

The Monastery and the World

May 15, 2014

This will be my last conference of the school year, the next one being sometime in late summer. This evening I simply want to emphasize a few points that all of us know about but that are so important that it would be wrong not to keep alluding to them from time to time. Let me begin by referring to something that was in Tuesday morning's newspaper, not even on the first page, even though in my opinion it was far more momentous than the reporting from Ukraine that did receive a front-page headline. Two scientific studies have just been published that claim that it is inevitable that the West Antarctic ice sheet is collapsing into the sea, and that as this happens and the ice melts, ocean levels can be expected to rise an astounding twelve feet over the next couple hundred years. Now a selfish way of hearing that would be to think, well, at least we won't be alive when all of this happens, but if you reflect that a majority of the largest and most important cities in the world are basically at sea level--New York, Houston, Lagos, Cape Town, Mumbai, Calcutta, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Sydney, to name only a few--this seems to me an impending disaster of epic proportions. Whether the main cause is a natural cycle or greenhouse emissions, the effect is going to be enormous. This is a very good example of how relatively powerless we are, a way of highlighting the fact that we not only cannot do everything but that the things we can do often pale in comparison with the challenges that face humanity.

The humility that this engenders was reflected in something President Obama said a few months ago. Reflecting on his office and on all the men who have preceded him there, he said that all any of them can do is add a few paragraphs to the ongoing narrative of our nation's history. If this was said by someone who holds one of the most powerful positions on earth, how much greater humility must mark our own lives. The practical conclusion, however, is certainly not to do nothing but to do whatever we can to the best of our ability. Here are some thoughts on this from an interesting collection of essays by a number of leading writers on monastic life,

many of them monks and nuns, but also some laypersons as well as a diocesan priest and a bishop. The book is titled *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century: Where Do We Go from Here?* As you'd expect, there was considerable diversity in what the authors had to say. A few kept dwelling on the need to conserve the values that have been handed down to us from the past, while others emphasized the need to risk new forms and expressions of monastic living. There's no time or need to summarize such a lengthy work, but a few themes kept cropping up with some regularity, such as the contemplative dimension of our life, its communal dimension, and the way both of these can speak to the wider church and world.

As regards the first of those dimensions, Michael Casey wrote: "The communities that will survive in the future will be those that best form their members in handling the inevitable vicissitudes of the contemplative life. In the last analysis there is no other valid reason for embracing monastic life than to be formed according to its mystical tradition.... Monasteries without a strong contemplative ambience and orientation will struggle to stay alive. Those that survive will be so grounded in contemplation that they will not be shaken."¹ As characteristics of what he believes contemplative life to be, he was quoted by another author in that book as saying that "Contemplation is the fruit of radical self-honesty and of kindness to others."² What I like about that is its down-to-earth practicality. A wonderful specific example of how many years of living as a monk can lead to such kindness is something that Abbot Primate Notker Wolf said in a talk he gave recently at Collegeville and that is available on YouTube. It might surprise you to learn that his St. Ottilien Congregation has long sponsored a hospital in North Korea. When Abbot Notker was there about ten years ago to renegotiate the contract for that hospital, it was just a week after President Bush had named that country as one of three that formed a worldwide "axis of evil." When Notker met three officials one afternoon, including the mayor of the city

where the hospital is located, he first thought, "What pitiable people," but he immediately thought something quite different: that they were children of God just as he was, and that they were just as beloved by God. That basic realization--bedrock Christian teaching but something that might not come naturally when dealing with persons in a country that does appear strange and threatening to much of the world--led him to relate to them in a very kind and friendly way. Later that evening, when about to have their evening meal, Abbot Notker said the mayor of the city came up to him and, with tears in his eyes, embraced him and said: "The rest of the world hates us, but you have come to help our poor people." And he added, "Please say grace before we eat." There may be no better example of what monastic contemplative life can do for a person. It does not, of course, come automatically simply by living in a monastery. Rather, it comes out of attentive participation in the liturgy and time faithfully spent in personal prayer and *lectio divina*, something that Abbot Notker has certainly done throughout his life.

That other theme, communal life, was especially prominent in the essay by Bishop Robert Morneau, an auxiliary bishop of Green Bay until his recent retirement. In a particularly fine paragraph, he wrote: "The communal nature of monasticism cannot be overemphasized, especially in a world culture that highlights individualism. Whether the activity is one of liturgy or work, of eating or [being on retreat], monks are in their life together.... The underlying attitude in this way of life must be that of sacrifice, a surrender of one's own particular will to the will of God and the community."³ Bishop Morneau insisted, however, that this kind of sacrifice or self-emptying is not of value only within the monastic community itself, for it can and should have an effect on the world outside the cloister. This was also pointed out by another author in the book who has visited here from time to time, Fr. Daniel Coughlin, who was for several years the chaplain of the House of Representatives. In a very personal essay, he said that when he was

chaplain, it was his habit each morning to page through a picture book of the members of Congress that year. In his words: "This daily perspective provides me with a fresh approach to the day. As I have come to know more and more of [the members] personally, my prayer for them penetrates outward appearances. I see their effort to shape an informed and good conscience. I recognize the pressures they are under. I know of their high aspirations, hopes for the nation and the world. I have also felt their anguish expressed over problems and situations they cannot solve and the compromises they are required to make."⁴

Those are the kinds of persons that Abbot Primate Notker said we ourselves should be more concerned about and involved with, which is why we held the recent symposium on "just peace"--and in the very same room where Notker made that recommendation several years ago. Those of you who attended the symposium will, I think agree that we had a very vibrant and stimulating discussion, and I have since received some very appreciative emails from persons who attended, including Congressman McGovern and Lt. Gen. Talley. I'm confident that we can build on that success and continue to do our part in providing a spiritual resource for leaders in our government and, eventually, in the business community as well. But you can't fake things like that. We will appear to such persons to be a welcoming community only if we really are such, and we will be such only if we can be as kind and considerate to them as Abbot Notker was to those North Korean officials. These, at least, are some of the things we should be thinking about as we end this school year and enter the somewhat more leisurely period of the summer.

1" Michael Casey, OCSO, "Thoughts on Monasticism's Possible Futures," in *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century: Where Do We Go from Here?*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 28.

2" Michael Casey, quoted by Gail Fitzpatrick, OCSO, "Enclosure: The Heart of the Matter," *ibid.*, 155.

3" Robert Morneau, D.D., "Monasticism: A Poetic Perspective," *ibid.*, 112.

4" Daniel Coughlin, "The Fruits of Monasticism: A View from Washington," *ibid.*, 196.