

The Monastery as a school of love

The Monastery is a school and what we have to learn in it is love.

Thomas Merton.

Why do people go to monasteries; the ones who don't want to be monastics? They go for peace and for prayer, to be in T S Eliot's words on Little Gidding which was as near to a monastic foundation 17th century England could get, 'to kneel where prayer has been made valid.' At least I suspect that those would be the two most common answers if visitors to monasteries were polled yet what is behind prayer and peacefulness, the engine if you like, is love. In July I heard Sister Magdalen of the Monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights give a talk on 'The Monastery as a School of Universal Love' to the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies. She started with the above quote from Thomas Merton and the love Merton is talking about is agape.

Love was famously defined by C S Lewis in four categories which he called eros, agape, friendship (*philia*) and affection (*storge*). Sadly our contemporary secular world emphasises eros to the almost exclusion of the others. One sees this in the oft-repeated assertion that nineteenth century people as diverse as Cardinal Newman and Emily Dickinson were secretly, even unconsciously, in love with their friends because they wrote them rather passionate letters by modern standards, and we are uncomfortable with that belonging to anything other than eros because our understanding of love has narrowed.

The message from all media is that without the love affair there is no love. So why do people go to monasteries instead of spending their time more profitably on dating internet sites? The answer "Because God is love" is obvious but without definition that can easily turn into Don Cupitt's "If God is love then love is God" which seems a rather sentimental way of being an atheist.

God is *agape* (1 Jn 4:8). When St John said, 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God,' the love was *agape* and when Christ Himself said, 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another,' the love was *agape*. This is the fundamental love of the New Testament, it is the one that makes the others possible, and is the greatest of them, 'And now abide faith, hope, love, these three but the greatest of these is love' (*agape*).

Sister Magdalen quoted Father Sophrony as saying that eros exists only within marriage, that friendship must be exclusive, that affection cannot be universal but that *agape* is unlimited. God is unlimited love and we are required to love one another with that same kind

of love. This is very difficult to be conscious of in the world under an avalanche of cares but it becomes very apparent in a monastery where everything is organised around this one thing.

A monastery is, to echo Lotty in 'Enchanted April', a novel that seems to be feeling its way past affection and eros to something more, "a tub of love." Now Lotty was talking about a castle in Italy but she was also talking about the rediscovery, or deeper discovery, of love *in a place set aside for it* and there her San Salvatore (the name is not a coincidence) and the monastery meet. The monastery is a school of love, a place where agape is continually practiced as a way to know God where, in Sister Magdalen's words, "other loves are renounced as distraction."

Mother Maria of Normanby said that part of becoming a monk or a nun is "never again choosing whom to love." She says of the monk, "People are only real to him because God creates them; the monk understands each one as the love of God wills him to be, as that which he essentially is, in God, is and whom God enabled to love." Monasteries are places where people are loved, not for abilities or fleeting qualities, but as *the love of God wills him to be*. The voracious 'me' so often forced by the outside world is temporarily silenced, the pressure to perform, to prove, to be individual without being different – in short all the influences of pop psychology – are removed and the pilgrim can simply "be in community" where true being in God is. God created us for communion with Him and with one and other; he created us to be co-lovers, "condiligentes", in the words of John Duns Scotus who while not Orthodox certainly was a monk and this is achieved tangibly in monasteries.

Monasteries are places of prayer, yes, but prayer is a means to love. Prayer enlargens the heart, said Sister Magdalen, which is why the monks and nuns are given hundreds, even thousands, of names to pray for because love is better than prayer. Prayer is a particular virtue but love embraces all virtues. And in love, said St Theodore the Studite, is the bond of peace. Love – agape – is the mother of both prayer and peace and a monastery restores love to its true place and purpose and that, if one has been thinking about love, and everyone does, is irresistible.

The monk's repentance brings great hope to others. It points a way to fulfilling love open to all in all situations; even in the midst of deepest failure and chaos inextricable, it still gives possibility without preparation, as it were without effort, to turn everything to fulfilment and gladness. The one thing needed for this is to love to the end, though unfulfilled, and to love the work above all. God gives us everything else, it comes, as it were, by itself.

Mother Maria of Normanby.

by Margaret Smythe