

Christian Monasticism and Simplicity of Life
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Introduction

In a consumer society, those who follow the monastic way are marching out of step, because we can be content with a simple lifestyle. Allow me to begin with true confessions. For many years, my life as a monk was simple. It was a simple round of chanting, manual labor, periods of reading and prayer, with no more personal belongings than I could put into my desk drawers and a couple of clothes lockers. I cannot pinpoint exactly when I began to lose simplicity in my life, but I no longer have it now. What I have now is a whirlwind of multiplicity and complexity, a race against the calendar and the clock. I hate to blame everything on my computer, but as I look back, I remember a time in the mid-80s when I acquired my first computer and made the transition from typewriter to this new technology that was supposed to simplify my correspondence, creative writing, and research, but a technology still prone to freeze-ups and breakdowns, loss of data, and a resulting increase of work. Next came Internet and E-mail, intended further to simplify my duties. Instead I began to spin faster and faster, not in the prayerful way of the whirling dervishes but with the mindlessness of a toy top going nowhere fast. Now, if it is not too late, I want to get off this merry-go-round and get back to the simple life, back to center, before I spin totally out of control, like an unguided monastic missile on the way to outer space. Where is the wisdom that will point me to simplicity of life?

Scriptural wisdom

In the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures we find this thought in Ecclesiastes: “This is all that I have learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated” (Ecclesiastes 7:29; Good News Translation). King David was in some respects a complicated man, but his devotion to Yahweh was simple, even childlike. After piling up mountains of precious metals and costly building materials for the temple, he offered it all to Yahweh in a grand gesture: “I know, my God, that you put hearts to the test and love simplicity. Wherefore I also in the simplicity of my heart have joyfully offered all these things” (1 Chronicles 29:17; Douay-Rheims).

Jesus seems to have equated simplicity of heart with a quality of childlike trust in God’s care. On one occasion, “He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, ‘Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Matthew 8:2-3; NAB as also in subsequent citations). Jesus himself in his public ministry lived in radical simplicity as an itinerant preacher, freely receiving and freely giving: “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” (Luke 9:58). He cautioned against crass materialism to the neglect of the spirit: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19–20). He told the parable of the rich man who tore down his barns and built larger ones to hold all his goods but that night had to face his eternal judgment. “Thus will it be for the

one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God” (Luke 12:21). [1]

Simplicity described

What do I mean by simplicity of life? Simplicity as I understand it has two levels, material and spiritual. On the material level, a simple life means a life that is uncluttered, free of the superfluous, content with the necessities. [2] St. Paul reminds Timothy: “We brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it. If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that” (1 Timothy 6:7–8). Such a list prompts us to ask how much is really enough. I myself would prefer to add at least a couple of items to Paul’s short list: food, clothing, a roof that does not leak, and a computer.

On the spiritual level, a simple life suggests simplicity of heart, a heart that is centered on the one thing necessary (Luke 10:42), that is, the love of God or the kingdom of God. On this level, simplicity is a rich and full experience, a life that is integrated, not fragmented but unified in the sense of the Greek monos, which is the root of the word monk. (By the way, I use monk inclusively of male and female). To reach this level of interior simplification usually takes a conscious ascetic effort in order to detach oneself from all distracting desires. [3]

Poet T.S. Eliot in Four Quartets may be speaking of material and spiritual simplicity at the same time when he describes “A condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)” (Little Gidding V). Does he really mean “everything”? Isn’t that going to an extreme? Or does simplicity beckon us to an extreme because there is something godlike about it. The closer we draw to God, the simpler we become. St. Teresa of Avila says “God alone suffices” (“solo Dios basta”). God alone. Catholic scholastic theology talks of God as a reality not only without component parts but without any composition whatsoever, not even essence and existence, for God is God’s own existence (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, PP 3). Therefore the lovely ballad in Leonard Bernstein’s Mass is right on the mark with the words: “Sing God a simple song: Lauda, Laude/ Make it up as you go along; Lauda, Laude/ Sing like you like to sing/ God loves all simple things/ For God is the simplest of all.” [Oneness in togetherness]

Simplicity and monasticism

Christian monastic tradition fosters a life of simplicity by surrounding the monk with some degree of silence, enclosure, natural beauty, a predictable schedule, daily and seasonal rhythms, and limited contact with society outside the monastery. In such conditions, a monk’s mind and heart can drop their defenses and open up to all that is true and good, open up to the seed of God’s word in Scripture. That is simplicity as openness. The monk can gather all of himself/herself into one and center his/her heart on the love of God. That is simplicity as singleminded singleheartedness.

Monks accustomed to a simple life are secure and comfortable being who they are. They are unpretentious in what they say and how they act, without duplicity or hidden agendas, the same outside and inside. I do not mean they are simpletons in the negative sense, but in a positive way they are grounded in truth, humility, gratitude, and love. They are ready to love with their whole

heart, soul, mind, and strength, because their heart is undivided and uncluttered.

Concern for simplicity has led monks to reject the superfluous and to discover that less—not more—of something is often more beautiful and tasteful. I do not wish to get into the controversies about architecture, church furnishings, liturgical music and ceremonies, and religious art that sometimes set black monks against white monks in the middle ages and later. I think there is room for various expressions of a common ideal. But in this context it may be worth recalling some recent non-monastic witnesses like British economist Ernst Schumacher (1911–77), who promoted “technology with a human face” in his 1973 book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Then there is the twentieth-century movement of minimalism in art, music, literature, the performing arts, and especially architecture as, for example, in the Czech Cistercian abbey Novy Dvur designed by London architect John Pawson, completed in 2004. These are contemporary witnesses to simplicity.

Examples

I can give you further examples—non-monastic examples—of living simply, first some groups that are characterized by their simplicity, then some examples of individuals. Without going too far back in history we find communities, often of religious inspiration, that choose to live frugally, close to the land, at a horse-and-buggy pace, cherishing the values of family and community, content with the basics when it comes to food, furnishings, and clothing. In the eighteenth century there was an influx of these groups to the U.S. I am thinking of the Amish, the Mennonites, the Shakers. In the mid-twentieth century the Bruderhof immigrated to this country and joined with the Hutterites but since have split from them.

To return to the Shakers for a minute, they had a community called Pleasant Hill, located about 70 miles east of Gethsemani Abbey that was active for slightly more than a century until 1910, was restored in the 1960s, and is now a National Historic Landmark. [4] There is a Shaker hymn entitled “Tis the gift to be simple.” I am unable to sing it, but I can quote the lyrics:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free,
'tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be,
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right. [5]

As for individuals, we sense it when we learn about or meet someone who has a radically simple lifestyle. We sense their integrity and substance, their dedication to their chosen path. It is enough to invoke the names of some of these people who are better known, apart from Jesus

himself.

St. Francis of Assisi, 1182–1226
Thoreau, 1817–62
St. Bernadette Soubirous, 1844–79
St. Thérèse of Lisieux, 1873–97
Gandhi, 1869–1948
Pope John XXIII, 1881–1963
Dorothy Day, 1897–1980
Peace Pilgrim, 1908–81 [6]

Countercultural

The simple lifestyle of such people is countercultural, no matter when they lived. If monks today opt for a simpler lifestyle, we too will go counter to the consumer society around us. Our choices will challenge the greed and wastefulness, the pollution and sheer noise that people accept as inevitable parts of life, especially urban life. Consumerism, fed by incessant advertising, is an addiction to buying unnecessary and often impractical new merchandise in order to fill an inner incompleteness. People forget that “Whoever dies with the most toys is still dead.” In what ways might we as monks simplify our lives in the interests of being more ecologically sensitive? In answer I propose three “Rs”: Reduce consumption, Recycle, and Rely more on one’s local community.

1) Reduce consumption. The current jargon for reducing one’s impact on the environment is to “reduce your carbon footprint.” It does not mean taking off shoes before coming indoors, although that may be a good idea. Our carbon footprint is the amount of carbon dioxide we release into the atmosphere such as by driving a car or by using electricity generated from coal. Some people try to give up nonessential carbon emissions for Lent. Others buy carbon credits by planting trees that consume CO₂. Vatican City plants trees in Hungary to offset its carbon footprint.

2) Recycle and repair. Living in a throwaway culture where goods are engineered to break down or become obsolete in a few years, monks can sometimes mend what tears, or repair what breaks down instead of pitching it, or can be content with using an older, less convenient model for a little longer. When we do throw something out, we can try to throw it in the proper receptacle for recycling. Some monasteries have various receptacles for paper, glass, aluminum or other metals, compost material, and plastic. Jesus told his disciples, “Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted” (John 6:12). You have also heard: “One person’s trash is another person’s treasure.” It’s true. To give one example, our obsolete computers, monitors, televisions, and cell phones, discarded at the rate of about three million tons per year in the U.S., can be smelted down and the valuable components extracted and reused. [7] Recycling goes with a simple lifestyle, because it disciplines the instinct to hoard, the pack rat syndrome. On the other hand, too much compulsiveness about recycling can also complicate one’s life instead of simplifying it.

3) Rely on oneself in order to be as self-sustaining as possible. This advice applies to monasteries more than to individual monks. For centuries in the Christian West, monasteries were largely self-sustaining, according to the principle in the Rule of St. Benedict 66.6: “The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced.” In today’s interdependent world economy, a monastery might succeed in being partially self-sustaining. Some food needs could be met by a vegetable garden and a greenhouse, and maybe animals. Energy dependence could be reduced by use of solar, wind, or geothermal resources. For example, the Trappists at New Melleray, Iowa, heat and cool their casket factory by an underground geothermal system, and St Mary Monastery, Rock Island, Illinois, has a geothermal system to cool and heat their monastery from an artificial lake about one acre in area with five miles of piping beneath it. The Trappistines at Mount St. Mary’s, Wrentham, Massachusetts, with the help of a grant, are installing a wind turbine expected to generate enough electricity to meet all the needs of the monastery.

Conclusion

I want to draw our reflections to a conclusion now. In today’s interconnected world, simplified living is practically an issue of justice, that is, a moral issue. Because of this moral dimension, Pope Benedict on numerous occasions has been a strong spokesman for responsible ecology, and so has the Dalai Lama. How can developed countries or monks in developed countries justify patterns of conspicuous consumption and thoughtless waste when so many human beings live in near destitution in developing countries? “The fruits of the earth were given to feed all,” says St. Ambrose. [8] The best motto is “to live simply, that others may simply live.” [9]

Because crude oil costs about \$130 per barrel (5/22/08) and is rising, everything that depends on oil in our post-industrial society costs us more, beginning with transportation, but also the whole plastics industry, much of the chemical industry, much of agribusiness, with a ripple effect all down the line. For an oil-dependent economy, a petrocivilization such as the U.S, the party is over. Perhaps that will be a good thing for us from the spiritual point of view, a blessing in disguise, if we move away from consumerism and materialism toward voluntary simplicity of life.

For Further Reading on Simplicity of Life

Annabel Shilson-Thomas, *Livesimply: a CAFOD Resource for Living Simply, Sustainably, in Solidarity* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury, 2008).

André Angelantoni, Elliot Hoffman, and David Room, “Oil Transparency: Energy Policy that addresses Peak Oil and Climate Change,” <http://www.inspiringgreenleadership.com>

“Beth Daley, “Going Green for Lent: Many Use Period of Penance to Aid Environment,” The Boston Globe, March 3, 2008.

“Gift of Simplicity,” 2008, Santa Rita Abbey website:

<http://santaritabbey.org/GIFT%20OF%20SIMPLICITY.htm>

“Holy See: Planet is Everyone’s Responsibility: Archbishop [Migliore] Notes Pontiff’s Efforts on Behalf of Environment” Zenit, ZE08021407 - 2008-02-14 Permalink:
<http://www.zenit.org/article-21777?l=english>

Chrysogonus Waddell, “Simplicity and the Abbot de Rancé,” Cistercian Studies Quarterly 22 (1987): 250–61.

Edward Readicker-Henderson, “Letting Go of Stuff,” Spirituality & Health, January-February, 2008.

Gwynne Dyer, “The Coming Food Catastrophe,” FFWD: Calgary’s News & Entertainment Weekly, April 3, 2008.

Jonathan Walmsley, “Reducing Your Carbon Footprint,” fMid Ulster Mail, July 30, 2007 (<http://www.midulstermail.co.uk/midulster-news-features/Reducing-your-Carbon-Footprint-.3071003.jp>)

Kris Berggren, “Going Green: Sisters are Renewing Community Life From the Ground Up,” National Catholic Reporter, February 22, 2008.

Laura Lloyd, “Religious Orders Bring Clout to War on Bottled Water,” National Catholic Reporter, January 11, 2008.

Martinus Cawley, “A Monastic Experience and Theology of Waste Material Recycling,” Cistercian Studies Quarterly 20 (1985): 237-48.

Thomas C. Fox, “A Durable Future: Bill McKibben,” National Catholic Reporter, November 16, 2007.

Thomas Merton, *The Spirit of Simplicity: Characteristic of the Cistercian Order* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1948).

[1] In one passage, the word simple [akeraioi] means innocent in contrast with shrewd, when Jesus says to his disciples: “Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves” (Mt 10:16). Another word (haplous) sometimes translated “simple” has the more precise meaning of healthy or pure: “The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light” (Matthew 6:22).

[2] See St. Bernard of Clairvaux, “Reject what is superfluous and you are saved!” (SC 58:10; SBOp 2.134).

[3] See the teaching of the Buddha on renunciation of desire or craving.

[4] Thomas Merton visited Pleasant Hill before its restoration and describes one visit in his journal, using the word simplicity to sum up his impressions: “The empty fields, the big trees—how I would love to explore those houses and listen to that silence. In spite of the general decay and despair there is joy there still and simplicity. Shakers fascinate me.” December 26, 1959, Lawrence Cunningham, ed., *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three 1952–1960* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 362.

[5] Words: American Shaker song, eighteenth century

Music: Simple Gifts

Meter: Irr. with Refrain

<http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/t/t717.html>

[6] Her real name was Mildred Norman. For twenty-eight years she walked back and forth across the U.S., logging more than 25,000 miles, preaching peace, owning only what she could carry with her. She vowed to “remain a wanderer until mankind has learned the way of peace, walking until given shelter and fasting until given food.” See: <http://www.peacepilgrim.com/pphome.htm>

[7] See Jon Mooallem, “The Afterlife of Cellphones,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2008. See also Felicity Barringer, “A City Committed to Recycling is Ready for More,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2008.

[8] St. Ambrose, *Commentary on Gospel of Luke*, cited by the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, “The Call of Creation: God’s Invitation and the Human Response: The Natural Environment and Catholic Social Teaching,” 2002.

[9] Slogan attributed Horace Dammers, 1921–2004, Episcopal Dean of Bristol, Britain, founder of the Life Style Movement, UK.