

The Death of a Holy Terror

The Strange Story of Frere Pascal

By **Thomas Merton**

The following article first appeared in the June, 1967 issue of Jubilee (see previous article) and has not been subsequently reprinted. It not only profiles a fascinating figure whose life story bears some resemblances to Merton's own, but it sheds an interesting light on the crisis of renewal in monasticism with which Merton was so intimately concerned. It is published here with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.

On March 12, 1966, a French Trappist lay brother who had died of cancer was buried in an African leper colony, to the sound of drums, followed to his grave by the lepers among whom he had spent the last and evidently the happiest months of his life. Frère Pascal, in the world Jacques Bourgoint, had been an unusual person, indeed rather a famous figure in the Paris of the twenties where he had moved in the circle of artists and writers who surrounded Jean Cocteau, frequented *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, and promoted a surrealist style of life, of writing and of painting. In fact, Bourgoint, himself an artist, was portrayed as the hero of Cocteau's novel *Les Enfants Terribles* (in English *The Holy Terrors* – published by New Directions). He entered the Church in the twenties some time after Cocteau, with Jacques Maritain as his godfather, and then abandoned the Parisian art world to live with another artist in the South of France. At the age of forty-two he became a Cistercian (Trappist) laybrother at the Abbey of Cîteaux, and after seventeen years there, went to a Cistercian foundation in Africa, with the intention of leaving the Order to work in a leper colony. He eventually got what he desired, even though his superiors did everything they could to dissuade him. He reached the leper colony of Mokolo, Cameroon, in June 1965, about nine months before his death. Such is the bare outline of a story which is being written up as a book by Georges Cattai, and the book will draw on numerous long letters which Frère Pascal left behind him. Meanwhile, in Paris, his collection of drawings and other art work of his own and of the Cocteau circle, was auctioned off in Paris for the benefit of the lepers. Frère Pascal died in his sixty-second year, on March 11, 1966.

What is behind the story of Frère Pascal? It has already fallen into a stereotyped pattern, with a certain distortion of the time-perspective, almost as if he had jumped from Montmartre to the Cameroon with a brief pause in a monastery, like Charles de Foucauld. The comparison with Charles de Foucauld is of course obvious, since the latter did in fact spend a short time first in a Trappist monastery in southern France, then in a Trappist foundation in Syria, before becoming a hermit living in close contact with the Tuareg natives in the Sahara. In either case the itinerary led from a contemplative life in France, in a traditional monastic setting, to a life of poverty, solitude and service among utterly disinherited natives. In either case we find an unusual, yet perfectly "normal" development of the monastic charism. In either case we find that this development appears to be disconcerting, and that it is either tacitly excused (by contemplatives) or praised as a sign that "action is superior to contemplation." This latter seems to be the current interpretation of Frère Pascal's vocation to the lepers. Some writers have said, in so many words, he "finally saw the light and got out of that stupid monastery." As if his going to an

African leper colony were in some sense a repudiation of his monastic vocation and not a fulfillment of it. This simply goes to show that conventional thought, whether “monastic” or “apostolic,” is not yet prepared to cope with the charisma of freedom which is really of the essence of the monastic vocation.

Frère Pascal was one of many, very many, monks who have been plunged into suffering, self-questioning and conflict in the monastic crisis of the past ten years. Many of them have left – whether to go forward along the line of their monastic vocation, or to go back and start over again on some other track. This is a sign that the forces of vocational charisma and spirit which the institution seeks to “contain” (if not in some cases actually to suppress) are still very much alive. This of course is part of the same crisis of institutionalism and of authority which rocks the entire Church, as the Reformation finally works its way completely to the heart of Roman Catholicism. Frère Pascal is, in the end, one of the fruits of crisis and renewal in the Cistercian Order, even though he ended up outside the institutional framework of the Order (while still juridically a professed member of it). His “evasion” to the lepers coincided with other similar “breaks” – of Dutch Trappists to a small experimental “working” foundation, of American Trappists to experimental foundations or to hermitages.

Frère Pascal is one of those who seems to have found what he was looking for. In the leper village of Mokolo, with its three hundred adult lepers and many children and out-patients to be cared for, he was at last as happy as a restless and struggling man can be on this earth. He lived in his hut like the lepers, quietly praying and working as a sort of lay monk and resident of the colony. He did secretarial work for the priest who ran the place, and was setting up an orthopaedic shoe shop for the lepers with bad feet when he died. He loved the lepers and they loved him. “I wish I had been born among them,” he said and added, “I feel more at home here than I ever felt anywhere . . . nowhere have I had such peace . . . never have prayer and the service of others been so sweet.”

Yet he had also been happy for many years at Cîteaux. Jacques Bourgoignat became a Cistercian at the age of forty-two, at Christmas 1947, and five years later Jacques Maritain was writing letters about Frère Pascal’s solemn profession, his happiness working “with his cows,” his peace in the simple, hidden life of a brother. The picture of Cistercian life in the early fifties was still what it had been for centuries. It was an austere, demanding, stable, traditional monastic life with its rules and observances which had existed for centuries and which no one imagined changing except in slight details – perhaps to get back more closely to the twelfth century and the original founders. (The great radical in the Cistercian family at that time was Dom Alexis Presse, Abbot of Boquen and friend of the Lindberghs, who had succeeded in restoring the exact daily horarium and regime of the twelfth century.) One might question the validity of this or that religious practice, but no one questioned the established structure of the Order or the accepted ideals of medieval monastic spirituality. The only concern was to get out from under the incubus of De Rancé’s (Jansenistic) rigorism and return to the more “humanistic” outlook of the twelfth-century fathers.

Toward the end of the fifties, the ground swell of monastic renewal took the form of conflict over the “question of the brothers.” It was, to put it simply, a question of integration. There were two classes of people in the monastery, one of which did not even rate the title of “monk.” The history of the brothers is too complex to go into here, but the fact remains that they were considered *laymen*, and some of the old brothers who appreciated the special quality of their vocation, rather relished the fact. They were simply workmen who lacked certain privileges and also were free of certain responsibilities, and they enjoyed a somewhat less regimented and harassed life than the “choir monks.” However, the fact remains that they were “second-class citizens” in the

monastery and, especially in Europe, the tendency may have been to treat them as servants. The drive to integrate and equalize the two classes and make them “all monks” was something that obsessed Frère Pascal, and I remember having some correspondence with him about it eight or nine years ago. At that time he was so upset about this problem that his Abbot gave him leave of absence and he went to spend a few weeks, or perhaps months, with the Maritains in Alsace.

At any rate, when the new wave really broke in the Order, and when a lot of people’s canoes turned over on them, Frère Pascal was one of those who suffered most and there is some indication that his monastic community found him, on his bad days, still something of an *enfant terrible*. At that time, several new foundations were being made in Africa, and Frère Pascal finally got permission to go to the new monastery of Grandselve in the Cameroon where he felt that the monastic poverty would be more authentic, and where he also definitely hoped to plan his next step – which turned out to be the leper colony. Frère Pascal was, then, one of scores, even hundreds of men who became monks in the late forties and early fifties, and found, by the early sixties (if they had not found it before) that the Cistercian Order was not going where they themselves believed they had to go. Frère Pascal described it as a kind of spiritual hemorrhage, in which he felt that his life was becoming so unreal that his faith itself was running out on him. Again, a common experience in this time of crisis when the ostensible claims that have hitherto sustained a certain type of structured institutional life, suddenly collapse beyond all hope of repair.

Nevertheless, the story of Frère Pascal’s vocation cannot be thoroughly understood if we do not go back to its beginning: to the wild days of Paris in the twenties. Here, of course, it is difficult to judge a man’s real life through the eyes of someone else who has written him into a novel. But it must be said in all fairness that those who knew Bourgoingt at the time assure us that *Les Enfants Terribles* gives a very exact picture of him. It will be simple to trace its outlines here.

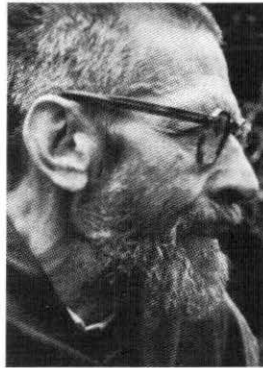
Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, fifteen and seventeen respectively, are left orphaned by alcoholic parents. They continue to live in their parents’ apartment. The boy (Paul – i.e. Jacques Bourgoingt) is an invalid, and the sister, with whom he lives in a rather wildly emotional symbiotic relationship, takes care of him. Eventually another teenage boy moves in with them, and when the sister becomes a fashion model to earn their living, another model moves in as well. They all pile up together in one room which is papered with pictures of athletes, movie stars and murderers, and here they live, sleep, fight, insult each other and generally carry on like all crazy kids who manage to get on their own in this offbeat kind of way. The pattern includes shoplifting, speeding around in cars, a great deal of subliminal sexuality but a very considerable innocence in practice. When I read the book thirty years ago I got the impression that they took drugs, perhaps because in the end Paul, the hero, nearly kills himself with some strange African poison. But they were not addicts, and Cocteau makes the point that they did not need to be. They could turn on without drugs, and their means for this was called “the Game” which they played together in “the Room.” In other words it was a result of their bizarre, emotional, precocious and innocent pattern of relationships with each other. But this pattern ended up by being fatal at least to one of them. The sister commits suicide at the end, and as a matter of fact so did Bourgoingt’s real sister in 1929.

One does not need to have any profound knowledge of monastic vocations and formation to realize that the kind of character structure which Cocteau depicts here is not suited to the prolonged restraints and rigidities which are still considered essential to a “strict” religious life. Yet the fault is not entirely on the side of the “problem child.”

Needless to say, the example of these “holy terrors” is instructive because, though it was

unusual to find teenagers living like this forty years ago, it is much more common today. The Bourgoins were charming, feckless, foul-mouthed, spontaneous, uncontaminated by scruples, yet tormented by emotional doubts, sensitivities, hopes and despairs. Cocteau says of them: "Indolent, frivolous, they were the living refutation of the Puritan ideal, the living exemplars of these words of the philosopher: vital essences, volatile, indifferent, drinkers at the sacred fount . . . uncontainable in any social framework." For such beings, even after the most profound conversion, a rigidly authoritarian social existence in which everything is regulated by the clock and by abstract principles must in the end prove deadening. When we look again at "the Room" and the half-wild creatures dwelling in it, we find much that is unhealthy, perhaps, but we also find one thing that is very important: an authentic, even though unbalanced, *instinct for community*. The complete spontaneity with which these kids expressed their emotions – even though the spontaneity was seldom edifying – kept them fully open to each other. Whatever may have been wrong with them, and much was wrong, nevertheless there was a warmth and a human authenticity that one too often looks for vainly in religious communities. Sometimes one feels that the religious life has gradually become organized precisely as a *defense* against every pretext for real openness and for the expression of genuine human emotion. It is therefore very ironic that such departures from the monastic life are often excused on the grounds that they "could not adapt to the common life" – in other words that such people are incapable of true communal existence. Perhaps that was what Frère Pascal went to the leper colony to find: *a community*.

No one can say how long he could have tolerated life in this place where he died so happy, and it would not be fair to ask the question. It was enough that he went as far as he did, from "the Room" in Montmartre to the leper's hut in the Cameroon, and that somehow, in so doing, he came around in a full circle, or rather a spiral, finding the kind of bizarre community and love he had started with, but on a much higher level now, in Christ.



Frère Pascal

As for the seventeen years he spent in the monastery, there is no need to argue that they were wasted. Yet at the same time, monasteries must face the problem that, in their present state, and with their present aims, they cannot provide a lifetime vocation for any but a few specially constructed people. It does not have to be that way, and monastic renewal will surely demand some examination of new and more flexible ways of relating to the world of today and to the people in it.