

## Monastic Values in an Alien World: One Person's Experience\*

(Concluding Remarks at the Abbey Center Conference)

---

*Rembert Weakland, O.S.B.*

Any conference of this sort could well become just theoretical and abstract. If one would but discuss what monastic values are like and how they should inform the culture of the future, it would have a certain value in itself. But, to make the conference fruitful, one would also have to see these values embodied in people and not just represented in abstract concepts. It is people who carry with them values and who, by the way they live and act, build their values into the fabric of a new culture.

This quest of how monastic values leave the monastery and go into the world, as it were, was not for me personally a purely theoretical matter. It was not one where I could wait for an answer as I just sat back and watched. When I was taken from the monastic milieu to become a bishop, I had to ask that question in the concrete. What part of my monastic training and values would go with me into the new kind of ministry I had been asked to accept? I had to ask the question of how to keep the integrity of the first fifty years of my life intact, as I faced the new tasks I was asked to assume. Such a question was not theoretical but very practical for me.

A conference such as this one awakened again old struggles and old dilemmas. I will try to recall them now and share them with you. Perhaps in the story of one person's quest some general lines can be found for others and even for the future culture itself.

\* This essay was presented during the October 22-25, 1993 conference sponsored by The Abbey Center For The Study Of Ethics And Culture, Inc. at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky.

The question I asked myself at first was, of course, what monastic practices, what externals if you wish, do I want to take with me, to keep as a bishop. At first I admit that I concentrated on externals, elements like the Liturgy of the Hours with most of its parts recited daily and squeezed in at the right time, a sense of community that resembled the one I had left behind. I did not consider wearing the monastic habit because I felt that the priests and even laity of my diocese might think I was going to make monks out of them. I can truly say I was only interested in myself and my own transformation, not in leading others to any kind of monastic spirituality, but I did not want to give a false impression. In fact, I did just the opposite: I tried on purpose not to impose any kind of monastic values on them and was very careful in talking about my monastic background. Later I learned that they wished for me to share insights of my monastic spirituality and enjoyed stories of the monastery.

But I soon learned that transferring such externals into a new atmosphere would not work, as quaint and romantic as it all seemed. It was, however, artificial and heavy and seemed to give one a kind of spiritual indigestion. So, for example, if I had had a long and exciting confirmation ceremony, it did not seem helpful to recite Vespers afterwards to maintain a sense of monastic continuity. Night after night in May there would be a celebration of some sort, generally Mass celebrated with extravagant solemnity because the bishop was at the parish, a rare occasion for them that demanded many extras. Adding my monastic practices on top of that became too perfunctory for me. Also, it may have seemed "romantic" to remember how things were in the monastery during Advent or Lent—seasons I had loved there—but I realized with my schedule as a bishop I could no longer duplicate those past experiences, as grateful as I was for having had them.

After a bit I gave up such heaviness and had to rethink what my monastic values really were. That was a troublesome period of searching for meaning in two worlds that did not seem to coalesce. Then I found myself going back to the *Rule* of Benedict and specifically to the Prologue and the very beginning of the *Rule*. I realized that there was a deeper level to the monastic "thing." One could call it the "search for God." Benedict asks if the novice is truly seeking God. That must come first. He then points out in the Prologue a listening process for each day. The monk must be listening for God's presence throughout the entire day. That is done in the Liturgy of the Hours,

but it is also pursued through all aspects of the monastic observance. I had to apply that idea of a search for God and of listening to God's voice to my own particular circumstances. I could no longer listen with the monks and to the abbot, but I could continue, I soon found out, to listen to God's voice in other ways.

As a bishop I knew I had to listen to the voice of God as the Holy Spirit spoke to the faithful of my diocese. I had to listen to my priests at the Priest Council meetings, to the Pastoral Council and to all the laity, to all those many who came to meetings and who sought to speak with me or who wrote to me about their cares and anxieties, their joys and concerns. I had, in other words, to create new listening posts, or rather to recognize them in the day's routine that was now mine.

My listening during prayer also had to change. I had to listen to God's voice during those many confirmations, church dedications, ecumenical prayer services, and the like. These new moments of prayer were not as systematic and as liturgically correct and proper as they would have been in the monastery, but they were what God was giving me as a bishop. They were not neat and ordered, but they were real to me and vital to my spiritual life.

So, for example, if I had a long ceremony in a parish, a youthful and exuberant confirmation, let us say, I no longer felt a need to say Vespers. It was better, I realized, to reflect prayerfully on that first event and let its spirit pervade my prayer life. If we were praying before a meeting, as boring as the meeting appeared to be and as unenthusiastic as I may have been to attend, or even as amateurish as the composed prayer may have seemed to me, I realized that it was important for me to be present fully to that prayer and not to worry about a proper monastic midday prayer.

The breviary became a flexible skeleton to fill in where the programmed and often unbalanced liturgical life of a bishop had vacancies or blank spots. Strangely enough, however, it became even more important to me than when I was living the monastic routine.

In addition, I had to rediscover my music. It may seem strange, but music is now more important than when I was in the community. It is not that I play that much, but the little I do is life-giving. Listening to music, like reading good literature, is something one finds time for less often but savors even more than ever. Somehow God speaks there too.

I also saw that it was not necessary for me to create a false com-

munity around me as if it were a pseudo-monastery. People had their own lives to live and would move on. Change had to come about. But I did learn how important return visits to my monastery were. Sinking those roots again, even if only occasionally, seemed to be enough, or at least all that I would be permitted.

I found that one had to find new support groups that fit the new vocation, that they had to be among all age groups and especially among couples my age and with my general Church background and spiritual history. These friends are important for major feasts and for those moments when one knows that there is need for sustaining powers other than one's own.

Somehow one changes from just having fellow monks on the same search to recognizing all one's fellow Christians on the same larger quest. I wish I had been able to recognize that fact when I was a monk. I believe I would have looked upon my confreres in a different fashion.

One area that I have not solved yet is that of poverty. It is not clear to me how my monastic background should enter into a more simple lifestyle. Benedictines usually live in big buildings that are well appointed and that have a sense of architecture and of the plastic arts that satisfies. They do not have a history of penury nor of ugliness as a substitute for poverty. The right use of things is emphasized rather than the non-use. This question as a bishop has troubled me for a decade and a half. Perhaps before I retire I will solve it. Since my life is so full of appointments and engagements outside of the house and since the house and office are not the center of my activity, I do not pay that much attention to them. They are oases that help sustain me in the larger task that I must accomplish.

I have also realized that often I used "community" as an excuse for not taking care of my own needs, as most people must do. I have decided to learn to do much of my cooking when I can, to work outside on the grounds, and so on. I think such independence is also very Benedictine. My schedule prohibits me from doing these chores in a sufficient way, but the intent is there and sometimes even the action.

Perhaps the hardest adaptation has come in the area of *lectio divina*. I do not find that I can open up for myself the large periods of time that I had found in the monastery. In my new world I realized that one had to learn to pray more like Benedict says, short prayers from the heart and not in many words. I would hate to say that one

has to learn to pray quicker, but there is a certain need to take advantage of the many moments of silence that do occur in a day and hope they add up to something more substantial in the long run. I have found that easier than I thought I would.

To sum up this experience, I would say that I have learned that the monastic quest is one of searching for God and not of the externals of the monastic routine and that each person must do that search in one's own environment and circumstances. That search involves the monastic means of prayer and work, of community, of poverty, and personal prayer, all adapted to the new world. What changes is often the balance and the particular means that one can use. But the search, indeed, goes on and gives unity to one's life and to life around oneself.