

Up from the catacombs

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

When Christianity finally became legal in the Roman Empire, Christians could profess their faith publicly without fear. They could move from the darkness of the catacombs into the bright sunlight.

The Christians could then build churches. Thanks to the generosity of imperial benefactors, they could move from small groups in homes to large congregations praying in grand basilicas.

This was a mixed blessing, however. Some of the sense the earlier Christians had of being a community — bonded together in their lives — was lost. And strange as it may seem, the larger the communities became, the less they stood out as witnesses to a different way of life.

Gradually groups of Christians concerned about this decided to band together in smaller religious communities. They simply wanted to live the Christian life as it had been lived for the first three centuries of Christianity. These communities gave witness to the world at large of what life could and should be according to gospel standards.

Actually, all Christians have this vocation: to give witness to Christ and Christian values in a bewildered, fragmented, lost world.

They have this vocation precisely as a people — God's people.

This was the vocation of the chosen people from the beginning. They were to be a sign to all humanity of God's presence and goodness.

In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, God's deliverance of his people from exile is seen as such a sign. "All who see them shall acknowledge them to be a race the Lord has blessed." (Isaiah 61:9)

The new community Jesus formed had the same mission. But keep in mind: This was not the mission of an elite corps. Very simply Jesus told them:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. They set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house." (Matthew 5:14-15)

St. Paul thought it was important for his communities to give witness to Christ and a Christian value system in a confused world.

The church is a sign of God's kingdom — of its presence and potential in human lives. After the early Christians came up from the catacombs, this was a challenge they faced: to continue to be the sign of what Jesus means.

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FOOD...

...for thought

Why would a lay woman — one whose work involves her full time with the roles of lay people in the church — write a book about the values of life in a monastery?

That is what Dolores Leckey did in a book titled "The Ordinary Way" (Crossroad). Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Laity.

Mrs. Leckey's focus is on the connections between life in a monastery and life in the homes of lay people. Interesting to note: She is not the only author with a current book on this subject.

Another who has written such a book is Trappist Father Basil Pennington of Spencer, Mass. His book is titled "A Place Apart" (Doubleday).

One view of monasteries — not found in these books — tends to regard them as basically irrelevant to lay people. Monks, while much admired, are thought to be involved in a separate and exclusive relationship with God that is unlike anything lay people who pursue careers, raise children and worry about next month's bills can expect to achieve.

But neither Mrs. Leckey nor Father Pennington finds monastic life irrelevant to lay people. In monastic life, Mrs. Leckey writes, one finds a way of "setting up a

household — Benedict's household of God." Certain qualities commonly valued by all those who want to grow as Christians are among monasticism's basic values, she thinks.

In a chapter on intimacy, Mrs. Leckey looks to the close bonds among those in a monastery. They hope that their very life together will generate growth and real happiness. It is similar for lay people in their communities — as friends, husbands and wives, parents and children, the author believes.

Again she looks to the value monks see in hospitality. Their expectation is that each visitor will be received as though Christ himself were being welcomed. But in every home, hospitality is key, she suggests — the hospitality of family members toward each other or toward guests.

In three of her other chapters, Mrs. Leckey connects the monastic values of play, solitude and prayer with the lives of the laity.

Some people think monastic life is irrelevant for the laity because, for them, it seems so impossible. But some current authors speak of monastic living as a sign — not of what is impossible for the laity, but of what some of the real possibilities are.

...for discussion

1. Life in a monastery and life in the homes of lay people bear certain resemblances, according to our writers. What are some of the resemblances — the common values — of monks and laity?

2. Hospitality is highly valued in the life of a monastery. How important is hospitality in the homes of lay people? Do you think family members need to be hospitable toward each other? Why? And what difference does hospitality toward others make in home life?

3. Friendship and community among those at home is valued by both monks and lay people. How do people living together at home contribute to each other's growth? What difference does this quality of a home make for Christians?

4. Father Robert Sherry tells of a conversation between two priests about their frustrations and insights on prayer. The article suggests the parishioners can be an important source of support for a priest's prayer life. Do you agree? If so, how?

SECOND HELPINGS

Practical insights about the links between monastic life and lay life can be found in "A Place Apart: Monastic Prayer and Practice for Everyone," by Trappist Father Basil Pennington. Chapters discuss such topics as fasting, friendship, obedience, peacemaking. Father Pennington advises lay people not to be concerned if they can't pray the entire Liturgy of the Hours as the monks do. "It is enough to pray what you can," he writes. He suggests that lay people might "prefer the Cistercian way." When Cistercians (Trappists) travel, he continued, they construct their own office from a Bible by choosing a hymn, a psalm, a reading and a prayer. The prayer may be quite spontaneous, arising from reflection on the biblical readings. (Doubleday, 245 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10167. \$12.95)

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Solle said.

"You know, Mike, the first month was like a release. I didn't have to prepare a homily every day. There were plenty of other priests around anxious to do it. But by the sixth week, I was starting to miss leading a group of familiar people each day in prayer. "I had to be away from it for a while to realize just how large a role the Mass plays in my life, my priesthood."

"That's great, Jerry. People expect more of a priest as a leader of prayer. Maybe we don't express how really important prayer is in our lives often enough."

"By the way" Father Dover said, "I've noticed that taking time for reflection gives me a lot more compassion for the human situation of people. It helps me appreciate their real concerns and gives me a lot more respect for the way they pray."

(The names of the priests in this story are fictional, although their conversation is true to life.)

(Father Sherry is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation.)

