

Monks and the New Evangelization Lenten Conference, March 6, 2014

In chapter 49 of his Rule, St. Benedict talks primarily of ways in which a monk can deny himself something or other during Lent. This is altogether in accord with the traditional notion of "giving up something for Lent." I'm not at all averse to doing something along these lines, but I'm going to focus in this conference on something still more basic, rooted in the notion that Lent could be above all a good time to reflect on our basic calling not only as monks but as Christians. In doing so, I'll rely on some things I heard at the recent annual meeting of the North American abbots at St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Alabama. The two major speakers were Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, the first president of the newly formed Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, and Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, a monk of Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon who teaches in their seminary one semester each year and then at Sant'Anselmo in Rome the following semester. He also made available to us the text of an address that the former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, gave at the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican in 2012, when the theme was precisely the new evangelization.

The term "new evangelization" was used frequently by Pope John Paul II, but the notion, if not the exact phrase, could be traced back to Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, where he said: "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize" (n. 14). What Pope Paul meant by "the vast and profound changes of present day society" referred in large part to the fact that the faith needed to be reawakened in parts of the world, especially Europe, that were traditionally Christian but now so affected by the forces of secularization as to be in need of renewed evangelization. But whether one is talking about "the

new evangelization" in areas traditionally Christian or the *missio ad gentes* directed to peoples who have as yet heard little or nothing of the Gospel, the calling of every member of the Church is to proclaim the salvation won for humanity by Christ. This calling, this vocation, is an intrinsic dimension of our faith. The words of Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel--"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations"--were not directed solely to a small group of his earliest disciples but are addressed also to us today.

Christians live out this vocation in multiple ways. Some of the more obvious would be the kind of work Frank Sheed did as a street-corner preacher in both England and our country in the last century, or the foreign missionaries of groups like Maryknoll or the Columban Fathers who have indeed gone to the ends of the earth, proclaiming the Good News to peoples who knew nothing of Christ. Even within the Benedictine Confederation there is one group, the St. Ottilien Congregation, who are often called "missionary Benedictines" because their founder envisioned sending monks to countries in Africa and Asia precisely with the view to spreading the Gospel. But where does a community like ours here at St. Anselm's Abbey fit into this scheme?

One might say that at least the religion courses in our school provide an opening for some explicit evangelization, but Fr. Jeremy Driscoll was much more to the point when he said that *a monastery itself* is "the word of evangelization in a particular way," and not only because monasteries typically attract visitors and guests. It's what Archbishop Rowan Williams meant in his address to the synod when he said: "Those who know little and care less about the institutions and hierarchies of the Church these days are often attracted and challenged by lives that exhibit something of [a contemplative encounter with God]. It is the new and renewed religious communities that most effectively reach out to those who have never known belief or who have abandoned it as empty and stale. When the Christian history of our age is written--

especially, though not only, as regards Europe and North America--we shall see how central and vital was the witness of places like [the monasteries of] Taizé [in France] or Bose [in Italy], but also of more traditional communities that have become focal points for the exploration of a humanity broader and deeper than social habit encourages" (n. 12).

This attraction is certainly not primarily to what the monks *do* in such communities but who they *are*: persons renewed and continually converted by the contemplative dimension of their life. Some years ago a Jewish scholar of religion named Jacob Needleman wrote a controversial book titled *Lost Christianity*, in which he argued that the words of the Gospel are addressed to human beings who do not yet exist, persons called to a transformation of their entire self, their feelings, thoughts, and imaginings, persons who have become new in communion with God and their fellow humans through Jesus Christ. More than anything else, this means people renewed in what Archbishop Williams called an "endless growth towards love" (n. 6), or what Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare movement, meant when she wrote that the closer people get to God, "the closer they get to the hearts of their brothers and sisters."

This is what St. Benedict is talking about especially in chapter 72 of his Rule, and not only in the verses that speak explicitly of love, as when he speaks of showing "the pure love of brothers" to their fellow monks or "unfeigned and humble love" to their abbot. It's also included in his phrase about "earnestly competing in obedience to one another." The practical meaning of this was brought out recently in very specific ways in a fine article by Abbot Jerome Kodell of Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas. The key paragraph, coming toward the end of the piece, goes as follows:

... My relationship to God is determined by the way I live with and treat those whom God in his providence has brought into my life. Incarnation is about reality, not romanticism or idealism. Those who are seeking God in their daily prayer and work are not angels, but people with ordinary flaws: the monk who forgets to return what he borrows, the one who tracks mud on a clean floor, the one who forgets liturgical assignments, the one who is never on time, the one who never signs up to help but is first in the food line. Somehow God in his providence has brought this motley group together for an eternal purpose, and how the brothers ... treat one another now will determine their eternal destiny.¹

What Abbot Jerome said there about the way we are to relate to one another can and should be complemented by something that Cardinal Jean Marie Lustiger said some years ago while he was still archbishop of Paris. He was addressing a group of Benedictines at a conference on "Monastic Community and European Community." Toward the end of his talk he spoke of how the fraternal charity that should prevail within a monastic community should also extend to those who visit, for this is a primary way in which monks can evangelize. Indeed, here in our own monastery education and hospitality are the two major ways in which we can be of service to others. Of the second way, hospitality, Cardinal Lustiger spoke in a way that dovetails very well what Abbot Jerome wrote about mutual obedience. He said:

You [monks] must ... live a true charity capable of being welcoming. You notice, I'm putting fraternal charity in parallel with present-day hospitality, not only towards petty thieves and wandering beggars, but towards all those considered of no account, all

those mentally or emotionally damaged. Our pitiless society creates marginal people.

And this is an aspect of charity which you must live out in exemplary fashion and in your own way.²

Even as I hope that our abbey will become more and more a spiritual resource for leaders in the government and business community, we must never overlook what St. Benedict says near the beginning of his chapter on the reception of guests, that "proper honor must be shown *to all*" (RB 53.2). There ought, of course, be some reasonable degree of separation between the guests and the monastic community, something that should become more manageable if and when we do some further construction in the relevant parts of our buildings, but we must carefully resist the temptation to be particularly welcoming only to persons of some wealth or social prestige.

To conclude on a very practical point, just as Archbishop Williams spoke of our Christian calling to be free of the acquisitive habits fostered by what he termed "the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture ... encourage us to inhabit" (n. 8), let us be mindful that one way we do this each Lent is to go through our rooms and make available to the poor all the unnecessary clothing and other items that have accumulated there over the preceding twelve months. I don't know how many other monasteries have the practice of a Lenten poverty bill, but I trust it is one that we will never abandon. Its main value, in my opinion, is not to have the abbot look it over for anything that might seem superfluous but for each monk to make that kind of decision himself when drawing up his list and then to place in the boxes on the second-floor corridor items that he no longer uses and that would be of real help to the needy. A few weeks ago I was reading with Brs. Isaiah, Samuel, and Bernard some autobiographical accounts by Benedictine monks and nuns in the book *Touched by God*. A

monk of Glenstal in Ireland wrote the final chapter in the book, and in describing what first attracted him to that monastery he said it was precisely the simplicity and freedom from clutter. Here's how he put it: "The first time I saw a monastic cell, I said instinctively: 'This is for me.' Perhaps ten-foot square, bare boards for a floor, it was furnished with an iron bedstead, table and chair, a prie-dieu, a washstand,... two shelves for books, three for clothes, and a crucifix its only ornament. Even [today], I hate clutter. In that respect, at least, I travel light."³ That is surely too spartan, but this ideal of simplicity is something each one should keep before his eyes in filling out his poverty bill, which I ask to be turned in to me one month from today, Saturday, April 5. You may, if you wish, also add something about any special practices you will be undertaking during this Lenten season. May it be for all of us what St. Benedict says it should be, a time of joyfully looking forward to the celebration of holy Easter.

1¹ Jerome Kodell, OSB, "Mutual Obedience: My Brother's Need is the Voice of God," *The American Benedictine Review* 64:3 (December 2013), 410-11.

2² Cardinal Jean Marie Lustiger, "Monastic Communities in Today's Europe," *The Downside Review*, no. 461 (October 2012): 9.

3³ Andrew Nugent, OSB, "An Away Match," in *Touched by God: Ten Monastic Journeys*, ed. Laurentia Johns, OSB (London and New York: Burns & Oates, 2008), 219.