

An Understanding Of Religious Life  
Based On "New Monasticism: new forms of missional  
& religious life in the 21st century"

Language that seeks to express something 'new' can often be inadequate in expressing both the continuity with the old and also its discontinuity, i.e. its newness. The term 'New Monasticism' is one example of this difficulty. This paper will briefly address how New Monasticism seeks fidelity to the traditional religious life as well as how it understands its new contribution to that life. We recognise that the tradition of the religious life has never been static, it is always evolving, being refreshed and renewed by the Holy Spirit, so now we seek to discern what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us in this place at this time.

The New Monastic movement has emerged out of the steady increase of consumerism and individualism prevalent in our Western culture. As humans, becoming increasingly seen as autonomous, economic units by our capitalist society, we have begun to cry out for deeper relationships and connections with others. Many would argue that the individualisation of our society began in the Enlightenment with philosophical thought becoming more introspective and focussed on the subjective interpretation of reality famously summarised in René Descartes, "I think, therefore, I am." The Church has not been immune to this social deconstruction and this has led to a powerfully individualised faith experience. This erosion of the corporate understanding of faith has impacted the Church's discipleship and life together.

With secularisation following on from the Enlightenment project through the Industrial Revolution and its further mechanising and fragmenting of all aspects of life, the place of community, and the sense of local, 'parish' life, has diminished. In the late 20th century the resources, particularly in parish churches, dwindled and so, too, its ability to offer intensive forms of Christian discipleship.

In this environment some gathered together to re-discover what it means to live out the communal life as described in the New Testament. The faithfulness of the monastic and mendicant saints throughout history became the wells around which these small groups were nourished, inspiring them to live counter-culturally. These 'pioneers' discovered that the shared life they dreamt of had long been practiced by communities like the Franciscans, Benedictines and the Jesuits, among many. Others arrived at a similar place by a different route, having sought, in the first place, to rediscover the spiritual fortitude and charisms of the very same saints of old by engaging with their spiritualities within the original and/or inherited context; such as a faithful re-articulation of Benedictine obedience and humility, with a view to reap the same fruit as did once the monks under his cure, and so to re-dig wells of Grace in the 'places' where God has worked for generations before. Regardless of the path towards a contemporary articulation of the monastic way of life, they all learned that the historic forms were in need of some re-imagining for the new context in which they lived. In this way they can all be reasonably described as 'new monastics'.

It is important to briefly define the use of the words 'new' and 'monasticism'.

'Monasticism' has been adopted by the movement partly because of its use in the USA where 'monastic' was seen as encompassing the whole spectrum of religious life. We appreciate the weakness of this word and acknowledge that monastic life is distinct from, say, mendicant religious life. Having said that, we would want to acknowledge that the monastic call is one to prayer and vigil with Christ, like the first disciples being taken to a lonely place with Jesus. In this way we hope that all new monastic communities would seek to have this commitment to a centrality of prayer somewhere within their shared life together.

'New' is being used by the New Monastic movement both identifying with the inherited DNA of 'traditional' monastic life whilst seeking, like children, to plow their own furrows and walk their own path for our time. We are deeply aware that the traditional communities, which birthed us and to which we owe a great debt for

passing on the 2,000 year 'story', continue to adapt and grow into new contexts in which they find themselves. We also have adopted 'new' due to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous statement,

...the restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism which has nothing in common with the old but a complete lack of compromise in a life lived in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount in the discipleship of Christ. I think it is time to gather people together to do this...<sup>1</sup>

Within the movement we want to identify the evolving story of the religious life through history and, as the next generation, find ourselves sensing the call of God to re-imagine the religious life for our age.

And thus, nothing from old times will meet our exigencies. We want a rule which shall answer to the complexity of our own age. We want a discipline which shall combine the sovereignty of soul of Antony, the social devotion of Benedict, the humble love of Francis, the matchless energy of the Jesuits, with faith that fears no trial, with hope that fears no darkness, with truth that fears no light.<sup>2</sup>

Appreciating the insufficiencies of the name we want to affirm that the New Monastic movement is seeking to be faithful to the call for 'new forms of missional and religious life in the 21st century'.

Having introduced the terminology we now move onto suggesting how the term 'religious life' is understood from those who find themselves under the New Monastic banner. The communities which identify with New Monasticism are varied and have found themselves under the 'umbrella' via different ways. To save the

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Testament to Freedom (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.424

<sup>2</sup> Westcott, Brooke Foss, Words of Faith and Hope (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1902) p. 14

movement encompassing any and all forms of community and thus being in danger of losing any distinction and, therefore, purpose, some explicitly shared principles and/or practices must be stated.

A Rule of Life is fundamental to the identification with the New Monastic movement. A Rule of Life is not just an agreed statement of belief or purpose but a set of commitments which are formally accepted by way of promises/vows. For all Christians, for every community, every monastery, every intentional grouping, the Gospel is the Rule of our life, the measure of our faithfulness to Christ. In this sense, no other rule is necessary. The tradition of the monastic Rule evolved as the deposit of the Gospel for a particular group at a particular time. Thus intentional communities need to be clear about the way in which they respond to the call of the Gospel. There are many possible ways: a community may feel called to follow a classic Rule; another may have felt called to write a Rule that is, for the members, their invitation to the Gospel life; another may have evolved a covenant document that identifies certain key practices that hold the members in their common vocation.

One distinction we have from the traditional communities is we allow temporary promises/vows to be made. We acknowledge that this limits the impact that stability and obedience can have on the human spirit and gives members the open door to exit community life when things get difficult. We pray that the way of life encourages members to remain faithful longer than they feel they can in the hope that they may discover the richness of God's grace to withstand and grow in Christlikeness. The seasonal nature of the vows, however, positively encourage reformation of certain charisms and expressions to ensure they are always contextual and relevant to the community.

Those within the New Monastic movement are discovering a call from God to find a median between the monastic life and the mendicant life. This can be expressed in different ways, e.g. monastic apostles/apostolic monks, cell and coracle, etc. This tension between the life of friars and the life of monks is

expressed amongst new monastic communities in a plethora of unique charisms but at the heart of them all is this call to both contemplative prayer and active mission.

The word 'monastic' comes from the Greek word, monastikos (from the root: monos – alone). Monastikos means 'to live alone' and was used to describe the hermits and Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early Church. These hermits became teachers of this solitary life and gathered around them a community of 'novices'. This, over time became the basis and foundations of the monastic communities we see across the world. All of them owe their tradition to St. Anthony and the many other Desert Fathers and Mothers (Abbas and Ammas) who went out from society to dedicate their life to communion with God without any distractions of life. The monastic call, therefore, is to the dedication to watch and pray.

The apostolic call, I would suggest, is to take on the Great Commission given by Christ at his ascension,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20a)

'Apostolic' comes from the Greek word, apostolikos (from the roots: apo – away from and stello – to place, set in order). Apostolikos means 'to send away' or 'to be sent' and was used to describe those whom Jesus sent to witness to his Kingdom and Resurrection in the Gospels.

It might be useful, at this point, to draw attention to a story in Mark's gospel which illustrates the balance between being alone with God in contemplation and being sent out to do his work in mission.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a

staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (Mark 6:6b-13)

They become 'apostles', sent out to build and spread the Kingdom. It is from this passage, and many like it, that the first Friars were inspired to do likewise. Then, after the death of John the Baptist, we meet the 'apostles' again.

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. (Mark 6:30-32)

The same apostles, having been sent, return from mission and are called to be alone, solitary, in a deserted place. In this way they become 'monastics', alone with Jesus. This balance between apostolic mission and monastic prayer continues.

Now many saw them going and recognised them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." (Mark 6:33-37)

The disciples, wanting to be alone with Jesus and remain faithful to that monastic call, ask to send the crowd away. Jesus, however, calls them to enter again into ministry and sends them for food. It is only after the crowd are fed, and Jesus reveals the Kingdom of God amongst them, that he dismisses the disciples to a remote place and he himself goes to be alone with God.

In his 18th Conference, Cassian hears from Abba Piamun of the three types of monks that have developed over the monastic tradition. The same three types of monks are also described in St. Benedict's Rule: cenobites (coenobites), hermits and sarabaites.

Cenobites are 'monks living in a community under the government of a single elder.' Hermits are 'men who have first been trained in communities to the life of virtue and have then chosen to live a completely hidden and solitary life.' Then come the third type of monk, the sarabaites.

The third, and culpable, kind is the Sarabaites... They are descended from Ananias and Sapphira. They do not follow the perfect way: they prefer to pretend to follow it. No doubt they want to be rivals of, and to gain the kind of credit given to, people who choose Christ's utter poverty above all the riches of the world. They pursue true goodness feebly. They must needs become monks in order to gain the repute of monks, but they make no effort to follow their discipline, disregard the rules of the communities, are outside all control from the elders, fail to use the elders' traditions to conquer their self-will. They... go on living in their homes just as before, carrying on the same work; or they build cells for themselves, call them 'monasteries' and live in them as they please... Shirking the austere rule of a community: living two or three together in a cell; under no direction: aiming above all else at having freedom from the elders, of going where they like, and of satisfying whatever passion they like – they

are more busied about the necessities of life day and night than are coenobites.<sup>3</sup>

...unschooled by any rule, untested, as gold is by fire, but soft as lead, living in and of the world... They live together in twos or threes, more often alone, without a shepherd in their own fold, not the Lord's. Their only law is the pleasure of their desires, and whatever they wish or choose they call holy. They consider whatever they dislike unlawful.<sup>4</sup>

Critics of the New Monastic Movement are right in holding these excerpts as a mirror on those of us who are exploring this emerging vocation to New Monasticism. We who are undertaking a discernment to what God might be doing within his Church must take these dangers seriously and face up to the wisdom found within them.

It is in response to these dangers that we call upon our mendicant heritage. Friars/mendicants adopt a lifestyle of poverty, travelling, and living in urban areas preaching, evangelisation and ministry, especially to the poor. The mendicant orders have a Rule and an abbot figure called by various names. The mendicants were released from the traditional interpretation of the Benedictine vow to stability giving them freedom to roam and preach where need is found.

The emergence of urban centers meant concentrated numbers of the homeless and the sick. This created problems for the parish churches who found themselves unable to address these issues. In response to this crisis, there emerged the new mendicant orders founded by Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226) and Dominic of Guzmán (c.1170-1234).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cassian, *The Conferences of Cassian*, "Conference 18: Conference of Abba Piamun on the three sorts of monks", Owen Chadwick (trans.), *Library of Christian Classics Volume XII: Western Asceticism* (London: SCM Press, 1958) p.268-269

<sup>4</sup> St Benedict, Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro (trans.), *The Rule of St Benedict*, "Chapter 1: the different kinds of monks and their customs" (New York: Doubleday, 1975) p.47

<sup>5</sup> "The Mendicant Orders", University of Saint Thomas–Saint Paul, Minnesota, 2003, <http://courseweb.stthomas.edu/medieval/francis/mendicant.htm>

It is this reconciling of the monastic and mendicant life which, we feel, may be the distinct charism for our time and this movement. It is in discovering, through conversation and dialogue, this new thing emerging amongst us that leads us to our distinctive vocation from the established traditional religious communities.

The religious life, for those in the New Monastic Movement, is a life of commitment to and through the process of community. We take seriously Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of life together, 'Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.'<sup>6</sup> and we want to affirm Joseph Myers' view that,

Organic community is not a product, not an end result. Organic community – belonging – is a process, a conversation... It is not the product of community that we are looking for. It is the process of belonging that we long for.<sup>7</sup>

Religious life is also a commitment to the prophetic ministry of preaching good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. In this way, New Monasticism is held in creative tension between the call to the contemplative life and to the active life; it is a commitment to both intentional community and mission under the authority of the historic vows of stability/chastity, conversion, poverty and obedience.

Authority, alongside a Rule of Life, is also key to our understanding of the religious life. We are rediscovering the crucial gift of godly authority and godly obedience and their countercultural message in a society where trust is utterly eroded - in society in general, and in authority in particular. We desire to experience and to offer a counter narrative of authority exercised within transparent interpersonal relationships.

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<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954) p15-16

<sup>7</sup> Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) p125

If we are aware of the dangers to slip into the sarabaitic way of life, forming our own Rule around our comfort and pleasure, then we are also aware of a deeper danger of following the gyrate monks.

All their lives they wander in different countries staying in various monasteries for three or four days at a time. They are restless, servants to the seductions of their own will and appetites.<sup>8</sup>

It is within this spirit that we are tempted to move from one community to another seeking our own satisfaction rather than subjecting ourselves, in humility, to the obedience to an authority. In a consumerist culture our investment in a community can be used, consciously or sub-consciously, as currency. If parts of the life together gets too difficult we move elsewhere. No part of God's Church is immune from this and many of our communities embrace those who identify as 'de-church'. We acknowledge our own struggles with these thought patterns and temptations and the difficult and painful tension that must be found between staying or leaving a community. New Monastic communities are seeking to readdress the balance that consumerism has brought into our life of faith with a renewed emphasis on obedience and authority. We know, from experience, that this life of obedience to authority is tough in the 21st century but we know that the challenge is there to train us in the life of faith, following Jesus' model of life as obedient to the point of death on a cross.

In conclusion, we believe that New Monasticism is a movement of the Spirit that reminds the Church of God of the integral role the consecrated life plays in discipleship and mission. It draws from the monastic tradition of cloistered life in search of God and the mendicant tradition of the apostolic call in search of the least, last and lost. Our understanding of the religious life is an explicit, lived out commitment to a Rule of Life which outlines how we interpret the Gospel for our age and practices that will enable us to live it out in our communities.

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict, RB 1:10-11 (New York: Doubleday, 1975) p.47