

PENTECOST 1967

Dear Friends:

The main piece of news at this season is the ordination to the priesthood of my old friend Dan Walsh, formerly my professor of scholastic philosophy at Columbia. It was he who first told me that such a place as Gethsemani existed. For the past seven years he has been living here and teaching at the Abbey and at Bellarmine College (Louisville). The retiring Archbishop of Louisville, John A. Floersch, decided that Dan would make a good priest and got all the dispensations necessary to ordain him without further delay. Dan is in his sixties. The ordination took place in Louisville on Pentecost Sunday and was very moving. Dan has so many friends and students, and his ordination became for all of us a kind of providential happening that reminded us that unpredictable changes can occur. I think everyone is looking for a less systematic and less rigid kind of Church structure, something that leaves room for a more charismatic kind of religion, and this gave some of us a small glimmer of hope. I had the joy of concelebrating with Fr Walsh at the Louisville Carmel (where he has also given some talks) and that too was a real happening. The contemplative nuns entered into it with a great deal of very authentic joy that did one good.

There is everywhere a kind of hunger for the grace and light of the Spirit in forms that can be actually experienced. One hears a great deal of movements that can be called in a broad sort of sense "Pentecostal" even though they do not restrict themselves simply to far out Protestant groups by any means. I am often asked what I think about all this. I cannot really judge from hearsay, but at any rate the phenomenon represents a real spiritual hunger, just as the craze for LSD represents a real hunger for experience -- I hasten to add that I don't think an LSD trip is the answer for most of us! Personally, my own life and vocation have their own peculiar dimension which is a little different from all this. I have always tended more toward a deepening of faith in solitude, a "desert" and "wilderness" existence in which one does not seek special experiences. But I concur with these others in being unable to remain satisfied with a formal and exterior kind of religion. Nor do I think that a more lively liturgy is enough. Worship and belief have become ossified and rigid, and so has the religious life in many cases. The idea that "the Church" does all your thinking, feeling, willing, and experiencing for you is, to my mind, carried too far. It leads to alienation. After all, the Church is made up of living and loving human beings: if they all act and feel like robots, the Church can't experience and love in their behalf. The whole thing becomes an abstraction. Certainly it is fine that now the liturgy is becoming more spontaneous, more alive, and people are putting their hearts into it more. (I am not saying it was not possible to enter into the old Latin liturgy, but it was hard for many). But we need a real deepening of life in every area, and that is why it is proper that laypeople and others who have been kept in subordinate positions are now claiming the right to make decisions in what concerns their own lives. This is also true in religious orders. As long as everything is decided at the top, and received passively by those at the bottom, the vocation crisis will continue. There is no longer any place in our life for a passive and inert religiosity in which one simply takes orders and lets someone else do all the thinking. Those who fail to accept such a situation are not rebels, most of the time, they are just sensitive and intelligent human beings who protest against a real disorder and who have a right to be heard.

That brings us to the question of monastic renewal. It is a question that I do not feel competent to talk about at the moment. There is at present a General Chapter being held. Our Fr Abbot left the other day for Rome. Most of us in the community here seem to be doubtful whether anything special will come of it: there is a sense of "wait and see". A big questionnaire was sent out to everyone in the Order -- a complicated but routine affair -- and most people apparently wrote in their answers. But most seem to have felt that this Gallup Poll approach was not too promising. At any event, a lot of "wishes" will have been tabulated. Unfortunately the tabulation of wishes is not enough to constitute renewal.

If I were to leave it at that, this letter would perhaps be a bit discouraging. It need not necessarily be that. The institutional machinery for ~~renewal~~ renewal is perhaps not adequate, but that does not mean that renewal depends on the machinery alone. It will come not from the machine or the establishment but from persons. Fortunately the establishment is much more willing to relax and give special permissions to try out new ways, provided the establishment itself is absolved from responsibility for them. This is a very good thing. It provides opportunity for growth. One such experiment is under way in France now, a return to a more primitive and solitary monasticism in a wild mountain area, under the direction of one of the best men in the Order. The experiment is taking place outside the Order, hence it will have leeway to function and to grow. I think it has very good possibilities. I also think that the directory for hermits written by Dom Jacques Winandy (who has a group of hermits on Vancouver Island) is one of the best monastic documents to have appeared in the modern era. It is not in print, however, and does not need to be. It will reach those for whom it is intended.

As for me, the job of renewal, boils down to the conversion of my own life. That is quite a job in itself. Please pray that I may finally get down to it seriously and do something about it. I am grateful to be in a situation in which I should be able to achieve all that I believe I am called to do.

My best wishes always. Have a good summer.

With my love, in Christ,

Thomas Merton