

RENEWAL OF MONASTIC LIFE

- Fr. Bede Griffiths

I recently spent three months in America, visiting the Benedictine Priory in Montreal and meeting the leaders of a very remarkable renewal of contemplative life which is taking place in America today. The source of this movement may be said to be the teaching of Fr. John Main-who founded the Benedictine Priory in Montreal-on Christian meditation. Fr. John developed a very simple but profound method of meditation based on the use of a mantra. It is of a grate interest that Fr. John learned his way of Meditation originally from a Hindu Swamy in Malaya, whom he met before he became a monk. As a monk in Ealing Abbey in England he developed his own method of meditation based on the customs of the Desert Fathers as described in Cassian's Conferences, who used to repeat a simple word or phrase from the Bible as a means of recollecting the mind and enabling it dwell in the presence of God. This method was developed in the East in the form of the 'Jesus Prayer' and popularised by the book by an un known Russian author, which is well known to many people today, The way of a Pilgrim. It was developed in the West particularly through the influence of the medieval English treatise, The Cloud of Unknowing. The anonymous author of this little book recommends the repetition of a simple word like 'God' or 'love' as a means of fixing the mind on God. This little book has become immensely popular in recent times and is a model for those who seek a simple method of contemplative prayer.

Fr. John recommended the use of the mantra, 'Maranatha'' an Aramaic word meaning 'Come Lord' derived from the New Testament. The important thing however, is not the use of a particular word so much as the habit of repeating a sacred word, often simply the name of Jesus, as a method of stopping the ordinary flow of mental thoughts and images and concentrating the mind on the presence of God beyond image and thought. It is often called the Prayer of the Heart, because it is an expression of love which goes beyond all images to

the real presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart. As such it is essentially a way of contemplative prayer in the traditional sense. That is an experience of God which is the effect of the love of God 'poured into the heart', which comes not from any human effort, except the quiet repetition of the mantra, but from the free action of Holy Spirit in the depths of the soul.

The same method was taken up by the Cistercian fathers, Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington of Spencer Abbey, Massachusetts and called by them Centering Prayer. They described it as a 'gift from the desert' in the sense that it came down from the tradition of the desert fathers, but has been systematically developed in modern times, partly under the influence of Transcendental Meditation of Mahesh Yogi. The influence of Eastern meditation again is not accidental, as it is through contact with eastern tradition that Christians have been awakened to their own spiritual heritage.

It is important to emphasise that this method of meditation is essentially the same as that which has long been traditional in Hinduism. The aim of such meditation has always been to go beyond all images and concepts, that is beyond the senses and the mind, and to become aware of the deeper centre of the soul, the inner spirit or atman, in which the human person makes contact with the divine reality. For a christian it is simply the passing beyond the 'psyche' the soul in the ordinary sense, to the 'pneuma', the spirit, where the spirit of man is in contact with the spirit of God. Of this St. Paul says: "The spirit of God bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God". In saying that we pass beyond images and concepts, this does not mean that we lose contact with the humanity of Christ but that we experience it not as separate from the divinity but as the expression of his divine being. Fr. John Main speaks of participating in the consciousness of Christ or in the flow of love between the Father and the Son and the Son and the Father, which is the Holy spirit. In other words, it is a christian participation in the inner life of the Holy Trinity. It is to this experience of God in the depths of our being that we are all being led by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart.

Another centre of contemplative life in America is Osage Monastery in Oklahoma. It was founded by Sister Pascline Coff a Benedictine sister who spent a year in Shantivanam in 1978 and built her ashram, as it may be called, in the forest near Tulsa in Oklahoma on the model of Shantivanam. She has long been engaged in inter-faith dialogue and for years has published the bulletin of the North American East-West Dialogue Board, giving information of the dialogue especially with Hinduism and Buddhism all over the world. This is an important aspect of the revival of contemplative life, as the renewal of christian contemplation cannot be conceived apart from the growing interest in Eastern methods of prayer and meditation. Osage monastery has hosted more than one visit of Tibetan monks, who, under the leadership of the Dalai Lama, have done so much to awaken interest in Buddhist meditation. Briefly one may say that Buddhist meditation has done more than anything to assist the ultimate truth, the one reality, which can never be known in the ordinary sense, since it can never be an object of thought, but which can reveal itself to those who are set free from their ego, the separated self, and have attained what in the Gospel is called purity of heart.

The last place I visited was our monastery of New Camaldoli, at Big Sur in California. This has also become a centre of renewed contemplative life, building on the long tradition of Camaldoli in solitary life and prayer. Camaldoli is distinguished for combining the tradition of common life with that of solitary and 'evangelical' life. St. Romuald, who founded the monastery of Camaldoli in 1025 AD, was one of the leaders of the renewal of contemplative life in the medieval church. He emphasised above all the values of solitary life which he himself followed for many years, but he also kept in touch with the traditional Benedictine community life and towards the end of his life set out to evangelise Hungary. He thus kept open in Camaldoli the three ways of monastic life, not only the community and solitary life, but also the evangelical life in which the monk goes out to share with the others the experience of God in prayer, or in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas 'contemplata aliis tradere,' to share with others what one has experienced in contemplation.

I came back from America, therefore, with the firm conviction that there is a definite movement of the Spirit in the church today. This movement had its origin in the monasteries, but it is reaching out to lay people all over the world, particularly in the form of oblate communities. An oblate is a person, man or woman, married or single, lay or cleric, who offers himself or herself to God in a life of prayer based on the threefold life of the rule of St. Benedict, uniting prayer or meditation, study and work. But the centre of this life is the self-offering to God of one's whole being, which in India we call Sannyasa. This is also the essential nature of our life at Shantivanam.



Just I can't Believe

- A. Senthilkumar

Father,

Just I can't believe
 That 'you' were born,
 As, have, the sun and sky
 Had their birth?
 As they didn't have their birth,
 They don't have end too
 And you will live long
 As the sun and sky do
 O people, do you hear the sounds
 The river Cauvery makes,
 In its rejoicing on the day
 Of our Father Bede's birth?
 God planted my seed
 In this vast world,
 And you water its plant
 Through your, blessings
 You shall have many many
 Happy returns of this day
 To hear and see the fragrance
 And sweet smelling of my life - flower
 You are the God's
 Light to - of - in - the world,
 Guide our ships,
 In this world of sea,