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Without monasticism, Protestants miss out on community

Bill Tammeus | Aug. 25, 2010 A small c catholic

CLYDE, Mo. -- Sr. Dawn, who met us when we arrived at the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration [1] monastery here, used to be what I still am -- a Presbyterian [2]. Same story with Sr. Sean, the prioress.

Same with two old friends whom my wife and I accompanied on a recent Sunday visit to see the environmentally friendly remodeling work being done here. Our friends have returned to Catholicism, the faith of their youth.

All of that Presbyterian-Catholic crossover has moved me to think about what we Protestants are missing because we don?t have a monastic tradition. It seems a fair question as a follow-up to my most recent *NCR* column about what I think Catholics are missing because they don?t have female priests.

When I asked Sr. Sean what she thought monastic-free Protestants miss, her answer was both simple and profound -- "community." Oh, it?s not that we Protestants don?t try (and sometimes succeed) in creating a wonderful sense of community within congregations, it?s just that it never is quite fully committed community in the radical sense that members of monastic communities experience.

Yes, I know that monastic communities often struggle to create and maintain healthy community. I remember what my friend Kathleen Norris said about this in her wonderful book *The Cloister Walk [3]*. One of the monks at the monastery in Minnesota she was writing about told her that a big problem in maintaining a loving sense of community in such a place is that the mother of every monk there fixed potatoes in a different way.

So let?s not kid ourselves. Monastic life has its issues. And yet it?s the kind of model of community that Protestants (save for some Episcopalians) lack, and its absence in many ways creates a hollow within the body that doesn?t get filled in other ways.

What else are we Protestants missing because we have no monastic tradition? I put the question to the Rev. W. Paul Jones, a friend who spent most of his life as a Methodist seminary professor but now is a Catholic priest and Trappist monk [4]. His list was long, but included:

- An appreciation of silence and the "booming wonder of standing at awe before Mystery."
- The value of solitude in a society of "invasive togetherness."
- An "appreciation of the alternation between doing and being, work and leisure, aloneness and togetherness, prayer and work."
- An awareness of the diversity of spiritual life -- from Protestants? emphasis on words through the monastic goal of contemplation as quiet union with God.
- The importance of the monastic use of *lectio divina [5]* as a way of being "personally addressed" by scripture.
- Worship for its own sake, as opposed to "getting something out of it."
- The value of retreats in balancing one?s daily life.

- A deep valuing of tradition.
- A celebration of saints "as models for transformative living."
- A more profound appreciation of liturgy.
- An awareness of nature and the seasons as "an honoring of life?s ongoing rhythms."
- An appreciation of a rule that gives structure to one?s time and that creates responsibility for how one spends one?s time and resources.
- A valuing of the church?s organic diversity, "so that while Jesuits and Trappists would seem to have little in common, the various orders affirm the importance of each other in giving wholeness to the church as a robe of rainbow colors" -- a church that is not only human but also the Body of Christ.
- An alternative to society?s competitive, ownership-driven, individualistic, materialistic approach.

Monasticism, Jones says, "is the ongoing remembrance of the earliest Christian communities in which all receive according to their needs and contribute according to their abilities so that none goes away empty."

So as a Protestant I long for this tradition, just as I?m sure some Catholics long to be ministered to by female priests.

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