

NEW MONASTICISM: WHAT IT HAS TO SAY TO TODAY'S CHURCH by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (*Brazos Press*, 2008) Pp. 147, £8.99

CLOISTER TALKS: LEARNING FROM MY FRIENDS THE MONKS by Jon M. Sweeney (*Brazos Press*, 2009) Pp. 157, £8.99

New monasticism has a much looser relationship to monasticism than many other related groups and movements in the contemporary Church. While enthusiasts of new monasticism may be oblates of a particular monastery, they are not necessarily so. They may not even read books on monastic spirituality or have ever visited a monastery. What they are inspired by is monastic community and counter-culture, though often in less recognisably monastic forms, such as the Catholic Worker and Koinonia Farm in the American South. The label 'new monasticism' is taken from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but the idea itself is derived from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Wilson-Hartgrove, p. 37). The movement's self-definition or aims, '12 Marks of a New Monasticism' (p. 39), could describe a traditional monastery were it not for the mention of married couples. Its drive to relocate to the 'abandoned places of Empire', however, owes more inspiration to the friars' urban ministry than to the monks' reclamation of waste- and marsh-land. Another difference from traditional monastic practice is in the replacement of individual and communal poverty with sharing and generosity, as described in the Acts of the Apostles.

New Monasticism reads at times like a manifesto, sometimes like an autobiography, and at other times like a sermon. The author is an ordained Baptist minister as well as a writer. Some of his other books include *To Baghdad and Beyond: How I Got Born Again in Babylon* (2006), *Free to Be Bound: Beyond the Color Line* (2008), and *God's Economy: Redefining the Health and Wealth Gospel* (2009). The author certainly communicates well and clearly, with fresh perspectives, backed up by knowledge and experience. His knowledge comes across well in the third chapter here, for example, which gives highlights of monastic history from St Anthony of Egypt and St Benedict, to St Francis and the Anabaptists.

His experience comes across in the fourth chapter on recovering the ecclesial dimension of Christianity. While its basic idea may differ little from Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism* - 'Without the church, there's no chance of becoming holy' (p. 58) - *New Monasticism* is full of narrative, some of which includes the author's own experiences of reading the Bible in community as the story of a people. In particular Wilson-Hartgrove wants to get away from the idea that Christianity is only about the individual and God. Moreover, he underlines the necessity of the local church or parish community over and above para-church organisations. The book's experiential thrust becomes increasingly evident in the seventh chapter on peacemaking, where the author tells of his involvement in efforts to prevent capital punishment and of his subsequent defence speech in a court of law. At the same time, this chapter also reads like an extended sermon on Ephesians 2:14–18, which is quoted in full at its beginning.

The author's ability to communicate clearly and simply is evident in the eighth chapter, where he discusses the grace and truth necessary to make community. He says that community is like a garden: no matter how much you cultivate the soil, water the seed, and prevent it from being choked by weeds or blighted by frost, you cannot make it grow; you can only provide suitable conditions for its growth and wait. Community similarly takes much preparatory work and patience, but it is not the work of one individual. Lastly, Wilson-Hartgrove's fresh perspective is evident in his ecumenical vision. He knows and appreciates other Christian individuals, other Christian churches, communities, and organisations, as well as their traditions. He cuts through the partisanship of left- and right-wing

politics, conservative and liberal Christianity, Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, embraces white and black people, and despite the very American perspective of the book, his vision is much broader, partly due to his travels in the Middle East.

Sweeney's *Cloister Talks*, by contrast, lacks the prophetic thrust and dynamism of *New Monasticism*. While both books are heavily autobiographical, Sweeney's is a far more personal and private journey, with none of Wilson-Hartgrove's freshness of perspective. Whereas Wilson-Hartgrove is promoting a vision and a movement loosely inspired by monasticism, Sweeney is popularising ancient monastic wisdom for a contemporary audience:

'I have learned so much from the monastics that I feel the need to sit down and try and distill it. I have found that the best way to communicate their wisdom is through stories, episodes, and portions of conversations that have happened on quiet afternoons in the monastery or while walking together outside: cloister talks' (p. 20). If that was all Sweeney's book was and sought to be, then it would be a rather pedestrian example of the genre. There are numerous other books that do it better. What sets Sweeney's apart is his own 'monastic' journey. He realises as he writes the book that being a monk is not about running away from one's problems but facing them head on. It is only as he does this that he begins to reconcile his desire to be a monk with his commitment to his wife.

Sweeney is a frequent visitor to Trappist monasteries in America, particularly the ones in Massachusetts, Georgia, and Kentucky. He claims the Trappist spiritual writers Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating as friends, though his main conversation partners in these 'cloister talks' are less renowned but equally aged monks. Sweeney is a Protestant with Catholic sympathies yet he does not become a Catholic himself. He relates at the beginning of the book how in 1986 he was working as a missionary in the Philippines, supposedly to convert Filipino Catholics into Conservative Baptists. Yet he was interested in Catholic spirituality, reading Thomas Merton's books, which, together with a friend's suggestion, finally impelled him to visit a monastery in 1987.

In keeping with its stated aim of presenting 'cloister talks', Sweeney's book is full of dialogue, which makes it extremely easy to read. But the book has other less readable features. Each chapter begins with an example of monastic sign language, but in words rather than in gesture. Most chapters contain bits of shaded text, as in a textbook, that explain various things relating to monasticism, such as the layout of a monastery or the difference between active and contemplative orders. One of the strengths of Sweeney's book is also one of its greatest weaknesses. For Sweeney is an outsider, neither a monk nor a Catholic, presenting monastic spirituality to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Because of this, he makes many statements that, if not exactly false, are not entirely true. He describes the monastic title 'Dom' as Latin for 'Father' (p. 54) and John Cassian as a 'French monk' (p. 112), calls the very common practice of concelebration 'an unusual Trappist custom' (p. 81) and the *Cloud of Unknowing* 'the most important mystical text for a Trappist' (p. 82).

Each of these books in its own way tells something of what monasticism is about, whether lived by Trappist monks or by new monastic communities. Sweeney shows that monastic life is profoundly unsettling; it is not meant to be comfortable. Wilson-Hartgrove shows that, while monasticism in the Christian Church has been around for centuries and carries quite a lot of baggage, it is, nevertheless, possible to adapt monastic practices and traditions in new and diverse ways. Monasticism is about community, about sharing, about loving one another. Above all, monasticism is about making space in our lives so that God can work in us and through us.

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