

The Universal Call to Holiness: Its Significance for Monastic Life and Liturgy

When Vatican II was actually taking place it almost passed me by, making barely a flutter on my horizon, but entering the monastery not long afterwards I soon realised something important was afoot. The grilles came down, lay sisters and extern sisters were integrated, and the vernacular was gradually introduced into the Office. Daily place-finding in the novitiate was a nightmare as we changed over from four huge black volumes in Latin to endless pieces of paper in English which never seemed to be in the right place at the right time. Although in the novitiate we were excluded from the debates surrounding these matters going on in the community, we could sense that an important renewal was in progress both in the monastery and the Church as a whole. As time went by, however, the feeling of optimism of those early years gave way to one of disillusionment as our numbers declined considerably and fewer recruits knocked at the door to replace them. One could spend a lot of time analysing this situation, but I would like to explore just one idea which may or may not be relevant - that of the universal call to holiness as found in Vatican II's most important document, *Lumen Gentium* - and then go on to ask what significance this may have for our monastic life and liturgy today.

In the preliminary discussions as the document went through several drafts, it had been the intention to concentrate the theme of holiness more particularly on the religious life, but the universal call to holiness is the great leveller of all vocations in the Church. At some point it was suggested, by Cardinal Suenans I believe, that first there should be a consideration of the call to holiness in general. Not surprisingly there was some resistance from Fathers belonging to religious orders who felt that they had been banished to a sort of appendix (1). However the revision stayed in place and at last the laity have come into their own in the business of seeking holiness. It is now understood that the Church 'excludes completely any discrimination between a higher category composed of nuns and monks, and the mass of the faithful, who manage to be saved one way or another, by the help of an elementary form of morality, offered to them, so to speak, at a lower cost' (2). What does *Lumen Gentium* actually tell us? In Chapter V we read, *It is quite clear that all Christians in any state of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.* This means, as the document continues, responding to the grace which enables us to follow in Christ's footsteps, and to be conformed to his image as we seek to do his will in everything. This in turn involves a wholehearted devotion to the glory of God and service of one's fellow men and women (n.40). It always means cultivating that sanctity which, under the influence of the Spirit, enables us to obey the Father's voice, adore Him in spirit and truth, and follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing, that we may deserve to be partakers of his glory (n.41). The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one. The document then spells out the different ways in which various categories of people in the Church may achieve this holiness. Married couples, for instance, should support one another in grace all through life with faithful love. Their love is a sign of the love Christ has for his Church, and as such should mirror his self-giving for the Church his Bride, and share in her fruitfulness. (n.41) Towards the end of the chapter a fairly short section is devoted to those who seek holiness through a life of virginity or celibacy. It is clear that religious are no longer a sort of half way house between clerics and the laity; they are not special in any way, but

simply a 'sign of love' and a 'singular source of spiritual fertility in the world' (n.42). The chapter ends by reiterating that *all* the faithful are not only invited, but *obliged* to holiness, and the perfection of their own state of life (n.42).

This chapter on the universal call to holiness is complemented by Chapter 2 on 'The People of God', which gives it a more solid theological basis. There are many images of the Church in the New Testament, such as the Kingdom of God, the Temple, Abraham's Tent, the Bride of Christ and the Body of Christ, but it was *People of God* which was chosen by the Council as being the most apposite for our day. It is an inclusive concept as it connects us, by embracing the full sweep of salvation history, with God's people in the Old Testament. It implies a pilgrim people, still on the way, and a holy people set apart for God's service (Dt.26.18-19). The mode of entry into the new People of God, the Church, is baptism, which gives all a common dignity. As the document says, 'there is a common dignity among all the members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity' (n.32). By virtue of their baptism each member of the Church shares in the priesthood of Christ, a concept which is particularly relevant for monastic life and liturgy. *All* are consecrated to be 'a spiritual house and a holy priesthood' that 'through all the works of Christian men they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the perfection of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-10). And like the first disciples described in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47), all are to persevere in prayer and praising God, and should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy, and pleasing to God (cf. Rom.12:1) This is the first time in the history of the Councils that there has been such a positive theology of the laity. When this chapter was being drafted many thought the priesthood of the faithful was no more than a metaphor; others were rather wary of the expression since it seemed to threaten the ministerial priesthood. In fact today, as we know, it is not unheard of for lay people to run parishes when a priest is not available. The document firmly states, however, that whilst both share in the 'one priesthood of Christ', there is a clear distinction between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful (n.10). Perhaps it is only a metaphor after all, then? If we read *Lumen Gentium* bearing in mind what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* tells us, it becomes clearer that it is no metaphor. The participation of the faithful on all levels, as being vitally important, is frequently encouraged. To quote just one example: 'Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people" (1 Pet. 2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation, by reason of their baptism' (SC14). Outside of the specifically liturgical context, the layperson shares in Christ's priestly office by bearing patiently the hardships of life becoming, in union with Christ, in themselves 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pet.2:5)'. All their experiences, good and bad, are brought to the Eucharist and offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so 'worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God' (n.34).

The sequence of the chapters in *Lumen Gentium* is highly significant. It had been intended that after Chapter 1 on the Mystery of the Church, the second chapter should deal directly with the hierarchy, but at this point in the debates the Holy Spirit seems to have decided otherwise, so that we now have this remarkable chapter on the People of God which establishes the basic equality of all vocations in the Church before hierarchical distinctions occur. Yves Congar considered this decision to be momentous. Only time would tell, he said, what the consequences would be, but in his opinion they would be considerable (3). Perhaps one result is that the layman no longer considers himself (or *should* no longer consider himself) as in the secular use of the word, an outsider or amateur who has nothing to contribute to a particular area of expertise. He should no longer see himself as such in relation to the clergy, a 'non-cleric' with only a subordinate and passive role to play. Another indirect result may be the new Code of Canon Law which had to be completely rewritten to accommodate the insights of the Council. The 1917 Code barely mentions the laity, and when it does so it is only in a passive role. The 1983 Code, by contrast, has frequent references throughout which refer to the active role of the laity, not only in the liturgy but in an advisory capacity and co-operating with the clergy on all levels. Book 2, which comes immediately after the Introduction, is called *The People of God*, and has been called the Church's first 'Bill of Rights' (4). However, in the opinion of some, the Code has not gone far enough: for instance, it is still the case that the Church only grants jurisdiction, properly so called, to persons in Holy Orders (and therefore never to women religious or lay people).

What does all this mean for monastic life and liturgy? Does our life add anything to that of the layperson? Are we in competition or do we complement each other? I would like to look briefly now at one or two of the major insights of Vatican II and compare and contrast the lay and monastic vocations in relation to them. The Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, besides the participation of the faithful already mentioned, has given us a much greater appreciation of the omnipresence of God; he is present in the Scriptures and in the community as well as in the eucharistic sacrifice. As monastic communities whose lives are structured around the liturgy we would seem to have a considerable advantage over the laity. However they too are now encouraged to say the Office, and as 'professionals' in this area perhaps we should find ways of sharing our riches more generously. Could we perhaps have 'liturgical retreats' for visitors? Possibly our oblates and other serious seekers after holiness could share our community life on a temporary basis? Maybe we could have more lay communities on our premises? *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation, has given a fresh impetus to biblical scholarship and the riches of the Scriptures have been laid open before us as never before. Theology has greatly benefited from this since, as the document says, Scripture should be its 'very soul' (DV24). Again our monastic life would seem to give us an advantage; our constant immersion in the Scriptures forms us and gives a special ethos to our theological endeavours. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, is the Church's attempt to dialogue with the modern world and in its wake there has been a renewed emphasis on evangelization. In fact Pope Paul VI went so far as to say that 'the Church exists to evangelize... it is inherent in her nature' (5). The laity undoubtedly have an advantage and a special role to play here, called as they are to witness to Christ and sanctify the world through their presence and activity in it. But we

too can evangelize just by being ourselves. Our communities, microcosms of the Church, can set an example of what community life should be like in families and parishes. By our vows we give witness to a much-needed stability in a world where people find it hard to make long term commitments. We cannot run away from relationships and learn to grow through them to love and forgiveness. But those called to matrimony also have this challenge, as well as those posed by the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Evangelization begins and ends in the Trinity, and we in monasteries can be a sign, a pointer towards that Trinitarian life, through our lives of contemplation and praise of God in the liturgy. Finally *Nostra Aetate* gave the green light for all to enter into dialogue with non-Christian religions, something which is urgently needed in our time if our global village is to attain a degree of peace. Theology too must try to understand the ways of God in the light of the fact that only a small percentage of the human race, taken as a whole, will embrace Christianity explicitly. The laity have a great opportunity here to work alongside, and make friends with, adherents of other religions and thus build bridges. Monastics too have shown great aptitude for this task, with perhaps the advantage that the monastic life in itself can be a bridge, as for instance with Buddhist monasticism, or the more mystical branches of Hinduism and Islam.

In conclusion I would like to suggest that there is no competition or disharmony between the monastic and lay vocations, but a complementarity. The monk might be seen as the outward manifestation of the vocation not only of every Christian, but of every human being, because at the deepest level our vocations are the same. Once, in the early years of my monastic life, I was sitting in the dentist's waiting room in Worcester feeling extremely nervous. The other people waiting were absorbed in their own thoughts - no one spoke or took any notice of anyone else. Despite our lack of communication I remember having a profound intuition of being very close to all those strangers, and thought how surprised they would be if they realised how closely their lives were linked with that of this oddly dressed individual sitting in the corner. I had similar experiences on the occasion of other exits from the enclosure. I was pleased to discover that a modern theologian, Raymond Pannikar (perhaps best known for his book *The Hidden Christ of Hinduism*), confirmed my intuition. He says, 'The monk is the man who has taken seriously and uncompromisingly his vocation to become fully and totally man... Every human being has a monastic dimension, but this is realized in different ways and cultivated in different degrees of purity and awareness by different people. The monk proper is he who not only cultivates this dimension in a peculiar way, but also commits himself publicly... to develop this his human vocation' (6). In his book *Blessed Simplicity* he describes the monk, possibly rather grandly, as the 'universal archetype', but his meaning is clear. On the one hand, he says, the life of a monk is something special, difficult, even queer, but on the other it is something so very much human that it is ultimately claimed to be 'the vocation of every human being, what everybody should be or is called upon to be - in some way or other, sooner or later' (7). Whatever monastic life holds for the twenty-first century, one thing is sure; it can no longer be a flight from the world pure and simple, but must enter into dialogue with it, and the more we can share our life with lay people, the more we will be mutually enriched and helped along the path to holiness.

1. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: History of the Constitution* by Gerard Philips, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (Ed. Vorgrimler), p121/2.
2. *Ibid.* p123.
3. *The Church: The People of God in Concilium* Vol.1, no.1, Jan.1965, p7-8.
4. Francis. G. Morrissey, *The Laity in the New Code*, p36.
5. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14 and 15.
6. *Cistercian Studies*, Vol X:2, 1975, p79.
7. *Blessed Simplicity: the Monk as Universal Archetype* (The Seabury Press, New York, 1982) p9.

Agnes Wilkins OSB
Stanbrook Abbey

12 3@ AB CD EF GH IJ K___, #_ is Latin expression is most frequently translated as 'intrinsically evil', which in English is very misleading, being rarely used to express anything but moral evil and that of a severe type. It might accurately translate the Latin ___D_E___malum, ___D_E___but ___D_E___inhonestum___D_E___ says simply that situations, conditions, or relations, are not the way they ought to be. Even the word ___D_E___malum___D_E___, frequently used in this context, is best translated as 'wrong' (possibly morally neutral) rather than 'evil'. (25)___• €___D_E___Humanae Vitae___D_E___ makes little acknowledgement of arguments advanced on behalf of contraception, but it does allude several times to the 'principle of totality' (26), whereby some have posited that if the ___D_E___whole ___D_E___of a married life is open to children, this need not apply to each and every act of sexual intercourse. The document answers in the negative; 'it is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may follow therefrom' (n.14). [27] The so-called 'principle of double effect' will not work here, except when a contraceptive (an anovulant pill, for instance) is used for therapeutic reasons and incidentally renders a woman infertile. Even though the impediment to procreation is foreseen, the important thing is that it is not deliberately willed (n.15). In practice this could mean that contraception may not be used even if regulating marital relations according to ___D_E___Humanae Vitae___D_E___ is causing such severe strain that the marriage is in danger of breaking up. ___D_E___Gaudium et Spes ___D_E___recognised that married people are often hindered by certain situations in modern life (prolonged absences of one spouse, for instance, or the family, for various reasons, cannot be increased for the moment or even at all), which make it difficult 'to preserve the practice of faithful love and the complete intimacy of their lives', as a result of which 'faithfulness is imperiled and the good of the children suffers: then the education of the children as well as the courage to accept more children are both endangered'. (28) ___D_E___Humanae Vitae ___D_E___has not addressed this problem. ___• €___ In the final section of the encyclical entitled 'Pastoral Directives', married couples are reminded that the honest practice of regulating births demands self-mastery, and it is acknowledged that the virtue of chastity is quite difficult to acquire in today's society (nos.21 and 22). It is here that Scripture, briefly alluded to as a source of illumination and enrichment for a doctrine based principally on natural law, may give strength and support. (29) Throughout Scripture, marriage and childbearing are seen as great goods. God's first direction to man was to 'be fertile and multiply' (Gen.1:27) and in the Old Testament barrenness was considered a sign of his disfavour, or sinfulness. A child born into the world was always a cause for rejoicing, and the prophets likened the marriage relationship itself to God's relationship with his people. It was a relationship that was to bear fruit for Israel and the whole world as a small people gradually grew into a nation. The first miracle of Jesus, according to John's gospel, was at the marriage feast of Cana. Marked by great joy and abundance, it was intended as a sign of the new Covenant, God's marriage with his people to be consummated in the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. The Church, born from his pierced side, was to be his Bride. Married couples image this relationship, as St Paul tells us so eloquently: 'Husbands should love their wives, just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her to make her holy by washing her in cleansing water...so that when he t