

JOURNEY INTO CHRIST

JAMES M. DESCHENE, O.S.B.

A monk is a man of mystery.

He is a mystery partly, though least importantly, because in our day and age he is little seen, little understood. He seems to be a romantic anachronism living out some medieval dream. To the outsider, monasteries are mysterious places and the monks within are always curiosities. Those who visit the monastery expect to find, in the words of Saint Athanasius written centuries ago, “an altogether different country, cut off from the rest of the world, and the inhabitants of that country have no thought than to live in love and justice.”

There is, however, a larger sense in which the monk is a man of mystery. For it is the monk, more than other men, who plunges his whole life into the very depths of the human adventure, into depths where the human adventure is discovered to be a response to a mysterious divine call. In that secret place, in the very heart of our being, a Voice, full of quiet power, speaks:

I love you. Before the world was made, before the first tick of time, I loved you. I have made you for myself because I love you. And when the universe lies cold and lifeless, I will love you still. Come, my beloved one. Walk with me. Give me your heart.

To hear those words uttered in the stillness of our hearts is to know real terror. For, like any human love, they demand of us a commitment of our very being. Yet unlike human love, their demand on us is an infinite one. We are asked to surrender ourselves utterly into those divine hands, to withhold nothing.

We are afraid of such a love:
For, though I knew His Love Who followed,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.
(Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*)

In the face of this demand it is easy to see why we flee from God into busyness, noise, distraction. Who of us can bear to be so loved? Or to offer such a love in return?

Yet this love and this demand are at the very heart of our religion. God is love. And as hard as that is to believe, many find it even harder to believe that this God, this Love, loves them--infinitely (for God can do no less). This is a love that asks us to die to everything but itself, to be willing to abandon every possession, every security, every earthly thing and to leap into the dark from which God calls to us. From this darkness, from this call, from this unspeakably demanding love, we try to escape and flee.

The monk does not. And insofar as man's final rest and fulfillment lie solely in God, the monk stands before us as a challenge and a sign of what we truly are and of where our lives will truly find their ending: in utter abandonment to the love of God. Both the Christian monk and the ordinary Christian are called to the same high and mysterious destiny.

When Christ orders us to follow the narrow path, he addresses himself to all men. The monk and the lay person must attain the same heights. (St. John Chrysostom, In *Epist. ad Haebras*)

The monk is different in that he commits himself to this goal single heartedly and in deadly earnest, surrendering all that might hinder the search.

He who hears the voice of God must recognize that he is called to an ‘adventure whose ending he cannot foresee because it is in the hands of God’. That is the risk and the challenge of the monastic calling: we surrender our lives into the hands of God and never take them back. (Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Life*)

The monk is willing to suffer the loss of all things, if only Christ be gained (Ph 3:8). All the details of his life are simplified, streamlined, so that he lives with a clarity and single-mindedness often missing from the lives of other men and women. The monk is called to be the unified, integrated man whose life is centered on one thing only -- the love and service of God. And yet, for all this, we must not see the monk as special or basically different from others. Rather, he is a sign, a kind of sacrament or incarnation, of every person’s specialness and vocation--to seek the God in whom alone the human heart finds rest, life and joy.

You have made us for yourself, Lord. And our hearts will find no rest until they rest in you. (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*)

The monk is also a man of despair. By being utterly honest with himself, he has come to admit the hopelessness of what the world calls good--the illusions, the empty materialism--and knows in his heart that these values can bring no one to God, but often aid a man in hiding from the demands of the infinite Lover. Yet this despair for the monk is a salutary despair, for it enables him to discard these conventional and false values and to put in their place the only true values--love, mercy, justice, peace, joy.

So the monk withdraws from the city into the desert, the wilderness. He becomes an outlaw, a stranger. Yet his apartness and withdrawal are, paradoxically, signs of his deep loyalty to the family of man. In refusing to live by the values that demean human beings, the monk affirms in himself and for his brothers and sisters the true value of men and women in God’s sight. Out of love for his brothers and sisters, the monk will not consent to a life that enslaves in falseness and futility.

Here too the monk enters upon a mystery. For he enters a way he does not know, a journey without maps, a land untraveled by most men and women, an uncharted wilderness. Like the Chosen People of old, he is called and led by God deeper and deeper into this unknown country. Gone are all the familiar contours of the human landscape and social life. Gone are the security and assurance of old and comfortable habits of life. There remains in that dry desert air only the single Voice that calls one onward: “Come, my beloved one. Walk with me. Give me your heart.” Abandoning all to follow that call, the monk advances on his journey without maps. He is a fool to do so, but he is a fool for Christ’s sake; and like his Master, he confounds the wisdom of the world by living out the wisdom of God.

Seeing the monk’s foolishness, men ask: “What is the use of all this?” And the monk can give no answer. His way is not essentially a way of profit or usefulness or productivity. His life is, in the eyes of the world, a pointless one. The world never ceases to be amazed at this, and so it asks again: “What is the point of all this?” Again the monk is silent.

Silence is his message. The question has been asked; that is point enough. The monk has proclaimed by his very presence the absurdity of a world apart from Christ. So long as a single monk lives, men will have a reason to question the ways and values of their world.

Wars, revolutions, social, political and economic upheavals are the tools the world uses to bring about change, Against all these the monk proclaims by his life the one-power that can heal and change the world—transfiguration through love and grace. And this always happens in secret, in silence, in the depths where man meets God in love. Then and there is the wounded human heart filled with healing, joy and peace, which are the monk’s final gifts to

suffering humanity. By surrendering himself, he has been healed, and through him flow into the world the gifts the world has ever sought but rarely found.

Healing, joy, peace—the gifts of Christ. They may be had only by a surrender to Christ’s love, by a death to all things that would separate one from his love. The monk reminds us of this.

If the monk is to “reestablish all things in Christ,” he must be ready to disestablish all things in himself. Like Christ, he must empty himself, becoming obedient unto death. (Hubert van Zeller, *The Holy Rule*)

Obedience. Death. Harsh and fearful realities for modern man. The monk, like Christ, is a man of obedience unto death. He seeks to be admitted, in love, to the heart of the mystery of the suffering Christ and to become one with that sacrifice whereby the whole world is made a new creation. He goes through death with Christ to rise in the dewy morning of a world recreated in the risen Lord. Only through obedience and death can the gifts of the new creation--joy, healing, peace--be brought to man. Our own baptism showed us this, as we were plunged into the mystery of Christ’s death so we might rise with him in his new life. The monk is a living sign of baptism. In his own transfiguration through grace, having become a wholly new creature, the monk brings back into our struggling world the freshness and innocence of Eden.

The monk is also a sign of the end, of the coming kingdom. “Thy kingdom come,” we pray, dreading that our prayer might be answered. For the kingdom (we know) will mean the end of all our petty security, our dishonesties, our comfortable habits. In the monk we see a sign of this coming kingdom. Yet in him we see too that the end, though it will be an utter catastrophe for our old ways, will finally be a deep and gracious blessing, filling our lifelong emptiness with the gifts of healing, joy and love. In the monk God gives us a living sign of this hope, a sign that Christ has already overcome the world: Easter has happened, the power of death has been vanquished, and all our fears are groundless.

All that thy child’s mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home;
Rise, clasp my hand, and come!
(*The Hound of Heaven*)

We see too in the monastery itself--in this community of brothers gathered in love and mutual service, and centered and grounded in Christ—a sign of the coming kingdom. In the sonship of the monks and the fatherhood of the abbot, all gathered in loving fellowship, we catch glimmerings of the mystery of the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit. In the monastic Church, microcosm of the universal Church, with the monks gathered in Eucharist about the altar, we have a living sign of the Body of Christ, And in the fidelity of the monks to liturgical and contemplative prayer, we can discover anew that the worship and praise of God is the final destiny of man. For worship--“With my body I thee worship”--is but another word for love.

The monk is indeed a man of mystery and of mysteries--mysteries of vocation, of surrender, of suffering; of obedience, of death, of resurrection; of the kingdom and of the Trinity. Perhaps most simply, though, he is a sign of the mystery of love which is the deep mystery of God.

In our days, as always, men and women need signs of the mystery of God at work in their hearts. We need to hear the message of the monks among us:

... as unknown yet well known, as ever at death's door, yet, wonder of wonders, we continue to live; as chastened but not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as beggars yet enriching many, as having nothing yet possessing everything. (2 Co 6:9-10)

In silence, in hiddenness, the monk's life radiates its message of peace and hope into the nighttime of our world, assuring us that the light of Christ shines in the darkness of our lives. The end draws near, but it will be the end of darkness and death, not of life. And in that dawn, made bright with the risen Christ, our hearts will know the joy that never ends and the perfect love that casts out every fear.

You changed my mourning into dancing; you took off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my soul might sing praise to you without ceasing; O Lord, my God, forever will I give you thanks. (Ps 29)

That is the song the monk sings secretly in his heart.

It is the song of every Christian who has surrendered himself to Love.

Come, my beloved one. Walk with me. Give me your heart.

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