct experience of current monastic life in this country and in Europe is aware that the key problem is vocations. To put it bluntly, people are no longer joining monasteries. Of course, this is a simplification, but it is not a gross one. Many of our Benedictine monasteries of both men and women have hardly had a novice in many years. A few communities have had a few recruits, but they are an exception that proves the rule. From any ordinary, statistical point of view, monasticism in this country is simply dying out.

From the longer, historical standpoint, this is a rather surprising development. Although monasticism as such arrived late in this country, along with the rest of the Catholic Church, after its arrival about 1850, it has been a roaring success. Within about twenty years, founders such as Boniface Wimmer managed to establish Benedictine monasteries all over this country. By 1900, there were about a hundred of them, of both women and men. Moreover, they were not tiny cells but large communities of 50 or 100 persons.

This pattern of growth and success continued right up to the Second Vatican Council when our numbers peaked. There were at least six thousand Benedictines in this country in 1965, two thirds of them being women. However, at that point things changed. The size of our novitiates began to shrink and in many cases disappear

altogether. Some would say that this happened *because* of Vatican II and its reforms, but since that is unprovable and also very touchy, we will leave that aside.

Of course, this phenomenon has not been restricted to the monks. Virtually all religious Orders in this country have drastically shrunk since the Council. Moreover, this was not a mere blip on the Catholic radar screen, a momentary trend. In fact it has continued unabated for the past fifty years. We are not looking at one of the brief downs in a history of ups and downs; we are looking at a very serious, long-term pattern. To repeat: people are no longer joining monasteries in this country; our monasteries are dying out.

Some people do not like this kind of talk. One time I mentioned in the chronicle I write for our newsletter that we had not had a novice for five years. We were getting a bit anxious! I got an angry letter from a Benedictine sister who told me that I should not write such things. It does no good at all to be telling the world that we are short of novices. This kind of family laundry should not be hung out in public.

I answered this letter with one of my own, saying that in my opinion, a monastic newsletter should tell the truth. Of course, there are some truths that should not be broadcast, but overall, people have a right to know how we are doing. I added that I do not consider our newsletter a piece of public relations propaganda calculated to produce what the Italians call *la bella figura*, a beautiful illusion. I was somewhat incensed, so I went on to ask her why it was that her community liked to publish pictures of its new candidates. But they never tell us when they leave. You wonder why their community never grows?

Perhaps I should not push this point too far, but I want to say that none of this is just hysterical hand-wringing. It is based on plain statistics, and these numbers tell us that by the year 2050, there will be only a handful of monasteries, Benedictine or Trappist, left in this country. You don't have to be an alarmist to take those statistics seriously. Now someone might counter that surely this whole question is one of faith. Can't God solve our vocation problem any time he wants? Of course! But one could also suggest that maybe God actually wants the present drought to continue.

That kind of talk is not very popular. A more patriotic American approach would be to ask the practical question: what can we do about it? Must we just sit around bemoaning our bad fortune, waiting to die, as it were? So we then proceed to do some more American things: form a vocations committee; bring in outside experts; hire an advertising firm and so on. These things are not necessarily worthless, but we should not be fooled by them either. This is not a problem that can be solved by the usual blunt American methods. There is no direct solution to this problem.

In the rest of this talk, I want to discuss the place of hope in the present situation. I repeat again that I see no cause at all for *optimism*. Optimism, as I use the term here, is simply a positive feeling generated by the facts as we see them. As far as I can see, there is no cause at all for optimism in this situation. But I would insist that this is no reason for us to give up hope. We should indeed give up any silly illusions we might have about how to solve the present trend. But we absolutely must not give up hope. And if we have been living by something else, then we should put it aside and live by hope.

REMAINING HOPEFUL

What is hope? We all have some idea of what it is, since it is a common idea in most cultures. A hopeful person looks to the future for a better day. Indeed, a person full of hope longs for the future because she has reason to believe that it will fulfill her deepest aspirations. On the contrary, a person without hope slogs through life without anything to motivate him because he had no hope for the future. He lives without illusions, all right, but he also lives without the joy, the élan that comes from hoping for better days.

But of course hope for a Christian is more than that. Christian hope is based on the promises of Jesus to his followers. Although Jesus himself rarely used the word “hope,” he expressed the basic idea in one of his Beautitudes: “Blessed are the pure in spirit, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). He could have said: “Blessed are those who live with hope, for they will see God.” The important thing here is that the hope that Jesus calls for is directly to God, and not to anything or anybody else. Hope has God himself as its whole focus and object.

As for Jesus, he usually talks about God in terms of the Kingdom. And so in Matthew’s Beautitudes, the poor in spirit and those persecuted for the sake of righteousness will inherit the “Kingdom of Heaven.” But we should not be distracted by this circumlocution. The Kingdom of Heaven, in its essence is nothing else but God himself. That is why hope is called a “theological virtue”: it is directly concerned with our

relation to God. Of course, the other two theological virtues are faith and charity; hope has probably gotten less attention than its two more famous sisters. But nonetheless, all three are directly related to God.

This theological dimension of hope should not be passed over lightly. It is absolutely of the essence of this question. Our hope as Christians is in God, and our hope as monks cannot be in anything else. There are other, intermediate, concerns for us such as our future as a social body, but our ultimate concern is with God. As monks, we really must keep our eyes on the ultimate meaning of our lives, namely God and his promises. Christian monastic life has no other basic meaning than this: we are living for God. We are called by God and God is our real future. All else is secondary.

When we call hope a Christian *virtue*, what do we mean? Here we have to be careful, because the ordinary meaning of this word is not adequate. We often equal virtue with goodness, but that's not the root meaning. Virtue is based on Latin *virtus*, which means power or strength. And so Webster first defines virtue as "moral practice or action." There is much more that could be said about that, but the point here is that the virtue of hope makes demands on us. It is not just something that we sit on. God gives it to us so that we might live hopefully. The emphasis here is on somehow acting out our hope.

That kind of talk always reminds me of one of my favorite Biblical passages. In I Peter 3:15 we read: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for the reason for your hope." The implication here is that the Christian is *acting hopefully*, and that causes others to ask how she can act like that. Apparently, there is

no obvious, practical reason for her to be acting hopefully. Clearly, the answer that Peter expects the Christian to give, in so many words, is something like this: “I can act hopefully because Jesus Christ died for my sins and rose from the dead. Therefore, I live in him and that’s why I live full of hope.”

Of course, there are all kinds of reasons for living hopefully, and some of the ones that drive holy atheists are pretty impressive. But the Christian acts as he does because of hope in Jesus and his Kingdom. I would say that authentic Christian hope is primarily a matter of acting and not preaching. Peter does not say that we should practice what we preach. He says we should first practice and, if asked, then only explain what drives us. We may never be asked directly what drives us, but we should be ready to explain. We don’t live with hope so that novices might be attracted by our example. We live with hope because of God’s promises; if that attracts anybody else, so be it. If not, so be it.

Sometimes people concoct a sort of naïve causality in this regard. They say: the best advertisement for vocations are happy monks. Perhaps. But why are they happy? So that they can pose for their vocation posters? Maybe the reverse would be better? Why are you people so joyful? You have no novices. You will have to close your doors in a few years? What on earth keeps you going? Why not cut your losses while you can? Well, we don’t know quite what to answer, but the basic thing that keeps us going is our hope in what Jesus promised.

This matter of “what keeps you going?” is not so crystal clear. The whole business of knowing “when to hold and when to fold,” when to lock the doors and when

to keep them open, this can be very hard to determine. Recently the Abbot Primate was quite unhappy with a monastery in Germany that decided to close up shop. He said that they just don't have the hope that they should have; that their situation is not hopeless. Their answer was that it was their decision, not his, and they could not see a way forward. So they closed. Did they actually give up hope?

One of the dimensions of biblical hope, and therefore Christian and monastic hope, is that it often must function precisely in adverse conditions. In other words, we hope despite the conditions in which we find ourselves. Indeed, it seems that the roots of biblical hope can be found in the very hard and desperate situation in which the Jews found themselves at various times. Especially at the time of the Babylonian Exile, some of the biblical authors begin to urge the Jews that despite appearances, God had not abandoned them, and would not abandon them.

Of course that means that hope is often hard, perhaps very hard. In the present situation for religious, the problem is not that we are being persecuted. Maybe it would be less frustrating if we were! No, the problem is simply that people in our society and in our church no longer wish to become monks. Exactly why, we are not sure. Oh, some people are sure; they know why. Years ago, Bishop Fulton Sheen came here to give a retreat to the priests of the Diocese. Some of the retired sisters would sit in the back taking it all in. So Sheen could not miss a chance to get in a dig: If the nuns would just put their veils back on, he would guarantee them fifty novices a year! He understood the problem but the sisters do not.

But to hang on to hope in the face of years and years of dispiriting and contrary facts, that is not at all easy. And obviously there is a strong temptation to give in to sins against hope. We all recognize that the primary sin against hope is despair. It is just a French word that means no hope. To live in despair and to act with despair are fundamental sins against God and against all religion. We are not talking here about clinical depression; we are talking about theological despair. No doubt this vice can wear many faces, but surely lack of joy would be one of the ugliest. If we are living without joy in God, then we should indeed close down the monastery.

Obviously, you cannot fake this kind of hopeful joy. It is not the same as facile and willful happiness. This is not the kind of thing that can be produced on call. The task for the Christian and for the monk is to be joyful in the Lord and not just to be mirthful. Actually, our whole society is determined to be cheerful, and much of our entertainment industry is aimed at keeping people that way. We know well enough that one of the main jobs of the mass media is precisely to keep people distracted from dark thoughts. TV very often functions as a kind of psychic baby-sitter to shield us from despair.

We therefore should not be too surprised as the deleterious effect of the mass media on monks. Of course, some communities watch little or no TV or films. But where this stuff is regular far for many of the nuns and monks, we may well slip into the kind of despair that comes from keeping company with people who have no hope in the Lord. Note well that I am not claiming that all secular art forms are without real hope. In fact, sometimes so-called Christian art may be basically hopeless in its tone and outlook.

Another feature of modern life that can undermine hope is affluence. No matter how austere our monastery is, it is still situated in a context of affluence. Now the watchword of affluence is self-indulgence. “Be good to yourself!” “Nothing’s too good for number one.” The problem with self-indulgence, at least in regard to hope, is that it is focused on the self and also on the present. Authentic hope is oriented toward the future that God wants for us, not on the satisfaction of my present needs. Advertising wants to keep us focused on ourselves; the Bible wants to keep us focused on God’s future.

But what does God want for us? What is his plan? What is the meaning of the rather bewildering situation in which we find ourselves? Doesn’t God want the monastic life to flourish? Can God possibly be pleased with the statistics in the Catholic Directory that show that there are only about a third as many monks in this country today as there were fifty years ago? It is important to remember that the future belongs to God, not to us. We can cooperate with what we discern to be God’s plan, but we cannot force it. God does what she wants.

For example, right now, monasticism is flourishing in the Third World. Especially south of the equator, monasteries are brim full and have waiting lists. What does that say? We should not jump to facile and uncharitable conclusions. One time I was in an African monastery of women and the superior asked me to speak to the novices. There were fifty of them! When we were alone, I bluntly asked the Abbess whether maybe some of them were there for the wrong reasons. She set me straight: “Listen, Father, there are lots of other Orders they could join. They want to be contemplatives!”

At least this does say one thing, namely, that the monastic life is not about to go extinct any time soon. It may die out in this country, or it may die out in Europe, but it looks as if it continues to flourish somewhere and some time. Maybe the Africans will have to refound monasticism in this country some day. They already think that they may have to refound Christianity itself in Europe! This is not arrogance; they will be quite willing to repay the debt. But still, we really don't know what God is up to in these matters. The Bible seems to assure us that Christianity itself will not die out: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). But beyond that, we don't know.

One of the elements of biblical hope that should be discussed, and this will be my final point, is what we might call its social dimension. One of the criticisms that has been leveled against Christians is that they seem to be too focused on their own personal future and care too little about the future of the society and the whole world. Clearly, this is one of the dimensions of our historic disregard for the cosmos. If all we care about is our own personal future with God, we are part of the problem, not the solution.

Actually, biblical hope began with Jewish hope, and that was and is always social. The ancient Jews, and many of the modern ones, care more about the future of the Jewish people than about their own personal future. And Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God is also social. The very term Kingdom implies some kind of social concern. We may not know precisely what Jesus meant by Kingdom, but it is clear that it is about the whole people, the community, not just the individual.

One of the strongest examples of hope in modern history was Marxism.

Whatever we might think of Marxism as an ideology, it was and is very much concerned about the future of society. And like the biblical hope, Marxist hope focuses on this world. Moreover, it is very active: the Marxist wants to help bring about the desirable future. Not only that, Marxist hope is for the whole society, not just the individual. Now of course unfortunately when the Communists actually take over a government, this shining ideal tends to turn into a sort of nightmare, as in North Korea. But at least they know what authentic hope is.

Can monastic hope come up to this standard? Because our communities seem to be in jeopardy, we may think that it is best not to be too concerned with social problems. Some of us have been there and tried that, but maybe it is best that we just centered on our own salvation. Even if the monastery is in jeopardy, at least I can save my soul. I would counter that perhaps the best witness of Christian hope in that situation is precisely to be a counter-witness: even if our monastery must close, even if the Benedictine Order is fated to die away, I am still determined to further the Kingdom of God as I understand it.