

Contribution of Monastic Life to the Church's Missionary Transformation

In recent years, every document from the magisterium of Peter sounded like "Amen, amen, I say unto you." And we really needed that. The Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* has a different tone to it! We hear something like: "Convert and believe in the Gospel!" This is a call to conversion addressed to all the baptized, to all the communities without anyone being able to get past it. This is a programmatic document which calls for "*the Church's missionary transformation*."

In it, consecrated life is hardly mentioned. We are not in the spotlight! So much the better: we will be of service! Of service to this *missionary conversion*.

Everyone? Even the nuns and the monks? Yes, and that is what I'd like to dig into here: **What could monastic life contribute to this missionary conversion?**

I think that its first contribution will be to let this call penetrate into the depths of our heart. Without fear! Without being scared of "losing" our vocation! On the contrary, it is rather a question of letting the Holy Spirit arouse in us a genuine passion for this *conversion* of the Church. To carry this *conversion* in our hearts. To desire this *conversion*—"conversatio morum"—of the whole Church.

Let us not forget: the call to solitude with God, this mysterious monastic call to live of God alone, does not remove us from the Church... It throws us into the heart of the Church. In fact, it is impossible to dive into God without diving into the heart of the Church, without loving the Church, and therefore without longing that it responds to the call of Christ who now asks it to "*go forth*."

Are Nuns and Monks Going to Go Forth?

Certainly, we will not "go forth" and leave behind our life of solitude with God, because we were mysteriously called to it by the Lord himself. But we do need to **leave behind all the forms of self-absorption** in which we worry about our monastery, our order, our rule, our property, our future... *Spiritual worldliness* (cf. EG 93) is not absent from our monasteries and from our hearts. The Lord is calling upon us to pass through a good scanner to detect the presence.

We also need to **go forth away from all forms of community enrichment** and away from all complacency with respect to an economic system that continues to exclude the poor. It is not the monastic vocation that separates us from the poor: on the contrary, plunging into *contemplative* life opens one's eyes to what the poorest are in the sight of God (cf. EG 199). Won't the nun or monk seeking God find him in the smallest, the poorest? Starting with those in one's own community.

The Testimony of Monastic Life

Go forth... and serve! Because the monastic life has a wonderful role to play in the *Church's missionary transformation*. First of all, the role of giving witness. Our monasteries are laboratories of Christian living that can be sources of inspiration for Christians who visit us, physically or virtually, or who simply know that we exist.

Our essential testimony will be that of the priority of God, of the priority of prayer. Essential testimony because, for all Christians, there will be no genuine "*going forth*" towards the other unless there is a "*going forth*" to God. Worship is the spring, the drive, the motor of a genuine missionary going forth. Monastic life testifies to *the deep breath of prayer* that the *Church urgently needs* (cf. EG 262).

But there is more: if our monastic life is evangelical, our life testimony will challenge the *primacy of the immediate and visible* (cf. EG 262). Our joy will overturn *sterile pessimism* (cf. EG 84). We

will silently show that the desert is a favourable place to *rediscover the essential* (cf. EG 86) and that *obsession with appearance is vain* (cf. EG 97). Our fraternal life will speak about *the mystique of living together* (cf. EG 87), of the *mystical fraternity*, a contemplative fraternity that can see the sacred grandeur of our neighbour (cf. EG 92), far from all *individualism* (cf. EG 67).

Do we not have a silent word to say for putting an end to clericalism (cf. EG 102) and for opening paths to the full exercise of a feminine charism in the Church (cf. EG 103)? Do we not also have a valuable role in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue? And if our monasticism is urban, does that not testify to a *contemplative gaze on the city* so urgently needed today (cf. EG 71)? And one could continue thus to decline the wealth of monastic testimony—silent, hidden—but eventually visible, if only through our websites!

Offering Places for Renewal

The other role of the monastic life in the context of the *Church's missionary conversion*, is to open our doors (cf. EG 46), to offer to everyone—especially to the baptized who are fully engaged in the world—spaces where they can be renewed (cf. EG 77), where people can relearn how to slow down (cf. 46). And if it is an urban monasticism, to offer a *space for prayer and communion* in the heart of the city (cf. EG 77). Monasteries will be places that serve as sources for new evangelization. Places where people learn the *lectio divina* (cf. 152), where we discover the value of the *via pulchritudinis*, the "way of beauty" (cf. EG 167) to reach the human heart. Places where there are nuns and monks available for support, with *respectful and compassionate listening* (cf. EG 171).

Prayer and Offering

But the great "service" of monastic life will remain first and foremost that of prayer, the prayer of a vigorous intercession for the Church, for the new evangelization.

This intercessory prayer does not take us away from true contemplation, because *authentic contemplation always has a place for others* (EG 281). How fruitful will be prayer, fasting, asceticism and labour offered for this Church *conversion!*

The apostolic exhortation does not say much about it, but it remains so very true that evangelization is based on the often hidden offering of those who suffer, the small, the poor and the contemplatives who are united in silence to the Passion of Jesus for his body which is the Church. As for the spiritual battle of the contemplatives, it allows them to look at the world from the "periphery" that is God's silence, the night or the torments of the soul. And this is also communion in the dynamic of *missionary conversion*.

"*Today, God asks us to leave our nest to be sent; even those who are cloistered are sent by their prayers so that the Gospel may spread throughout the world.*" How can one not quote these words spoken by Pope Francis to the Superiors General in Rome on November 29, 2013?

A Challenging Force

So we can affirm: monastic life is not at all "**off to one side**" of the *Church's missionary conversion*. It has so much to share, so much to give, mainly through its contemplative fervour, its love of the Church, its passion for the coming of the Kingdom!

But the charism of monastic life also places it in some ways on the margins of the Church, even in challenge to it. And that will also be fruitful, because the specific risk of the *Church's missionary transformation* is to become deflected or sidetracked into apostolic activism or social profiteering. Monastic life, with its primacy of God, prayer and liturgy, will have a challenging or arresting force, an indispensable "ministry of concern." On condition that we never lose the truly mystical power of a life ploughed and seeded daily by *lectio divina*.

Monastic life will also exercise a ministry that the apostolic exhortation did not mention: that of the hope of heaven. We know it, but we so often forget it: monastic life has meaning only with an eye towards heaven. It says heaven, it sings Christian hope. Consecrated celibacy is primarily oriented towards an eternal life that it is anticipating joyously. Isn't this testimony of hope an essential link in the new evangelization?

Choose to Be Small

What will the monasteries be tomorrow? Not islands of "holiness" in the midst of a sinful world, but rather islands of mercy that silently announce that God shows mercy to the entire world. Islands of joy that silently proclaim that the Gospel of joy is offered to any human being. Islands of hope that share the certainty of Pope Francis when, at the end of his exhortation, he places, the proclamation of the Book of Revelation: "Behold, I make all things new," says the Lord (Rev 21:5; cf. *The Joy of the gospel*, 288).

And if monks and nuns made their own the key to the Church's missionary *conversion*, which is hidden below the last line of the exhortation: "Mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God's little ones, pray for us." Choose to be "small" ... Love being "small". If we were faithful to this evangelical "smallness," *would the Church not be transformed?* ...

To Delve Deeper:

What will be the contribution of my community to the Church's *missionary conversion*?

Antoine-Emmanuel, FMJ
frjerusalem.montreal@yahoo.ca