

LENTEN CONFERENCE: NON-POSSESSION

February 14, 2013

As you know, our Compline reading this year is from a book in which the entry for each day begins with a passage from the Desert Fathers, followed by a brief reflection on the saying by one of our contemporaries. I'm going to start this conference in the same way, although my reflection will be longer than the ones in that book. You may have heard this saying before:

Abba Theodore of Pherme had acquired three good books. He came to Abba Macarius and said to him, "I have three excellent books from which I derive profit; the brethren also make use of them and derive profit from them. Tell me what I ought to do: keep them for my use and that of the brethren, or sell them and give the money to the poor?" The old man answered him in this way: "Your actions are good, but it is best of all to possess nothing." Hearing this, he went and sold his books and gave the money for them to the poor."¹

What are we monks today to make of a saying like that? It sounds like Abba Macarius wasn't concerned if that group of monks out in the desert ended up with nothing at all to read and perhaps had to rely on recalling things they had once heard or read in order to receive some sort of spiritual nourishment. This would surely be altogether incompatible with our Benedictine Rule, with its emphasis on several hours of *lectio divina*, "holy reading," every single day, not to mention St. Benedict's requirement in chapter 48 that at the beginning of Lent each monk is to be given a particular book from the library to be read straight through. This means that we ought not apply that desert saying literally to our own lives. Benedict expected his monks to have books.

If that is a change that may have developed in large part because of the difference between the eremitical (or semi-eremitical) life of the Desert Fathers and the cenobitic life for which Benedict was legislating, there is another change that has entered even into Benedictine life since the time when our Rule was written. There is a well-known passage in Blessed John Henry Newman's *Historical Sketches* that comments on this change in a memorable way. I have probably quoted it before, but I hope you won't mind if I do so again. Newman wrote:

[The monks] had sought, in the lonely wood or the silent mountain top, the fair uncorrupted form of nature, which spoke only of the Creator. They had retired into deserts, where they could have no enemies but such as fast and prayer could subdue. . . . They had secured some refuge, whence they might look round at the sick world in the distance, and see it die. But, when that last hour came, it did but frustrate all their hopes, for, instead of an old world at a distance, they found they had a young world close to them. The old order of things died, sure enough; but then a new order took its place, and they themselves, by no will or expectation of their own, were in no small

measure its very life. The lonely Benedictine rose from his knees and found himself a city. This

was the case, not merely here or there, but everywhere; Europe was new mapped, and the monks were the principle of mapping. They had grown into large communities, into abbeys, into corporations with civil privileges, into landholders with tenants, serfs, and baronial neighbours; they had become centres of population, the schools of the most cherished truths, the shrines of the most sacred confidences. . . . And they comprehended that unless they fled anew from the face of man, as St. Antony in the beginning, they must bid farewell to the hope of leading Antony's life.

What Newman there wrote was surely already obvious to each of us when we applied to join a community such as ours. Otherwise we might have sought entrance into a charterhouse, where the strictly withdrawn life of the ancient desert monks is still the Carthusians' acknowledged ideal. Unlike them, and unlike Abba Macarius and Abba Theodore of Pherme, we intend to be of service in a more direct way to people living outside the monastery, whether they be students in our own school or at Catholic University, or our Oblates, or people who come here as our guests for a period of quiet retreat and perhaps spiritual direction, and so forth, and for such work we obviously need a lot more even than books if we are to serve such persons in the way they deserve.

This, of course, is where the whole matter can get complicated, simply because that word "need" doesn't always permit a clear-cut decision on which there might be anything like unanimous agreement. The problem is not new. Centuries ago, speaking of authentic monastic poverty, St. Bernard wrote of some monks: "They wish to be poor in such a way that nothing is

lacking to them. They love poverty so long as they experience no shortage [of anything].” The things we want to *do* so as to be able to serve God and our neighbor in appropriate ways don’t mean that we should *have* things that really just burden us, even in insidious ways, whether these be objects owned by the community as a whole or ones available for our personal use and for all practical purposes owned by us individually, even if not in a strictly canonical sense. Some years ago the late Raimundo Panikkar reflected about ways in which such objects can really deflect us from the *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary, that presumably drew us to monastic life in the first place. In a talk given up in Massachusetts several decades ago, he said:

Having is not simply riches, it is also the power of the means. And having can exert a deadening weight on [our] being. Having is all the artificial trappings that we accumulate.... Having is all the accessories that serve some purpose at first, but further down the line leave us entangled in the means without allowing us to reach our true goals. Having is all that weighs us down in our sack of provisions.... The contemporary monk does not so much want to wash his hands of all doing as to free [his hands] from all having, precisely in order to put them to use for their proper task. He wants no chains on his feet.... He would like to be active in the world as an outcome of his own being; he stresses poverty of having in order to attain a higher freedom in doing.²

That may sound too rhetorical, but it’s worth pondering the fact that some of the most influential persons in the history of the world have had almost no possessions. One thinks in the first place of Jesus himself, who said that while the birds of the air have their nests and the foxes their dens, he, the Son of Man, had nowhere to lay his head. Closer to our own day, one of the

most influential persons of all time was a man I've spoken about several times before, Gandhi. In a letter to a young cousin written in 1930, he admitted that those whom he called "[us] ordinary seekers" might fall well short of the ideal of perfect non-possession, but, he wrote, "we must keep the ideal constantly before us, and in the light thereof critically examine our possessions and try to reduce them.... We thus arrive at the idea of total renunciation and learn the use of the body for the purposes of service as long as it exists, so much so that service, and not bread, becomes for us the staff of life. We eat and drink, sleep and walk, for service alone. Such an attitude of mind brings us real happiness and the beatific vision in the fullness of time. Let us all examine ourselves from this standpoint."³

How well Gandhi did this himself is almost incredible. At his death, his personal possessions numbered about ten: a pair of spectacles, a watch, his simple garb, a couple eating bowls with wooden fork and spoon, a diary, a prayer book, a letter opener, and two pair of sandals. He used to give away or auction any gift that was ever given to him. To what degree might any of us be able to say that of ourselves, and yet this was a man who successfully brought the world's most powerful empire to leave his country in a non-violent way? (To his great and pained regret, of course, he was unable to get Hindus and Muslims to live at peace with one another once the British left, and in that respect he believed he was a failure.)

As a brief practical conclusion to these reflections, let me remind everyone of our annual practice of compiling a poverty bill during Lent. I do read these and occasionally I have asked one or another monk if a particular object is really necessary, but the real judge should be each of you as you go through your rooms before you even turn in your list. Let us keep in mind what so many of the Fathers of the Church, like St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom, used to keep saying: that items stashed away in our closets that we don't really use don't belong to us in the first place

but rather belong to the poor who could actually use them. As always, there are boxes in the corridor on the second floor of the Johnson wing where you can place such items. Please turn in your poverty bills by one month from now, March 14, and if you wish to add something about a special Lenten practice and/or some special Lenten reading, feel free to list that too. For all of us, may this season be the joyful one that St. Benedict writes about, a time of even now looking forward with the joy of the Holy Spirit to the celebration of Christ's resurrection.

1" *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 73.

2" Raimundo Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity The Monk as Universal Archetype* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 46-47.

3" Letter to Narandas Gandhi, Aug. 26, 1930, in Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Writings*, new ed., ed. Judith M. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2008), 92.