

The Council and Religious Life

by Thomas Merton

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I

The Second Vatican Council draws to a close amid the rather general realization that the Catholic Church has reached the end of a historic age. Indeed it is sometimes, provocatively, said that we find ourselves now in the 'post-Christian era'. Naturally this term has such undertones of pessimism and ambiguity that it cannot be taken too seriously. From the point of view of theology, there can be no post-Christian era. Since the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, and since 'behold He is with us all days even to the end of the world', all ages are His and He is the King of Ages, immortal and invisible. Yet on another level, that of social and cultural history, it may perhaps be possible to find certain fruitful suggestions in this insolent expression.

For over a thousand years the Catholic Church in Western Europe has first helped to build, then to sustain a Christian culture, a 'Christendom', which has after all been not without its glory. It is the culture and society not of the last days of the Roman Empire, though inspired by Augustine and the other Latin Fathers, but of Carolingian and then Medieval and Renaissance Europe: the Christendom of Chartres and Canterbury, Paris and Rome, Cambridge and Salamanca, of St Anselm and St Thomas, of St Bernard and Peter the Venerable, of St Francis and St Dominic, Duns Scotus, St Theresa, St John of the Cross, St Ignatius . . . What need is there to go on? It is the 'Christendom' which we grew up to regard as identical with 'Christianity' itself. And this culture, with its special order and splendour, is definitely at an end – it began to crack open in the thirteenth century, it split wide in the Reformation and Renaissance, the roof fell in with the French Revolution and the walls collapsed in the first World War. What we have now is a generous pile of rubble in which there is still an enormous amount of building material. But is it possible, or even desirable, to reconstruct this venerable monument? Cannot the same materials be incorporated into a modern building?

To say that the Church has reached the end of an era is then to say that she has reached a point where it is no longer possible to identify the Christian culture of the West, from Constantine to the French Revolution, with Christianity pure and simple. Admission of this had and will continue to have some extremely disquieting consequences, when we reflect that in practice so much of Catholic

worship, the apostolate, religious life, the missions, education and so on have taken for granted that Catholicism meant the word of Charlemagne, Innocent III, St Pius V and His Catholic Majesty in the Escorial.

Only with the Second Vatican Council has the Church openly and officially recognized that the Reformation did not take place without good reason and that modern science has had important implications for Catholic Truth. So true is this that, without anyone complaining of redundancy, we have now adopted a new word which ought to mean the same as Catholicism but which in fact implies a note of universality which the word Catholic has imperceptibly lost: the new word is, of course, ecumenism.

That these introductory remarks are not irrelevant to our subject will become apparent when we remember that the foundations of Western Christian civilization were laid by monks. And therefore when we come to consider the question of monasticism at the time of the Second Vatican Council, we must expect to find this general problem enhanced by a peculiar modality. More than anyone else, the monks have naturally identified themselves with the medieval culture and society built by their monastic forbearers. More than anyone else, therefore, they have to recognize that if 'monasticism' means purely and simply *medieval* and *western European* monasticism, it is likely to disappear. An aggiornamento of monasticism which would be nothing more than an effort to recapture the spirit and rebuild the structures of the great medieval reforms, Cluny, Citeaux, and the rest, can result in little more than an exercise in archaism.

This was the formula of the nineteenth-century reformers like Dom Guéranger and Dom Wolter. The restoration of Solesmes and Beuron was analogous to the restoration of Notre Dame by Viollet-le-Duc. One would hardly call this a serious temptation in America, where quite other forces are at work today. Here, on the contrary, it would appear that the monastic orders are more apt to consider themselves 'religious institutes' like any others, and to formulate their problems no differently from the Jesuits, the Franciscans, or the more modern congregations.

From reports that have emanated from Africa since the important meeting of monastic superiors at Bouaké, it would seem that the most hopeful and indeed exciting developments are now taking place in *African* monasticism. The most authentic inspiration seems to be breathing in the continent where monasticism began.

It is of course true that the basic problems of all religions are the same, and that is why this article will concern itself with more than the difficulties of monks as such. But let us take note, in passing that the monastic past is by no means irrelevant to the problems of the present, and that if American and European monks, in cutting themselves adrift from their medieval anchorage, simply join the convoy of active institutes, retaining only a particular communal style of

life that is vaguely 'monastic' they will hardly be monks in the real sense of the word. One might make an interesting study of the influence of the more modern Orders and 'spiritualities' on the older monastic orders, and try to assess the extent to which the apostolate of American Benedictines has in fact been affected by the Jesuits, or the contemplative spirituality of Cistercians and Carthusians has been influenced by that of the Discalced Carmelites. The fact remains that a member of a monastic order in America today usually has much more in common with members of the modern active orders than with the monks of St Benedict's time, or of the twelfth century.

It is with this problem in mind, and in order to preserve the distinctive character of *monasticism* that there is at present a strong movement to petition for juridical recognition of the *monastic state* and of the monk in the new Code of Canon Law.

Consequently, in meetings of abbots and other monastic superiors, in conferences of monastic canonists, novice masters and others, priority has been given to the task of defining a monk and bringing out the elements that make him essentially different from other religious. This has been the particular concern of those for whom the monastic life is essentially contemplative. It is hoped that canonical recognition of the monastic state as one with needs and functions different from those of active orders, will enable the monks to preserve their own way of life and their own methods of formation.

The Cistercian circles, the definition of the monk has focused on the note of 'separation from the world'. In Benedictine circles it has been oriented more toward 'dialogue with the world'. The fact is that both of these are very important for modern monasticism: *separation* from the world because the monk is essentially one who lives 'alone' and who has in some rather radical way cut himself off from the 'world' with its agitation and its confusion; *dialogue* with the world because today the Church is more than ever conscious of her mission to bring Christ to a world that is agitated, confused and indeed, one sometimes thinks, nearing the point of desperation.

However one may look at it, one can neither admit a 'turning to the world' that would entirely destroy monastic solitude, nor a flight from the world that would leave the monk totally estranged from his contemporaries.

Without going into details, one might say that the essence of the monastic state is this. First, it is not only the *stabilis in communi vivendi modus* of Canon 487. It also implies a special mode of common life, which is in some way oriented to solitude, either by being lived in a place remote from cities and towns, or by the practice of enclosure and silence in a rather strict way. This common life is also organized not in view of carrying out some particular work, but in view of a life of prayer and renunciation. Cassian calls the postulants to such a life simply *renuntiantes*. They embrace a characteristic monastic discipline the purpose of which is not merely to train the

monk to live as a fully controlled and efficient person in carrying out an active work, for the Church, but to open up his inner depths in what Cassian calls 'purity of heart', in order to make him capable of a deeper experience of the mysteries of the Christian life, which he lives on a more fundamental and simpler level than other Christians and even than other religious.

While the life and formation of religious in the apostolic congregations is directed towards preaching the Christian message in the world, the monastic life is entirely centered upon living, meditating and celebrating the Christian mysteries. The monk is one who, in St Bernard's term, is constantly engaged in silent 'rumination' of the Bible which he reads in his *lectio divina*, chants in the *opus Dei* and remembers while he is at work in the fields. Hence the monastic life necessarily implies a certain disengagement, a freedom, a leisure without which such continued reflection would not be possible. This does not mean the monastic life is one of bodily comfort. On the contrary, an austere discipline is required in order to preserve the spiritual leisure, the *otium sanctum* which is the only legitimate business, *negotium*, of the monk. Hence it follows that the chief obligation of the monk is to preserve for himself a dimension of *awareness* which cannot be authentic without a certain depth of silence and interior solitude. A monastic renewal that does not in some way envisage this dimension of spiritual understanding and direct experience of the things of God will hardly be worth undertaking.

This notion of experience has not, I think, been stressed in any of the officially proposed definitions of the monastic life, and I can scarcely imagine it appearing in one of the canons of the new Code. And doubtless one must never give the impression that the monk has to be a special kind of person, a gnostic, a mystic, or a prophet. God forbid! But it is nevertheless true to say that the monastic vocation is an ascetic charism, a special gift which is supposed not only to make the monk holy, and by his holiness of life to constitute him as a silent sign of Christ living and praying in his Church, but it is also supposed to enable him to 'taste and see that the Lord is sweet' and to experience in his inmost being the full reality of God's mercy to man and of his infallible promises to his Church.

This is where it becomes so necessary to emphasize the continuity of a really living monastic tradition, for this dimension of simplicity and living faith, with its special notes of silence, solitude, austerity, renunciation and abandonment to God alone, cannot be learned in a classroom or from a book. It must be experienced in the ambient of an authentic monasticism and according to a more or less unbroken tradition embodied and lived by actual monks of flesh and blood. Hence we must face the fact that even though blind attachment to the forms of the medieval past would be a disaster for monasticism, the living spirit that has hitherto given those forms

meaning must nevertheless come through to us and enliven whatever new accidental forms we may devise to fit a new context. And in this new context, while we may not exactly reproduce the monastic observance of Tabenna, Citeaux, Subiaco or Pispir, we should still be able to experience, in some small way, the truths of faith as they were lived by Pachomius, Bernard, Benedict or Ammonas.

With this in view, the last ten or fifteen years have seen numerous remarkable monastic experiments in all parts of the world. Certainly the small, relatively independent, 'primitive' monastery where a few pioneers strive to live the monastic life in its purity, *sine addito*, has a significance which is not measured by size, numbers, publicity or material prosperity.

Needless to say, definitions of the monk all tend to emphasize the social aspect of the Benedictine life, in which the monastic community is a family of brothers under the guidance of the Abbot, the common father, who represents Christ. But there is also in some quarters a reawakening of the eremitical ideal and a realization that the solitude of the hermit can be, in exceptional cases, a normal fulfilment of the monastic vocation for one who has proved himself by years of fidelity in the common life. Not only have certain Benedictine monasteries in Europe and America permitted some of their members to try the hermit life, while remaining under obedience to their abbots, but the Cistercian general Chapter recently admitted that experiments of this type were also legitimate in Cistercian (Trappist) abbeys.

These are a few of the specifically monastic problems that are being discussed at the present moment. They are no doubt a matter of some interest, but there are other questions of much greater urgency: those which concern all religious, whether monks or not. These questions were not answered in the draft of the schema on Religious presented at the third session of the Council. The discussions that have taken place both in the Council and out of it, and the rather general feeling among theologians and superiors that the religious life is a grave crisis, have suggested the following observation.

II

The draft schema on Religious presented in third Council session was severely criticized because it did nothing to meet a desperately felt need for a renewed theology of the religious life. Such a theology is obviously demanded if the religious life is going to be brought up to date in accordance with the Constitution *de Ecclesia*. It is significant, by the way, that no one is at present speaking of the *reform* of religious life but of its *renewal*. Renewal is something deeper and more total than reform. Reform was proper to the needs of the Church at the time of the Council of Trent, when the whole structure of religious life had collapsed, even though there was still a great deal

of vitality among religious. Today the structure and organization is firm and intact: what is lacking is a deep and fruitful understanding of the real meaning of religious life. To simply echo the Tridentine reform and urge a tightening of discipline within the now familiar framework would ignore the very real problem of religious, and not least the problem of obedience and authority in the modern context.

The problem of obedience is the one which both Superiors and subjects feel to be the most disquieting, and the most urgent. It is quite possible that the whole Church is now facing a crisis of authority. If so, the crisis will doubtless be especially acute among clerics and religious. But it will probably be a crisis of *understanding* even more than one of *will*. The real difficulty is perhaps one of conflicting interpretations of the religious vocation itself.

Let us not forget that modern man, or modern woman, at least in the 'advanced countries', is desperately concerned with the problem of giving meaning to a life that is so easily reduced to mere empty routine by the alienating pressures of commercial and technological organization. We are often very keenly aware of the danger of becoming mere 'mass men', frustrated, unidentified cogs in a huge impersonal machine. This does not necessarily mean that modern man is as free as he thinks he is, or as mature as he sometimes claims to be: his very protestations in this matter may sometimes be a sign of serious deficiency. But is he altogether wrong in resenting the lack of interest which Superiors of an older generation so often seem to manifest toward this very real problem? Surely the advice to 'shut up and obey' is altogether inadequate.

Clichés about 'blind obedience' make the modern religious feel, and not without reason, that his objections are simply being waved aside without even being considered. The summons to offer himself as a victim of holocaust on the altar of religious perfection, without even a reasonable hope that the sacrifice will make sense or be of any use to anyone else, leaves him in a state of serious doubt about the worth of the religious life itself. To diagnose this as cowardice or lack of generosity is more often than not pure equivocation. These same religious, in a situation that they are better able to comprehend, can give themselves most generously.

It is a regrettable fact that there is much immaturity among religious due to lack of a really adequate spiritual and psychological formation. This is not news to anyone any more, and it is most keenly felt by those who are most humiliated by it, being aware that they are themselves immature. But their anxiety to be mature often leads them into more outrageous forms of immaturity. Personalism and freedom do not, for example, consist entirely in always being right, always being deferred to, always having the last word. If in fact the immaturity of some Superiors has taken this form, and if some subjects are therefore misled into believing that maturity is simple immaturity made official, and if 'renewal' proceeds on such

assumptions, the prospect is not encouraging. One of the marks of a mature mind is that it is able to get along without being at all times in a position of unquestioned superiority. In this sense, as a judicious reading of the Rule of St Benedict will show, obedience is not only for children: there is a higher and more perfect obedience which is a prerogative of the mature. In fact, only one who has this mature understanding of obedience is really fit for Superiorship because in fact the good Superior has to defer to others more wisely and more consistently than anybody else. The renewal of the religious life cannot, then, mean a free-for-all in which every oversize infant dressed up in a habit can expect to promulgate decisions that will be accepted with awe and with finality for all eternity by the entire order.

Yet the basic theological principle for the renewal of the religious life is something deeper than a reaffirmation that God signifies his will through Superiors, that the subject has an obligation to obey blindly, and that the only norm of religious perfection is to be sought in an abstract and legal formulation of the will of God. This blind voluntarism is based on an excessively juridical and rigidly authoritarian view of the religious – indeed of the Christian life – and it belongs definitely to the past. But there is no hope of its being used effectively any more merely to preserve the past. We cannot expect to treat religious today merely as persons who have abandoned all hope of personal autonomy and dignity, subjecting themselves to a particularly detailed and stringent set of rules and regulations in order to show that they take their faith more seriously than the ‘ordinary Christian’. The religious life then becomes a permanent tour de force, an obstacle race, in which those do best who steel themselves to consistently meet the challenge of the most repugnant difficulties, and who are inexhaustably able to see in all that ‘human nature most hates’ a summons to prove that they can take more punishment than others.

The new emphasis will no longer be on the dogged will of the religious to prove his love, but on faith in God’s love for the world in Christ, and a grateful, total response of surrender in trust and in brotherhood. The religious is not dominated by a theology that throws him back on himself as an isolated individual challenged to prove and to immolate himself. He is led by the light of the Gospel, the message of mercy and salvation, which is announced and experienced in the assembly of brethren and disciples, and his response of love and sacrifice is his self-forgetful and fraternal co-operation with them in the service of God and of man.

The new theological emphasis will be on joyous, grateful, fraternal life in Christ as a perfect response of praise to God’s love. The religious will seek to live most perfectly the life of the Church, the life of prayer, service and dedication which opens the heart completely to the Spirit of Christ. In so doing he or she will serve in the world

as a visible sign of Christ present in the midst of men as one of them. Religious perfection is not the stoic and individualistic exploit of submitting to difficult and senseless trials of strength (though great fortitude will certainly be demanded in the real trials of religious life). The true religious is one who, fully aware of his own limitations, has surrendered to the love of Christ, in order to praise the mercy of God and serve him joyously in common with others who have made the same surrender. This is simply a special modality of the ordinary Christian life, in which the vows are to be seen not just as peculiar and difficult obligations, but as means to guarantee the authentic purity of the Gospel life in religious communities. It is here above all that renewal is demanded because in point of fact, as theologians observe with increasing frequency, the vows have often come to be used as evasions and pretenses – for example where poverty becomes a completely abstract formality by virtue of which the religious enjoys all the comforts of life ‘with permission’ and without the exercise of juridical proprietorship.

The authenticity of the religious commitment is what makes all religious life (even that which is contemplative and cloistered) apostolic, and the measure of apostolicity in religious communities is not to be sought purely and simply in the amount of active work they accomplish, but in the purity of their faith as expressed in the genuine simplicity of a truly humble and open Christian life.

A spirit of *openness* will be most important in any renewal of religious life. This means that observances which are ‘closed’ and incomprehensible even to the religious themselves will almost inevitably generate a spirit of pretentiousness and artificiality which is incompatible with true Gospel simplicity. Such observances must either be re-thought so that they recover a living meaning, or they must be discarded, and if necessary replaced by others that fulfil the function which they have ceased to fulfil.

In any case it is clear that one of the central concerns of the Church in the religious life, as in the liturgy and everywhere else, is to ensure that renewal is more than tightening up the exactitude of rubrical or juridical observance. In religious life as in liturgy, renewal means *a restoration of authentic meaning to forms and acts that must recover their full value as sacred signs*. And these signs, whether in religious observance, apostolic action, contemplative solitude or liturgical worship, should always be clear and evident not only to those who give them form and shape by their living practice, but to all who witness them. The renewal of the religious life must be first of all a renewal of authentic meaning and of understanding, and only after that a renewal of zeal in carrying out what is understood.

The meaning of communal life, of the vows, of religious work, of worship, meditation and prayer can therefore not be permitted to remain arbitrary or abstract. Everything must converge on the central mystery of unity in Christ and illuminate it – or rather spread

the illumination which it receives from it. The function of the religious community is to manifest this mystery, and the 'spirit' of each order is in fact simply the way in which the order interprets its vocation to understand and to live some particular aspect of the mystery of Christ. Usually this 'spirit' was manifested to the Founder and made itself fairly clear in the first generations of the order's history. And so, for example, the sons of St Benedict pray in the liturgy of his feast, 'that the Lord may renew in his Church the Spirit that St Benedict served, so that we, being filled with the same Spirit, may strive to love what he loved and to carry out in our works the things that he accomplished'. So in the monastic life, renewal consists in rediscovering the meaning and spirit of monasticism as it was understood and lived by the early monks. Obviously the 'return to sources' has been an important element in the monastic movement of the last hundred years.

However, recovery of the 'same Spirit' in a different time means being alert and sensitive to what is also in effect a 'new spirit'. A really authentic renewal implies an awareness of the present special needs and new directions of the Church. This brings us to one of the most difficult problems of religious renewal: that of openness to the world.

III

The Church of the Second Vatican Council is turning to the modern world and taking a completely new look at its relations with the rest of society. In what does this 'new look' consist?

Without going into a detailed analysis, one might surmise that the Church's new optimistic view of the world is due in part to a theological renewal which has set aside some of Augustinian ideas which have dominated Christian thought in the west for fifteen hundred years. Pope John's *Pacem in terris*, for example, is remarkable for the fact that it takes a completely non-Augustinian view of the world and of man. It stands in rather stark contrast to the Augustinian pessimism about fallen man which guides the thought of those theologians, Protestant and Catholic, who speak for nuclear realism, and advocate 'the Bomb' as the only force capable of keeping an essentially perverse humanity in line.

The religious life in the West has traditionally adopted a pessimistic and negative view of the world. Thus the theology of the religious life has tended to be extremely negative toward the world, and this has affected not only the attitude of the religious toward the layman, but also the attitude of the layman toward himself.

One of the basic assumptions of much religious spirituality has been that salvation 'in the world' is at best extremely difficult, even for the faithful Christian. This has led, as we know, to unfortunate exaggerations and misunderstandings, so that the Christian in the

world felt that the only spirituality open to him was a kind of second-rate imitation of cloistered observance and prayer. The nun or the priest tended to be regarded as the only true Christians and the layman who took his faith seriously had to spend his life regretting the fact that he was not in a monastery or in Holy Orders, and making up for this regrettable oversight in one way or another – preferably of course by generous contributions to the parish and to religious houses.

The world has figured in this theological reckoning purely as a dead loss. It is a shipwreck from which the clergy and the religious, in lifeboats, are striving to pick up a few lucky survivors. The first obligation of the religious is to keep himself from being swallowed up in the same disaster.

According to this view, the relation of the religious, and indeed of the Church, to the world is unilateral. The world is wrong, the clergy, the monks and the sisters are right. The world is in darkness and we are in the light. The world is with its father the devil and we are united in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit speaks through us to the world. Anything that is said or done in the world that has not previously been inspired by ideas or initiatives of bishops, priests, monks, theologians and so on, is simply negligible if not downright perverse. The function of the priest or religious is to confound the falsity and malice of the world by laying down the law. The world has nothing to say: it can only obey or refuse obedience.

What is the new view of the world? It is not simply that the Church, as a matter of policy, needs to talk the language of the world in order to survive as an institution. One must admit, however, that this motive, which is hardly Christian, seems to have caught the popular imagination to some extent. This makes one realize the extent of the insecurity, indeed one might say the lack of faith, that unfortunately seems to underlie so many of the superficial 'new attitudes'. For many Catholics and for many priests and religious the question of the Church and the world seems to resolve itself into an anguished and undignified scuffle to get the Church accepted and respected by modern man if not on her own terms, then at least on his.

The reason for this rather comic turn of affairs is probably that while Christians have, in the last fifteen hundred years, reviled the world, it has not cost them a great deal to do so since the world was, in fact, all theirs. But now that he who decides to renounce the world must apparently find himself effectively out of the world for good and all – to the point where the world will care very little whether or not he starves – then recognition that the world may have a few good points suddenly becomes a pragmatic necessity. Obviously this has nothing to do with the genuine and serious 'turning to the world' which is characteristic of the present Catholic renewal.

Just as, in her relations with Protestants, the Catholic Church has tacitly and even openly admitted that her 'turning to' them implies

a repentance for her own past sins in their regard, so too this new 'turning to the world' is at least an implicit act of humility and sorrow for what has been a rather arrogant past. Theologically it implies a less rigid interpretation of the doctrine that 'outside the Church there is no salvation'. It also implies renunciation of a strictly unilateral view of the Church's relation with the world. True, it is the Church that must save the world, not vice versa. But nevertheless there is now a growing recognition that the honest and dedicated concern of certain non-Christians may represent a certain latent spiritual sensitivity to the will of God expressed in history, where expressions of that will have escaped the attention of Catholics. Thus it happens that in certain areas, such as that of social and economic reform, it becomes imperative for Catholics, including clergy and religious, to cooperate with Protestants, non-Christians, or with that unfortunate and despised genus, the 'fallen away Catholics', on a basis of equality, and even following them in initiatives which are seen to be, in fact, more Christian in their substance than those which have been taken in the same situation by the Church (if she has taken any initiative at all).

Here of course we are venturing into an area of great sensitivity, and it is too soon to decide anything definite about it. Two things we can say with assurance: the Church has repeatedly insisted in recent years that religious, clergy and laity must all have a deep understanding of the Christian implications of current problems whether social, interracial, international, economic or cultural. They must not see these simply as areas of peripheral concern. On the contrary, they must recognize that the Holy Spirit is speaking, today, in the midst of the world and in the agony of man, and that to fail to hear him there would be lamentable indeed. As a corollary, the formation of priests and religious, as well as that of Catholic laymen, should take this into account and provide for a real understanding of the modern world.

The question of openness to the world seems at first to be a difficult one for the monastic Orders that have hitherto insisted most strongly on enclosure, silence, remoteness from the world and a life of contemplation. But is the question always asked in the right terms? Is it really relevant for Trappists or Carthusians to suppose that they are now required to go out and work in parishes? Posed in such terms, it becomes a false problem: but nevertheless one which has a certain urgency, since in fact young priests in contemplative orders tend to get restless and feel that their lives are fruitless and 'unfulfilled'. Even if they do not get exclaustations, they tend to create a certain unrest in their communities by protesting against their supposed inertia and idleness. Here, in fact, we come back in full circle to the original question of renewal. If the monastic life loses its contemplative meaning, if in fact the monastery is a community of pious liturgical busybodies looking for justifiable dis-

tractions, then one may reasonably ask if they would *not* do better to help out with necessary parish work. But that is not the solution. The solution is to make the monastic life be what it is supposed to be, and then it will naturally and spontaneously fulfil its own appropriate function in the world.

Briefly, the contemplative monastery has a great deal to offer to a world that has forgotten that a silent, simple, austere, well-ordered and peaceful existence, close to the soil and to nature, is still humanly possible. It not only offers a refuge to those who need to get away from the noise and chaos of a badly unbalanced life and do a little thinking. It also bears witness, by the reality and authenticity of the 'sign' which it is, to the presence of Christ in the world. It brings men not only into physical silence but into living contact with the Spirit who speaks in silence.

However there are other more specialized functions which some members of these communities can fulfil: not only by the preaching of special retreats, by literary and perhaps scholarly work, but also by special conferences and meetings, ecumenical dialogues and so on. The monastic orders remain more or less suspicious of activities which can too easily proliferate, but the fact remains that there *are* certain forms of activity which can be very fruitful and can be carried on inside the enclosure, without the monks having necessarily to go out to parishes or educational centers.

We might however also remember the example of Taizé, the Protestant community which is in effect having such a profound influence on the renewal of Catholic monasticism, and where there is no such obsessional fear of 'going out' as we find in certain contemplative monasteries. The Brothers of Taizé alternate between contemplation in their monastic community and work in the world among the poor, in factories, in parishes, on farms and so on.

It is not for us to discuss concrete changes here. Each monastic community will want to work out the problem for itself, in the light of its own vocation and its own ideals. But all must admit it is a serious problem.

The conflict, real or apparent, between action and contemplation is certainly one that has arisen more in the tradition of Platonist and Neo-Platonist philosophy than in that of the Gospel. Medieval interpreters of Luke 10: 38-42 (Martha and Mary) have perhaps too much limited the sense of that passage. Nevertheless the problem, as St Thomas' treatment implicitly admits, remains very real for those who are still striving to attain full spiritual maturity. It ceases to exist, in practice, only for those whose perfection is assured. Thus one might well be somewhat disconcerted when those who are so opposed to purely abstract and formal solutions in other areas, seem content to assume that a busy apostolic life needs no more than good intentions for its activity to become, automatically, contemplation.

The monastic life will, in any case, take seriously its own basic contemplative character, and not overtax that tired cliché, 'My work is my prayer'.

What are the monasteries doing to contribute to the work of their own renewal? In the spirit of the Council, monks are discussing more or less freely and more or less fully, their needs and their obligations, while putting into effect the new liturgical constitution, which will by itself undoubtedly have a considerable effect on monastic renewal. In some monastic communities, such as St John's, Minnesota, all the members are articulately involved in the discussion and planning. In others, the discussion is carried on among the officers. In one South American abbey, when the novice master went to the abbot with a few discrete suggestions about monastic renewal, he was told to mind his own business. The idea that renewal comes only from the top down is not exactly dead!

Since, in America, we are eminently practical, the nature of the discussions is practical before all else, and much time has been spent on the question of recruiting, screening and training candidates. This is certainly useful, but one feels that there are other more basic considerations, and these have been perhaps left aside for the moment precisely because, being more basic, they are also more difficult.

The root difficulty however remains this: that renewal of the monastic life demands a knowledge and understanding of little known primitive sources as well as an ingenious and creative awareness of the Church's new needs. The danger is that since monastic tradition has been so often identified with *medieval* monastic tradition, and since even this tradition is poorly understood at least in America, the work of renewal might remain sadly superficial. Here above all, then, we must clearly realize the necessity of patient inquiry, tactful and charitable progress, sound theology, and above all, a sense of history.

CORRECTION

The editor apologizes for the description of Thomas Merton's *The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air* as being 'Extracts from an unpublished Journal'. The editor greatly regrets that he imposed so misleading a description on these extracts from a forthcoming book, which Thomas Merton has generously allowed NEW BLACKFRIARS to publish.