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Consecrated Life: The Rock Pile

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés | Mar. 17, 2009 El Rio Debajo del Rio

What I know of consecrated life, I have learned from my loveship with the ones I some times call affectionately "madwomen in black," our nuns ... and los hombres con pechos*, male priests, brothers and monks who are mothers.*
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I am not a theologian, rather growing up in the north woods, perhaps I'm more a tree-ologian. As a wandering preacher, even as a backwoods mystic, I do not know everything I wish I could know about convent life, about consecrated life lived in community where souls are involved in a lifelong lapidary project with one another ...

that is, they are engaged in serious rock tumbling ... rolling over and over one another, knocking off each others' spurs and spikes ... refining, polishing each others' ways of being ... and especially, seeing.

Yet, I'd humbly offer this tiny mirror to those who are consecrated, perchance a bit wavery a mirror ... but true to what I have seen by living in spirit with my Sisters of Charity, Leavenworth, Kan., as an associate -- particularly in pennies given and in prayer, but paid back a ba-jillion-fold by sisters' rationale-heartful counsel ... and from being ?raised up right? by my sisters, brothers priests from the order of the Holy Cross; and from being further drubbed over, that is, shined as much as sandstone can be shined, by my teachers at university, Sisters of Loretto; not to mention Jesuits from Regis who seemed at the time to not walk, but rather in their long black cassocks, to glide on wheels.

This is a good deal of what I see time and again about souls who have chosen to take vows and live a consecrated life:

It doesn't matter how one comes to the commitment -- with a high-octane dowry or with only a little wrinkled coin purse that has nothing in it; as a golden girl who looks and acts ?the part? (meaning culture's rote idea of ?the part?) or a practically pre-ordained boy who is guarded by powerful men who will try to assure his success in their power structure ... whether entering as a member of a preferred tribe, or as a holy or semi- holy nobody; or as a prideful person who is sure their conversion experience is newsworthy with drum rolls please every time they tell it; or whether they cover the holes in the topside of their socks by turning them over to the bottom of their feet in order to be frugal...

whether they are shiny and funny or immature-dependent; whether they are wise beyond their years, or haven't the sense Creator gave them; whether they are jovial and at ease; whether they are in jailbreak condition, or carried in on a stretcher by angels who are ever true...

no matter what condition one starts from, no matter what ego disguises one has donned for good reason or not so hot reason ... all souls, if they are worth their salt, if they wish to teach instead of imperiously demand, to be example instead of exterminator, live cheek to cheek with Who has called them, no matter how vague or bright their initial sense of their calling might be ... then each soul will submit to ?the process.?

The Process

What is that? Well, from outside, it can look like, by golly, you get a free college education...at some of the best schools known, and a post-doc education too if so called. You may get to travel to missions far away, learn cool foreign languages, seriously get to dedicate oneself to something that truly matters, get to do useful things with ?like kind,? get to celebrate that joy of ?being together,? not only in the work, but in spirit, and in Spirit ... all together respectfully finding a way to partner the great Source without source.

Too, in a secular world, a vowed person often has more freedom to move amongst different social groups and groups of influence, than if one were just Jane Doe or Joe Doe sort of just suddenly showing up with great ideas and no skeleton key.

From the outside, with credentials of ?one who is consecrated? ... immediate deference might be given by others, even if not earned and re-earned scrupulously ... meaning, in part, that the oaths of obedience, humility, fealty, humanity, equal regard, and others, are often the only bulwarks against becoming carried away with one's inflation about being the only one who can save the world, or define propriety ... or schedule the x properly.

To many, this might be a good deal of what a consecrated person's life looks like overtly.

But, from the inside of the consecrated and vowed life, there is a darker reality.

Darker, as in dearer, as in price to be paid ... far higher. Darker, as in hidden, not easily seen. The blood price of being called, of tottering up close to radiance to see for oneself, of making the often precipitous descent that is both exhilarating and doubt-funding ... and then ultimately committing ... these matters carry none of the ?outside? seeming perks and pretties.

Living a consecrated life, in part, is literally destroying in oneself a different set ?p? words: Pride, pulchritude-only efforts, power penchants, perseverating on ?very important unimportant things,? also known as persnickityness. All these will be destroyed by those who give themselves to the work.

And, then building upon those ruins, will be the structures set in place for living out another set of ?p? words: Principles. Pain. Perseverance. Privation. Placing chairs at the table for other travelers. Pitching over the edges of one's limitations purposely, even sometimes in joy. Pushing oneself to be chipped, clipped, and sanded down. Pursuing bringing a huge heart into a world made smaller daily by smallness of mind.

Yet, aren't these last rather masochistic endeavors, such as privation of ego? No. From what I can see in flashes about those in the consecrated life ... reining in a power seeking ego is like ejecting a wrongful squatter from the driver's seat that is reserved only for the soul.

Isn't ?punishment,? as in pressing for clearest truths about one's own foibles til ego squawks loud and long, some kind of weird self-humiliation? No. It is purifying the vehicle for carrying the ever-golden soul ... and the One who continually broadcasts through the soul.

Although some see the vows of chastity, obedience, poverty, fealty and all else ... as restrictive and sometimes as repressive/oppressive ... the vows are actually the finest abrasives...

that is, the emery cloths, the cross-hatch files, the lapidary tanks, that literally polish the stones until they are bright as each can be. A refined polish doesn't come from painting a trompe l'oeil over all, but from being abraded ... opened by *la lucha*, by struggle, by testing.

Although I have seen some prelates who are committed, but feast like kings, dress like squires, have servants

and others who bow to them ... far more so, I see most consecrated souls not in such lavish earthly lucre...but rather this way --

In their communities and associations with others, they sway and clatter together: again: like rocks in a lapidary barrel. We can see that the magnitude of the rock at the beginning -- boulder or pebble -- doesn't matter. What matters is not the beginning form, but the middle ... and the later. And then, in the opus, the even later.

To any who give themselves to the work, they will all be reduced, they will all be rent; they will all be rendered and tempered, rearranged.

Consider that rock presenting itself to the elements will be shaped in countless ways:

Wind
-- The winds of spiritual commitment will blow away what is loose, and loosen what is not well fastened...

-- The winds will also bring surprising gifts right through the windows ... sudden quiet inspirations or those of mind-blowing magnitude ... synchronicities, coincidences that the soul will recognize as artful, nearly ideal, or hopefully otherwise useful -- all the while ego is still crying over whatever twig of earthly matter was lost in the last dust storm.

Fire
-- Fire renders stone, and will tear down whatever is not tempered, that is, not yet passed through the flame and thereby fire-hardened,

-- yet, the crucible which pours new forms, will definitely pour a wild and fiery grace ... right up to the very top of one's soul, creating a meniscus -- a last drop when added to a full vessel, makes a rounded top to the fluid, one last drop of joy or understanding, or peace, or intensity or knowing -- - one drop more than one thought one could ever bear; the meniscus quivers with life then, when even the smallest action is taken.

Earth
-- There will be other earthy rocks that represent other souls, now in community, clacking against each other, some shaping each other gently, others bruising, cutting, knocking off rough edges, each rock growling, soothing, reducing, angling until there is better, not fit exactly, because one can cut and slice ?to fit? and destroy far more than you build. No, this other kind of able fit is the one we're after ... one in which a protected harmony is developed, but not an endless bloodletting in order ?to fit a seriously unfittable form.?

But while earthiness will rend, so too shall earthy silt travel from upriver during flood season, making thereby a fertile delta downriver. What is that fertile triangle made of? Just this: Rocks rendered small. Flood transformed into useful terrain, occurs in the consecrated, in those who give themselves over to ?the wearing away? elements of an effective sacralization.

Water
Then, too, the waters of spiritual life, these push and push the rocks. Flowing water forces stones to scuff, sand down, wash, rinsing them over and over again. At first, the consecrated life can seem like trying to drink from a fire hose ... so much that is nourishing arrives all at once.

Yet, the waters of spiritual life that can so overwhelm one's spirit, those same waters pull back in tides on a regular basis, revealing unexpected treasures there on the sea floor; there for the gathering up for soul's expansion even farther into the affairs of the supernatural and mundane life, both.

These are some of the hidden aspects of a consecrated life.

Thus, some rocks will be shaped underwater, travel miles rolling through dispersal currents ... did you know a single stone in the sea can travel a ten-thousand square mile area in three days?

Some rocks will roll across hills and down roads forced to rumble and tumble head over heels by an icy gale or a dry-hot wind ... did you know, such tiny stones can become moving mountains? They are called singing dunes?

Some rocks will lie under the earth, molten there, and then, perhaps, heaved up by a volcano, they'll be thrown into intemperate climes where they will be frozen in ice, thus held for a time til they cool ... after which the other elements will render them to a new shape. Did you know that some rocks are in a way, protected, suspended in time, until they are sturdy enough to undergo a re-shaping?

All this is part of consecrated life also.

One of the first lessons for rocks -- for souls -- may be, as in real stones of the earth, all are broken away from a larger mass ... the parts being fragments of what was once thought by some scientists, to have been a continuous mantle both underground and overland on earth.

Thus, no matter where one find's oneself being shaped and sanded ... on veldt, in moraine, on lakeshore, at timberline, in alpine meadows, at coral reef ... all come from the larger progenitor.

And each rock will, by assent, but also by twists of fate, by storm, by dispersal drift, by undercurrents, by forced migration, be carved, winding up -- look closely at river rock, it is not smooth but all wild scarred, pitted, rounded edged, most not unique qualities, but unnecessary ones, will have been knocked off painfully some days, easily others. In all, fitting a shape the soul can use to fulfill her calling.

There is no rock which does not have its schists, its foggy cracks in the midst of its clarity. Yet, even these are often cleared by submersion in the elements too. In all, there is no earthly rock that does not change, that cannot be changed, shaped to its essence.

The consecrated, vowed life is like entering a workshop of the true heart where there is endless variation on emery cloths...

proximity shifts, winds, waters, fires laid. The person so answering the call does not know how they will be tumbled...with whom, by whom ... only that one has presented oneself and committed to ?the process.?

Even when it's hard, and when visibility on the mountain passes is poor, they will not leave. Not leave themselves. Not leave their litter mates. Not leave the One who, in essence, bought them. The One who purchased them back from whatever fripperies any might have otherwise sold out to, thereby becoming derelict geniuses instead of nearer los angelocitos, the brightest angels.

There are differences between an organized, committed, consecrated life with vows, and a consecrated life without vows or with pledges.

In the vowed life
-- Practices are more intense, often stylized, and consistent daily.

-- Formation is tended to, this being, amongst other things, the education of the soul. Formation is not limited to, but is in some part, learning to think like the Heart of the World, practicing proper engagement, learning to think closer and then closest yet to the Mind of Creator; learning to walk well in the world with other-worldly ideals. There is much more.

-- There is often consistent testing for reality based outcomes; not only evaluating the execution of helping endeavors and projects, but also assessing how the individual is developing -- or not -- in the sacral and the ordinary worlds.

-- Self-examination is updated daily; there are often regular meetings with spiritual advisors, many of great and wise spirit and radiant love.

-- And for many, there is too, ?the gathering of one or more souls in the name of the Cristo,? even though they might pray in their rooms alone, or sit at the benediction mass together, this often unfurls a peace and sense of well being -- a merging of soul-senses -- that many cherish and find they cannot achieve alone...

I believe a consecrated life is open to all of us...

even though such a life is often ?rolled out? via different practices for different souls. I was consecrated to La Señora Guadalupe when I was six years old. I have daily practices. But, I live in a cave, not in a community, and I am still not perfectly able these many decades-plus later to have perfected anything, let alone by half. But I'm clear my practices are the magneto. The practices are the engine without which, soul's vehicle won?t go.

I'd urge you, if you feel something like a tide of great love moving through you, or sudden clarity like gin-clear water, or a longing that wont quit, or the wind pushing at you instead of solely fluttering you, or you find the flame drawing you near, or the ?Nature of nature? pulling you with great tugs at the heart and soul that translated from ?low muffle,? sound something like, "I must, I have to" ... those are some of the bodily sensations that often announce a calling, a summons ...

You can consult the saints. Many have left all the way from austere to joyous spiritual regimens and practices, in writing, just for those with hungry hearts.

And, especially, look to the vowed nuns, priests, brothers, monks who are ever near you, particularly those whose hearts would be troubled if you didn't ask them to lift their lanterns over your pages that still rest partly in shadow. They will very likely know something about how to read those pages. They will help you see just a bit more -- all the way to a great deal more -- about your ways and means ahead.

It may be likely they will tell you too, in their own ways, some version of how to take the first step to a more sacral life, something like this:

> *First, still and yet, come closer,*
> *come forward as a rock of any kind,*
> *igneous, metamorphic, sedimentary,*
> *not even knowing what kind you are,*
> *come anyway.*
> *Then, just this:*
> *Commit to fall toward the wind*
> *that takes and gives;*
> *The fire that burns down*
> *and yet also creates;*
> *The earth that knocks you sideways*
> *yet nourishes you in the aggregate;*
> *The water that drowns your ego out,*
> *yet uncovers the Treasure.*

CODA

This column is in response to heartfelt letters I've received from nuns, priests, brothers, and laity, who've written about matters on their minds in the last two weeks. Thank you so much, all. There will be more columns on various matters forthcoming. If you have other topics you would like to suggest, you are always welcome to write.

Also, dear brave souls, March 3, marked my one year anniversary of writing a weekly online column for *National Catholic Reporter*. My gratitude to you for your readership, and your generosity with your comments and stories of your lives, your candidness, your kindness toward others here. I promise to put your blessings to good use.

On this one year anniversary, also, my thanks to the staff at *NCR* who held my place open here while my family struggled through two unexpected and heartbreaking deaths of loved ones during autumn of last year. We are not back to ?normal? as there has never been any such thing as ?normal? in our household, but we are slowing coming back to ?fully able? again. My family sincerely thanks you all for your prayers and cards during and after. That meant a lot to us.

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