

Home Retreat on the Monastic Vows

5 September 2020

This short talk provides a reflection on the monastic vows of stability, conversatio morum and obedience and their possible significance for the life of lay Christians.

Introduction

The next day as John stood there again with two of his disciples, Jesus went past, and John looked towards him and said, ‘Look, there is the lamb of God.’ And the two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, ‘What do you want?’ They answered, ‘Rabbi’ – which means teacher – ‘where do you live?’ He replied, ‘Come and see;’ so they went and saw where he lived and stayed with him that day. (John 1:35-39)

This call to ‘come and see’, or as we also hear it expressed in the Gospel to ‘follow me’, is addressed to all of us, Christian believers responding in faith and doing their best to allow God in Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit, to shape their lives, as they seek to grow in holiness that ultimately they might come to union with God.

The monastic life is nothing other than the Christian life, though it does of course take a particular form and is defined by the vows of stability, *conversatio morum* and obedience, which monks and nuns take as a means of dedicating themselves to God, building on what was begun in them in baptism.

The Vows and their Meaning for Monastics

Through vowing stability, the monk or nun becomes a member of a particular Christian monastic community. The vow does not necessarily imply permanent residence in a given location. So, for example, a monk might go away from the

monastery to study or to undertake some particular work of the community, say in a dependent house or in a parish, but his home remains the same: he returns to it; it is where his community life, his monastic family you might say, has its centre, its home. It is the vow that is peculiar to monasticism, binding the members of a community to each other through all eventualities, as together they make their journey of discipleship to the Lord.

The term *conversatio morum* is difficult to translate into English, and for this reason when monks take their vows they promise *conversatio morum* in Latin. Different suggested translations have been offered, such as the apparently obvious ‘conversion of life’ or the older ‘conversion of manners’, but these seem a little weak. Perhaps somewhat better is ‘fidelity to monastic living’ inasmuch as this short phrase grasps something vital, in the sense of life-giving, about the meaning of this vow, as it is an active fidelity to Christ that this vow serves. The Christian life, the monastic life, is a journey, and we are asked each day to renew our commitment to it and to grow spiritually: to recognise where we have failed and to repent; to renew our faith; to commit ourselves afresh to the search for God; and, for monastics, to dedicate ourselves in faith to the path of monastic living, which includes evangelical poverty and chaste celibacy. This vow captures both the sense of the need for continual repentance and conversion, combined with a fidelity to the practices and disciplines of the monastic life; it captures the dynamic of the life of faith, of the monastic life, through which over time we become conformed to the image of God in Jesus Christ; and in this, of course, we find our fulfilment and a very great joy.

The vow of obedience is ultimately a vow of obedience to God, though of course for the monk or nun the vow in this life finds its expression in obedience to the Abbot. A little care is needed in thinking about what this vow really means. Whilst it may well include accepting uncongenial work for the good of the community or some restrictions on what one might be able to do in a given set of circumstances, it is not an unthinking, blind – or even slavish – obedience, of the

type that would simply infantilise an adult. When it is remembered that the word ‘obedience’ comes from the same Latin root as the word to ‘listen’, then it is possible to think of this vow as an aid to discernment, to listening for the voice of God in one’s life, and trying not to give in to the impulses of self-will, which can so often be prompted by a sense of one’s own importance or desire for pleasure, and ultimately leads one away from giving oneself up to God and finding one’s true fulfilment in Him alone.

The Vows and a Possible Meaning of them for Lay Christians

Now, it goes without saying that a life lived according to these vows within the monastic cloister looks somewhat different from the life of the vast majority of Christian believers; and yet, distinct though this way of following Jesus may be, inasmuch as it is a following of Christ, a response to his call to ‘come and see’, it can, and does, have meaning for those who are not monastics, but who nevertheless share the same grace of baptism. It is in its essence the Christian life, albeit in a particular form, and this necessarily overlaps with the life of other Christians. Indeed, this has been the experience of countless Christian believers, who over the centuries have been drawn to monasteries, without experiencing a need to join the monastic community, finding within these communities spiritual nourishment and encouragement for the living of their faith, and appropriating something of the Benedictine charism into their lives.

The vow of *conversatio morum* encapsulates what lies at the heart of the Christian vocation, namely to allow oneself to become conformed to Christ. Monastics respond to this call in a very particular way, but the call – what Vatican II termed ‘The Universal Call to Holiness’ – is the same for all of us; and although we each have our own journey to make in the particular circumstances of our lives, we are all invited through the Holy Spirit into the heart of the relationship of Father to Son in the overflowing and endless life of love that is the Trinity. A commitment

to this is something that all Christian believers share, and an understanding of the vow of *conversatio morum* can help us to recognise what is needed to travel this path to God, so that the promised interior conversion into the likeness of Christ can be brought about in us; a journey of conversion that is never complete in this life, even for one who has entered a monastery.

In the same way as monastics by virtue of their vow of stability belong to a particular community, a monastic family, and share together their journey to God, no one lives the Christian life singly. We know, of course, of those who live in very difficult circumstances and suffer from isolation, whilst others are fortunate to have the support of families and, to varying degrees, the support of their parishes and church communities, but, whatever our circumstances, we all belong as St Paul explained to the Body of Christ, and our baptism and our prayer unites us in Christ with all Christian believers. In other words, we all belong to Jesus, and salvation is not merely a matter of personal endeavour. As Christians, we speak of communion with God and through Him with each other – a communion given its greatest expression in the Eucharist.

And if we are not simply on our own, then we need to be able to listen and to respond in faith – to God and to others. Whilst there might not be within our families and communities the strict formalism of the structure and practice of obedience that can be found in a monastery, we all know from experience that simply seeking our own will does not lead to harmonious living and to happiness. In fact, we tend to find that it is in listening to others and serving each other's needs that we find a way of bringing about the good of everyone concerned, and that it is through this that we learn to do God's will and find fulfilment in our lives.

It is love that is the key, and in seeking genuinely to listen to the other and support their needs – to be obedient in this sense - we grow in this love, love of God and of others, becoming more like Christ. Jesus' summary of the Law is familiar to us:

And now a lawyer stood up and, to test him, asked, ‘Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?’ He replied, ‘*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.*’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have answered right, do this and life is yours.’ (Luke 10:25-28)

So, ‘Do this, and life is yours.’ What a promise! Or, to put it differently, ‘Allow the Holy Spirit so to work in your life, as to bring about that *conversatio* by which you will be conformed to the image of Jesus, and drawn into the heart of the Father.’ For the monastic, the response to Jesus’ call to follow him takes a particular form and is consecrated by the profession of monastic vows. But both the call and the response arise from our common deepest human need, created as we are in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Christ; and in the meaning of the vows, and how they are to be lived, we can see echoes of the lives of all of us, finding some guidance in how we respond to God’s call in the particular circumstances of our own life.

For St Benedict, this life of *conversatio* was a particular way of living the Christian life; and his *Rule* continues to provide the spiritual vision of the life lived by Benedictine monks and nuns today. It is St Benedict’s spiritual wisdom, combined with his recognition of the need to adapt to changing times and circumstances, that has helped to ensure the longevity of the *Rule* and the way of life – both inside and outside the cloister - based upon it.

Suggestions

For those who would like to reflect a little more on the meaning and possible relevance to their own lives of the monastic vows of stability, *conversatio morum* and obedience, some texts are offered below, as are some questions for reflection.

Selected texts

Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.

(Rule of St Benedict Prologue 45-49)

If after due reflection he promises to observe everything and to obey every command given him, let him then be received into the community. But he must be well aware that, as the law of the rule establishes, from this day he is no longer free to leave the monastery, nor to shake from his neck the yoke of the rule which, in the course of so prolonged a period of reflection, he was free either to reject or to accept.

When he is to be received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience. This is done in the presence of God and his saints to impress on the novice that if he ever acts otherwise, he will surely be condemned by the one he mocks.... [F]rom that day he will not have even his own body at his disposal. (*RSB* 58: 13-18 & 25)

Such a man who so promises is one who has heard the voice of the Lord calling out to him, '*Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?* (Ps 33: 13)' and in his desire for 'true and eternal life' has given the answer, 'I do.' (*RSB* Prologue 15-17) After a period of discernment and testing in all patience, he has begun to learn to listen with the ear of his heart (*RSB* Prologue 1), and has understood that God is calling him to seek Him earnestly, is calling him into a

deeper and live-giving relationship with Him that will not so much fulfil as transform him, enabling him to see beyond his own narrow horizons, expanding his heart so that as he progresses in the monastic 'way of life and in faith, [he] shall run on the path of God's commandments, [his] heart overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.' (RSB Prologue 49). 'What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life.' (RSB Prologue 19-20)

In the Western monastic tradition, there is a vow of conversion of life: that is the obligation of continual conversion.... It means remaining in the attitude of one who is repeatedly beginning again, opening ourselves continually, as if for the very first time, to the loving gaze of God which gives us our existence. (*The Wound of Love: a Carthusian Miscellany*, pp. 167 & 169)

For the Lord, obedience is not a constraint that goes against his very nature. On the contrary, for him, obedience is returning to the roots of his being, as a child of God; it is drawing from the source of life: being the Son of the Father, and being the one whose obedience is perfect, are, for him, identical.... There is nothing theoretical about the obedience of Jesus. It is quite simply a relationship of trust in someone. To obey means to turn our heart in trust towards the heart of another who loves us. (*The Wound of Love: a Carthusian Miscellany*, p. 188)

Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: *They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other* (Rom 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body and behaviour, and

earnestly competing in obedience with one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life. (*RSB* 72)

Questions for Reflection

In what ways have I heard the voice of the Lord calling to me in my life and how have I tried to respond to this call?

In what ways am I helped to maintain my fidelity to Christ?

How well am I able to listen to God and to others?

To what extent do I serve God in serving the needs of others?

St Benedict teaches that, 'Your way of acting must be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else.' What does this mean for me?