

The Value of Monasticism

by Abbot David Altman, OCSO

When individuals go into monasteries, they take on much the same identity as the average family: they live by themselves peacefully, sustaining themselves by making small contributions to the local economy and the social well-being of surrounding peoples. In that exterior sense, monks don't do anything out of the ordinary, but how many of us do? Monks live the Christian, human life as others do, but on a more intense level: a life of prayer, community, and personal commitment.

The problem in not appreciating the value of monasticism is that we live in a utilitarian society, where individual worth is largely measured by exterior accomplishment. This problem can be ours. If we are not doing and producing, we begin to question our own worth. The result of this mentality is chilling: those incapable of making functional contributions are considered valueless and therefore disposable. That's why human beings who are very young and very old are in fact eliminated, by abortion and euthanasia.

The problem lies not in monks or monasticism but in the lack of appreciation and poor evaluation of monasticism. We are not called by the Lord to be human doings but human beings. Our value is in our identity before God, not our physically related accomplishments.

What value is there in monasticism? Monks practice great love. Love is the greatest good there is. God is love. To practice love, we simply choose to unite good to the object of our love: ourselves or others. Love is good will.

The cardinal principle of life is that it is only through challenges that people grow. We see this in our formal education system, as we grow in knowledge and skills through the challenges of classroom work, study, and exams.

Love, or good will, grows in strength through the challenges of relationships. Some think that people become monks in order to escape from life, but what do people want to escape from? The difficulty is relationships, and we have three relationships in life: with God, with other people, and the most burdensome, demanding relationship of all—with ourselves.

Outside the monastery there are legitimate escapes from problematic relationships. Simply drop them and go somewhere else. In a monastery, however, there is little or no escape. The monk must put forth great effort to make many relationships work and to grow through them.

In other words, monks face great challenges to their good will. Persevering love in the face of great challenges is a great love. Add the fact that the primary dwelling place of God is in people. We alone have an eternal destiny, and we are the most highly developed beings on

our planet. Since God dwells in us, whatever we say, do, or willfully think toward anyone, good or bad, we say, do, and think toward our Creator, in each other. The great love we practice toward others, then, is primarily practiced toward God, and we are relating to a God who is not going to be outdone in generosity. God rewards us with the proverbial hundredfold beyond our efforts, and not only us but our loved ones and all the peoples of the world.

After all, we are threefold in our humanity: physical beings, mental-psychological beings, and moral-spiritual beings. Monks relate to everyone primarily at the moral-spiritual level, the deepest level of our being. At that level we are all brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the one heavenly Father. This means that when a person becomes a monk, he goes, not into isolation, but into solitude, and he becomes more intimately related in love to his brothers and sisters in the world, by drawing closer to God, who is Father to all. Monasticism is a universal vocation.

Monks are men and women of love and of prayer. We know that relationships depend on communications. Good relationships mean regular, congenial communications, or else the relationship weakens and dies. It works the same way with God, and our communication process with God is prayer. The closer we come to God, the more we bring all of humanity closer to God, just because we are human, and we are praying in the name of all humankind, another aspect of our universal monastic vocation.

Who knows but that in God's providence a monk's life of self-sacrificial love and prayer may be intimately connected with the success of another's personal life outside the monastery. If that monk left the monastery, or did not enter at all, the supporting sacrifices would not be there for others, and their lives would fall apart.

With all this love and prayer going on, why is there still so much war, division, and conflict in the world? Between the Lord's offering of happiness and peace, and our acceptance, there is the awful barrier of human free will. We have other agendas that we like to pursue, other gods that we would rather worship: money, fame, power. People worship the gods that rule them: their anger, their lust, their ideas, and their ambitions. Who is capable of making a sacrifice, such as giving up a dish of delicious food or a movie at a time when they desire it?

With our free will, in other words, too many are saying that they don't want God's gifts of life and peace. This is not a question of the value of monks or religion, but free rejection by too many people. Look at the statistics. An important example is that all the countries of Western Civilization are dying because of artificial contraception. People want pleasure, but without the responsibility of children. The result is that whole countries have fallen far below replacement levels. If contraception fails, abortion is used as a backup. Both are country-killers. History is also filled with people who want to gain more power by conquest, and consequently destroy peace.

What has happened throughout history is that people commit the cardinal sin of humankind. They forget God. When you realize that all good comes from God, then those who

forget God reject good and are left with evil. By contrast, monks spend their lives remembering God.

In the face of moral and social problems, there is monasticism. The great love or good will that monks practice is the antidote for all the hatred and disorder in the world. Love, or good will, is the only factor that can offset hatred or bad will. As monks grow in love, they become ever more effective solutions, contributing to the peace and happiness of the world's people. Their prayer-petition becomes more powerful. The love-lives of monks also serve to make up for the evil choices that people make. Monks offer their lives in sacrifice, the highest form of love, for all humankind. Parents perform this kind of love for their children, and monks practice love for the benefit of everyone. Monks can be justifiably proud to be part of this redemptive effort. This is the valuable redemptive aspect of the monastic vocation.

Multiply any pleasures and satisfactions by infinity and you get some idea of the opportunity everyone has in life for an eternal happiness. This is the opportunity that monks are living and giving witness to. In failing to seek the Creator of all that we have and are, many are missing out on what monks enjoy: the greatest and most rewarding and important adventure in life.

Thomas Merton became famous as a monk. His wife and child were killed in the London blitz, so that he had no obligations when he entered monastic life. When a priest leaves the active ministry, it depends on how he leaves. If he leaves with a Church dispensation, it is probably for the best, since as a priest he was frustrated and unhappy. He might serve God and the Church much better as a married man.

Vatican Council II recognized the contributions that non-Catholic religions can make to spirituality. The bottom line in a person's relationship with God is not his formal religion. It is love, because God is love. God is not Catholic or Protestant. God is good will.

At the same time, greater truth about God will lead to greater love. Monks are people of the book. By reading and praying, they grow in knowledge and love. The late Frank Sheed wrote in *Theology and Sanity*: "If a person loves God knowing something about Him, he should love God more from knowing more about Him, because each new thing learned about God is a new reason for loving Him." Thus the true religion of God, the religion that possesses the fullness of truth, offers the greatest opportunity to grow in love of God.

Individuals do leave the Catholic Church because of poor preaching in their parish church, and they are attracted to another church on account of a minister's personality or ability to preach. That is not necessarily sinful in each case, but it does show a lack of appreciation for Church doctrine. The problem is almost always: inadequate catechesis. Individuals who leave the Church do not know or appreciate what they are giving up.

Each religion offers its own path to God, which is to say, a path to personal holiness. Like paths on different sides of a mountain, they are all in different locations, but they all lead upward to the same summit.

Before Vatican II, Trappist monks were spending time and energy going from one difficult penitential exercise to another. Now, after Vatican II, the emphasis has changed. We appreciate the value of close community life as a source of challenges for growth in love, understanding, and compassion. Human relationships are penitential and disciplinary enough.

Monastic religious life is much like a marriage, where the primary focus is on efforts to make relationships work, and this is challenging work. It costs great effort at times to practice love in the context of stability.

Monastic life is primarily an interior life of mind and heart, because there is so much aloneness with God. The powerful challenges of relationships force a monk to turn to prayer in order to maintain love of neighbor and interior peace.

When a man gets married, he chooses a spouse on the basis of mutuality: shared religious beliefs, social, economic, education backgrounds, and compatibility in interests, character, and personality. When a man becomes a monk, these luxuries are not afforded him. He commits himself to a community that often comprises great differences in all these areas. The personal challenges are great, and the corresponding call to great character-growth or holiness is great. The monk's value as a person of love and prayer becomes great.

The primary challenge in the interior life of a monk is his thoughts. Various kinds of thoughts come into play in response to the challenges of daily monastic life: the demanding schedule, different kinds of people, personal psychological and physical challenges. Success is measured the same as in marriage: how you handle conflict, whether in your relationship with God, with others, or with yourself. The greatest conflict is interior, between oneself and God.

There is no mental collision between, say, an All-American football player or any vocation, including the monastic vocation. All lifestyles and activities are governed by laws and rules. All have penalties for violations of the rules, even to the point of being removed from the premises or the monastery. Interior peace and peace between individuals in community must be maintained, and in all cases that requires a high degree of personal discipline through training.

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