

You know the story of St. Anthony. He was a rich monk in Egypt and Alexandria. He went to Church on Sunday and heard this gospel read (Lk. 14,25-33) and it touched his heart. He went home and sold all his possessions, gave his sister to a convent and then went to live an ascetic life and became the model of all monks.

The message still holds for us also but I think we should recall St. Matthew's gospel or one of the other gospels where Jesus repeats: "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches." It is not only the possession of riches that is harmful, it is the attraction to riches, the clinging to possessions. And that is the problem for all of us. We all need certain things and may even need many things but we should not cling to anything. The Buddha speaks of this. That is the root of all evil, the attachment to riches, not the things themselves but the attachment of the mind and heart to the things. That is our problem today particularly here in America where we have an abundance of riches on all sides. It is not that we have to give them all up but we have to learn how to accept what is good, coming from God - to be thankful for it and not be attached to it, or to cling to it, not thinking that everything depends on this possession. So I think the message is there for all of us.

This call to be a monk is really universal. We speak of the archetype of the monk. Every human being in their depths has an openness to the Transcendent, to the Infinite, to God, and beyond all human desires and happiness and hopes and fears, is this call to go beyond. It is in everybody but for most people it is submerged - for all of us to some extent, and only occasionally can it break through and change our lives. For those who undergo that conversion, their lives are changed. It can be anyone, anywhere; some may be led into a monastery or convent, but I think today more and more people are awakening to this inner life, this inner truth, this inner reality and feel called to give their lives to searching for ways to dedicate themselves as lay people, men and women, wherever they are, married or single - to give themselves totally to God, and that is the monastic calling, not confined to monks or to nuns. It is the universal call to contemplation, to go beyond the present world or the outer senses, the outer world, the outer mind with all its activities, and open to the inner mystery of the heart of reality, which is the heart of each one of us. We speak of this inner eye of love and that is the heart of all. We all have that inner eye only it is not open. But once it is opened, then it controls all our lives.

So we see St. Benedict as one who had this vision as a young man in Rome. He left all his studies behind and went to live in a cave "to be alone with God", as St. Gregory, the one who wrote his life, tells us. And so he made this total commitment and became the channel through which this monastic calling came fully into the Western Church. It began at first in Jesus, the great Sannyasi. He was the great monk who was totally one with God, one with the Father. So it comes down from him and then it spread. It was in India for centuries before Christ. We have the Seers of the Upanishads, the Buddha, the Bikkhus (Buddhist monks). So that call is everywhere in every people and among the more ancient peoples - the American Indians for instance, who had the shaman. The shaman is that one who has the call to go beyond the present world, to open him/herself to the Transcendent. Everywhere we have this witness, and St. Benedict was called to mediate it, as it were, because it can take many forms and can have many abuses in it, extravagances in asceticism, and so forth. St. Benedict showed the way to integrate this call of God, this call to renunciation, to a balanced human life. And that is why his Order has lasted these hundreds of years - it is a call to contemplation, to go beyond everybody and everything, to belong to God alone, and yet to do so in the balance and harmony of a normal human life: the daily work of providing one's necessities, providing one's food and clothing, and then a community sharing with other people, doing the duties of daily life with care for one another, and finally centering it all in prayer and offering all our work, all our companionship, our friendship in communion with one another in Christ to the Father.

So we have in our Benedictine tradition a wonderful example of a way of life that is

open to all - the married or single, men and women, even children. All are called to open themselves to this inner life and within this balance and harmony of a normal human life to keep open that inner eye of love and allow it to make this transformation.

So we pray St. Benedict, first of all, to renew the monastic order. We are all stuck in various ways, as always happens. I feel the call of the Benedictine community today is to renew contemplative life in the Church. It is a call to contemplative life, not in the status of St. John of the Cross which is a very special way, but in the more traditional way which integrates normal human life, human companionship, work, service, prayer, in a whole. And I feel we have that call to renew, to renew the order and to open it to the world.

Fr. John Main, a great Benedictine monk from Ealing Abbey in London, felt this call to open the monastic life to lay people. He was first to gather a lay community in his monastery in England. That has spread now through the world - this call to be one with God is open to everybody. Lay communities can be formed by people dedicating themselves in all different ways, in a loose community, freely, not bound by any rules but opening themselves to freedom in union with God, open to people all over the world. And, of course, we do not have to limit ourselves to those who profess to be Christians because the monastic calling is universal, all human beings have this call and, as I say, it is manifest in so many forms all over the world.

Distinctly we should remember the Native Americans. We live in this beautiful circle here in the Osage country. They have their shamans. These are people who have felt this call. They have this vision and go out into solitude when but young. They have this vision of God and that transforms their life and transforms even the community to which they belong. They become a light in that community.

So pray for the renewal of this grace of the contemplative life. It is a grace, a pure gift of God. Not because we have done anything to deserve it, but it is out of the generosity and love of God. So we ask for ourselves, for the Church, for the world as a whole, to recover this gift, this grace of contemplation, of union with God in the Spirit.

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