

# INTERACTION OF MONASTIC CULTURE WITH SOCIETY OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## COMMUNION OF SAINTS - CAN WE WIDEN OUR TENT PEGS?

*This was not a written paper but a more informal talk at the end of the day. The following is an outline prepared from notes.*

This title attracted my notice, and I propose to throw a few ideas to the wind.

“Widen the space of your tent  
extend the curtains of your home, do not hold back!  
Lengthen your ropes, make your tent pegs firm,  
for you will burst out to right and to left.... (Is. 54:2)

Society in 21<sup>st</sup> century is fragmented, confrontational and afraid... multicultural, ethnic mixing witness the politics in the Netherlands..... asylum seekers.... terrorism.....boundaries are hardening.... barriers are going up  
What is the place of monasticism in this society?

As I have grown into the monastic culture, my interests have developed towards relationships with the wider Christian body, particularly the Orthodox with the wider monastic family through AIM with Interfaith Dialogue - now concerning Islam which is in the forefront of our society's questions and fears which can be summed up as global relationships between men and women.

As we are all destined to come before God and live in Him, if we are to live at all, one can speak of the Communion of Saints... and sinners; and I am taking the communion of saints to include those now on the journey to the Kingdom.

Communion implies relationship.

Two favourite quotations to address the fragmentation of society:

“Matter is a dynamic web of interdependent relationships. Ultimately you come to a field of energies pervaded by consciousness and having the nature of compassion or love” (attributed to David Bohm).

Love reaches out to the other.

“To say that there are ‘many human beings’ is a common abuse of language. Granted there is a plurality of those who share in the same human nature - but in all of them, humanity is one.” (St Gregory of Nyssa).

Benedict saw the whole world in a ray of the sun. And add to that: in the heart of every person there is the seed of the divine presence.

These quotations both point to ultimate unity in God.

### **The question I want to ask is:**

Do we set up false boundaries in our monastic culture?

Looking at the Gospel of Mark, there you find the Pharisees with a 'holiness code', an elite with strict boundaries and sinners outside. Jesus was continually breaking these boundaries to include outsiders, women, sinners

The drama in Mark of crossing the sea, the place of chaos, to the Gentile district... Among his own people, the Jews, he urged the messianic secret, but on the other side, among the Gentiles, he told the mad man to go and tell everyone of his cure and of Jesus. He didn't just call a meeting on the shore and talk (!), he also got into a boat and went somewhere.

PP John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*: "The Church is not an end unto herself, she is only the 'sign and instrument of the Spirit's action which extends to all people, their religions, cultures and philosophies". Is it possible to substitute *ecclesia* by the *ecclesiola* of the monastery? And consider how we might become 'the sign and instrument of the Spirit's actions which extends to all people, their religions, cultures and philosophies'? Monasteries are 'places where the deep connections are made....'

Emmanuel Levinas: the Church needs a culture of 'otherness', of relatedness, a need of 'Others' for self-understanding. "True equality implies maximum differentiation, each true to oneself; and respect for the other, not blurring.

So - I am questioning our boundaries.... do we set our community on a hilltop in such a way that the poor and the lame cannot climb up?

Are our minds enclosed within our monastic culture, or do they, enriched by that culture, embrace the 21<sup>st</sup> century world? On the other hand, would we then be in danger of losing our monastic charism, our single-minded search for God? Which way should we look, so that we do not succumb to modern pluralism or relativism?

We have gone to the 'desert' to seek God; I would not urge that we leave the desert, but that we should open our minds and hearts to give the love that brings communion. We are not outside society, but at its heart.

At a recent study day in Douai an Iranian professor mentioned the Islamic mystical tradition, and I asked him whether he thought there was a way forward in dialogue on this level. He answered: absolutely, it is the only way. Having looked at Ibn Arabi, (which left me lost) I wonder how close he comes to the 'Cloud'.... but nevertheless....

Practical examples: EBC boundaries, members of different ethnic races, men and women etc. [and please remember that I am speaking from the ambience of an 'enclosed' EBC community of women]. There are British people of many different origins in Birmingham, do they find their way into our noviciates?

Can EBC nuns and monks worship and work together more closely as is happening in other Congregations and communities?

Boundaries can become frontiers:

one has one's back to a boundary

a frontier beckons - connections can be made - one can grasp the edges of a vision.

The Trappist monks of Tibhirine sat in the desert with their hearts open, engaged in

the *Ribat* with their Muslim brothers, and witnessed to the love and fidelity of Christ.

Which brings us to the tent pegs.

Some of you may know of Fr Barnabas Sandeman's article on Solomon's temple and Abraham's tent.

Stanbrook is in process of leaving its temple, picking up its tent and moving - which brings me to consider where the tent pegs should be placed. In a temple the space is fixed; a tent can be stretched. One can entertain at the door of a tent, like Abraham, and as I was in the Sahara. (Here I told the story of when I was wandering in the Sahara desert and a woman took me to her tent and fed me with couscous, and we prayed together, as she faced Mecca and prayed to Allah, although we had no common language.)

I will remind you of Timothy Radcliffe's talk to the Abbots' Congress on the empty space at the heart of the monk and of the monastery where God may show Himself. Is this space where we make room for the Other, the Stranger, to meet God?

I came across an article by Fr Thomas Hopko, an Orthodox priest in USA who wrote: "the infant Church had to 'move out' into the Gentile world - a tiny stream into the Greek-Roman world and transform it... so now in a secular culture in some ways closer to the 2C than the 20C?... Islam did the same thing, and is attempting to do it again.

It seems to me the challenge - at least for my generation, is to make this space at the heart of the monk or nun as wide and open as possible, so that the next generation may have room to weave new connections, to give new expression to our monastic culture and help to transform secular culture in 21<sup>st</sup> century.