Discernment, Discernment

Caveats for evangelicals flirting with monasticism.

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vanghelic Christianity might well be more familiar with the various branches of Christian monasticism. When one considers that both movements have sought to elevate the standard of Christian living and devotion in times when mainstream Christianity has been lax, and that both have regularly sought the global expansion of the faith through missionary labor, why have these two expressions of Christianity not become better friends? The answer to this question, from the evangelical Protestant side, surely has to do with the early Protestant era; the Reformation side, surely has to do with the early Protestant era; the Reformation and Catholic world as priest-pastors of churches. But Sloan, rather than being pure contemplatives, they serve the spiritual needs of the community, as alternative lifestyle which energizes them. Can be considered as a form of dissent from the status quo, turned to the dubious purpose of assisting the medieval Inquisition in its hounding of Jews and of Christians whose orthodoxy was questioned. One suspects that a Dominican writer would enumerate the distinctive features of this order differently, laying much more stress on acts of ministry and mission carried out beyond cloister and church walls. Savonarola, the turbulent monk-reformer of Florence (1452–1498), is one striking example of Dominican activism. One also suspects that Sloan, who writes with an admiral clarity, would have utilized her keen powers of observation and description just as happily on the Benedictines or Cistercians if she had been introduced to a handsome novice oriented to a different order. It is with the volume of Scott Bessenecker, The New Friars, that we move beyond the commending of monastic devotion and community to a consideration of the possibility that monasticism might serve as a pattern for evangelical activism. The friars, whether Franciscan, Dominican, or Carmelite, were itinerant rather than cloistered, and charismatically active in society on behalf of the unevangelized and needy. Bessenecker means to appropriate the preacher-friar aspect of monasticism for the equipping of a new generation of evangelical missionaries to the urban shuns of the developing world. It is not monastic dress, communal life, or styles of devotion that-effect the imagination of this author but rather the model of a voluntary, celibate, impassioned ministry to the poorest and neediest which he sees displayed in the careers of Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566), and Mother Teresa (1910–1997). His apologia for the friar’s life is the more intriguing inasmuch as he, a former Roman Catholic, saw enough innocence in an Iowa Franciscan monastery he visited as a teen to permanently cure him of any romantic notion that monasticism represented the way of living the Christian life.

As with the Bessenecker volume, so also with the composite work produced by Ruth House (a Durham, N.C. community), 12 Marks of a New Monasticism. The contributors to this symposium are not particularly interested in the relative appeal of any single branch of monasticism from the long-agold, they are very interested in all forms of monastic and Christian communal living which can be considered as a form of dissent from the status quo in the wider culture and in the church. It is the idea of monasticism as counter-culture, as dissenting community, as alternative lifestyle which energizes them. The operative word in their consideration of monasticism is “new.” Though members of Catholic religious orders are among the contributors to the book and among the members of the residential communities to whose existence the book alludes, the burning desire is to appropriate from “old” monasticism whatever literature, spiritual practices, and ideals will help forward their new project (whether in ministry to the hungry, the homeless, or the powerless).

Questionable, however, is the readiness of the book’s contributors to suggest parallels between the day of Emperor Constantine and today. They allege that as

BOOKS MENTIONED IN THIS ESSAY:
Scott A. Bessenecker, The New Friars (InterVarsity, 2006).
Dennis E. Okholm, Monk Habits for Ordinary People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants (Brasill Press, 2007).
Ruth House, Schools for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism (Cascade Books, 2005).
the Constantinian awarding of toleration to the early Christian movement had a corrosive effect on the Christianity of that day, so also has the effect of the American "Empire" on the church of today been harmful. Sinister imperial corrosion made monasticism necessary then, it makes it necessary again now. In fact, monasticism predated Constantine; only its proliferation followed his rule. This polemic is overheated. In kindness, let me suggest that many of the new monasticism's ideas are helpful whether or not one endorses this latent "Christian against Culture" view.

All four volumes fail to address the question, "What is the 'whole of which these pieces of monasticism are parts?'" In order to view the big picture, interested readers will benefit by consulting standard works on this larger subject. I do not know of any compact work that surpasses the overview of the whole of monasticism provided by the late Benedictine scholar, David Knowles, in Christian Monasticism (1969). The same authority, Knowles, had in 1962 commended the reprint of a 1913 classic, worthy of our attention: H.B. Workman's The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal. Workman (1862-1951), a British Methodist, pointed out that the ideal or aim of the monastic life was regularly modified, century by century, in response to changing circumstances and aspirations. A lot of water had flowed under the bridge between the day of Benedict (6th century), when the ideal was seclusion and contemplation, and the day of Francis (13th century), when the ideal was to enter towns to serve in schools and hospitals. Yet the issue was not so quickly settled in the church at large. Benedictine monasteries in Western Europe were only with difficulty brought under episcopal jurisdiction, Christian donors were more likely to remember monasteries with bequests than they were the institutional church. Even then, in time, all new monastic orders were required to gain a papal charter, the fact remained that the men and women in his region to leave their wilderness retreats and come into towns to serve in schools and hospitals. Yet the issue was not settled so quickly in the church at large. Benedictine monasteries in Western Europe were only with difficulty brought under episcopal jurisdiction, Christian donors were more likely to remember monasteries with bequests than they were the institutional church. Even then, in time, all new monastic orders were required to gain a papal charter, the fact remained that the men and women who sought entry to them were, as surely as old Antony, seeking affiliation with a variant of the church which seemed more likely to assist in the pursuit of salvation and sanctity. The institutional church, having established the point that monastic life could no longer exist without reference to the church's oversight, does not seem to have cared to challenge the premise that monastic life provided benefits not so readily available in the local parish. So, whether our contemporary writers are urging our appropriation of the insights of one branch of monasticism, or of several taken collectively, the question remains: why the monastery and not the church?

Monasticism's Declining Numbers
There are plenty of reports that in the global south, Catholic monasteries and convents are doing very well, we hear this particularly of such countries as Nigeria. But this is not what we hear about Europe and North America. The Dominicans, whom Sloan observed at such close quarters, number less than 1,000 in North America; the indolent Franciscan monastery in Iowa which Bessenecker visited in his teens is now no more. The BBC reported in 2008 that the number of monks and nuns, globally, declined by 10 percent between 2005 and 2006.

That under these circumstances, we have evangelical writers discovering and commending monastic ideals does not require us to suspect that they are deluded. But again, we are obliged to ask whether the pieces are being seen in relation to the whole. Seeing the whole will require us to understand that over centuries, any marked decline in monastic recruitment has been an indicator of weakness in the church constituency from which recruits come. Conversely, a flood of recruits (and still more, the chartering of new orders) is a reflection of some heightened vitality in the church at large, which lends to monasticism its keenest. There is reason to suspect that our writers have not grasped the wider complexity of the situation they describe.

Can We Smile at the Foibles?
An old cowboy ballad speaks wistfully of a place where "the skies are not cloudy all day." In the view of our writers, there are few clouds in the monastic sky. I have credited Okholm with acknowledging the critique of monasticism given in the early Protestant era, Sloan admits that the Dominicans were not on the side of the angels in supporting the Inquisition. Bessenecker has never forgotten the Franciscans who so shadowed his expectations in his teens. But what one needs to see acknowledged also, in such favorable accounts as these, is that criticisms of the monastic life have been a regular feature of Catholic life. Without this admission, one is left with the impression that only Protestantism has been faultfinding.

When Benedictine monasticism at Chury grew opulent, it was the puritanical Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux who aimed barbed arrows. Francis of Assisi had the pre-existing monastic orders (Benedictine and
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Our authors are (largely) evangelical Protestants appropriating elements within monasticism for the devotion, community life, and mission-outreach of their fellow evangelicals. But in order to serve this constituency well, some basic theological landmarks need to be maintained. This is true especially in reviewing the sacramental practices customary in the monastic orders. Okholm, while he does not openly endorse the Catholic understanding that after consecration, the elements of bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ (physical appearances notwithstanding), nevertheless bluntly indicates that the elements are the body and blood. Not only is this not the view of evangelicalism, broadly conceived, but it is not the view of his own adoptive Reformed tradition. In this tradition, we may speak of a real presence of the heavenly Jesus Christ in the Supper, facilitated by the agency of the Spirit. Sloan, who stands in the same Reformed theological tradition, while she refrains from participating in the Dominican administration of the mass, makes no theological evaluation of the Catholic devotional practice of the adoration of the host in which she regularly participates; this practice, however, presupposes transubstantiation to be actual. A high Marian devotion, similarly, is observed but given no theological evaluation.

In a similar way, Bessenecker gives an extended defense of the view, popularized by Mother Teresa, that in serving the destitute, we serve Christ unseen. There are signs that his editor did not prevail in pressing him to rethink this problematic interpretation of Matthew 25. The books are intended as windows into monasticism for evangelical Protestants who are utterly new to the subject; to do this effectively requires more theological discernment than they have shown.

Why Not Reciprocity?

Finally, if one accepts the proposal made here that there are actual affinities between monasticism and evangelical Protestantism, we should then expect that exemplary forms of evangelical spirituality would hold a degree of fascination for large-hearted Catholics (monastics among them) as surely as features of monasticism draw evangelical curiosity.

I wish that this expectation had surfaced in the books under review. Instead, their collective tendency is to suggest a unidirectional fascination, in which evangelicals alone must appropriate from the other tradition. As one who accepts that evangelical Protestant movements originated as movements of the Spirit, it seems to me that such unidirectional thinking betrays an evangelical identity crisis. We should affirm that our movement began as a movement of the Spirit, and that there were also earlier initiatives of the Spirit to renew the Church. We have a basis for reciprocal curiosity. So, let this conversation about evangelicalism and monasticism undergo some fine-tuning, and then continue.

Cistercian) in mind when he forbade his own recruits to receive gifts of coin, and discouraged the use of books. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) found easy targets, both monks and nuns, when he composed his Decameron. To crown it all, the still-Catholic Erasmus poked fun at the various mendicant (begging) monastic orders by describing how they sent their "reps" into a dying man’s bedroom; there each jockeyed with the other in hope of seeing his own order included in the man’s will. If loyal Catholics have pointed to monasticism’s foibles, can we not at least smile with them?

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