

EASTER LETTER 1968

Dear Friends:

As I write this there is snow on the ground from a blizzard we had the other day, but the sun is bright, the birds are singing, and Easter is on the way. This letter is early. Mail has continued to pile up. More and more requests come in for me to go somewhere and talk (all of which have to be refused). More and more letters I can't answer personally.

Some of the recent questions concern the ongoing debate about the validity of the religious life. Some theologians have frankly stated that the cloistered life is not and cannot be even "Christian." Obviously, for people who have laid their lives on the line in the sense that they have sincerely "offered them to God" in monasteries and convents, and have made considerable sacrifices to be true to what they felt was a serious commitment, it might be a little upsetting to be told that they have not only wasted their efforts but have even been dishonest and unchristian. In my opinion, when the argument is pushed that far it becomes unchristian itself. Simply to condemn and excommunicate people out of hand, without any sympathy for the fundamentally generous fidelity they have shown in a demanding situation, is not much evidence of Christian love! Much of the criticism of religious life shows not only a justifiable impatience with archaic modes of life but also an unjustifiable contempt for human beings who have identified themselves, in good faith, with those modes of life.

I have frankly said, myself, that a completely medieval style of monastic life is finished. On the other hand, when I wrote The Waters of Siloe twenty years ago, I was aware of certain basic values in medieval monasticism. Those values were real, even though they might not be precisely what we need to renew in the Church of the twentieth century. It is important not to repudiate them, even though we happen to be looking for something different ourselves. It would be a real impoverishment if we were to be completely insensitive to the real vitality and creativity of twelfth century monasticism. But the impression one gets from critics today is that the entire past has to be repudiated in all its aspects. It was all irrelevant: more than that, it was all "gnostic," "manichean," "jansenistic" or tainted with some other heresy. If the argument is pressed to its logical conclusion we would have to admit that the Church ceased to be Christian seventeen hundred years ago.

It would be utterly dishonest for me to claim that when I first came to Gethsemani the place was not for me a "sign of Christ." It was, in spite of all the shortcomings I instinctively realized. We who entered cloistered orders ten, fifteen and twenty-five years ago were certainly chilled by the sense that there was something warped and inhuman about it. We were not totally blind and stupid. We knew that we were getting into something hard, even unreasonably hard. But we also knew that this counted for very little in comparison with something else which in our case was decisive. We believed that we were really called by God to do this, to entrust ourselves to him in this peculiar form of life, to enter into it believing in his word and in his promise: that this was one way of being a completely dedicated Christian, taking up one's Cross, and living as a disciple of Christ. It is true that we were told absurd things, made to behave with a stupid and artificial formality, and put through routines that now, as we look back, seem utterly incredible. How did we ever stomach such atrocious nonsense?

It must even be admitted that the climate of Catholic spirituality, perhaps especially in contemplative orders, has been infected with a theology that is in some ways pathological, in some ways heretical. Certainly the cloistered life has proved for many to be unhealthy, both physically and mentally. We carry deep wounds which will prevent us from ever forgetting it. To this extent, we are all able to agree fully with the critics. There is something deeply unchristian about the way in which the monastic life is sometimes interpreted and "enforced." We have all seen things done which still make us shudder. Nor are we perhaps entirely through with them!

On the other hand, the injustices, the distortions, the inhumanities of the secular life are incomparably worse (so we feel) even though they may to some seem acceptably "painless" (or even enjoyable). Thus we--I speak for myself and others like me who have stayed put in spite of the fact that we have seen good reasons not to--repeatedly renewed our initial choice. Though we may have shed one illusion after another and gone deeper and deeper into the radical questioning of our life and our vocation, we have nevertheless elected to stay with it because we have continued to believe that this was what God asked of us. We have simply not seen any alternative that seemed to us better. Admittedly, I would hesitate to write a book extolling the monastic vocation today, and would be very slow to urge anyone else to enter it as it now is. What matters to me is not the monastic life but God and the Gospel--as exemplified by these words of St. Paul from the Easter liturgy: "Since you have been brought back to true life with Christ, you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is sitting at God's right hand. Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on earth, because you have died and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God. But when Christ is revealed--and he is your life--you too will be revealed in glory with him."

According to the critics I have been citing, St. Paul would seem to be a gnostic, a manichean, a jansenist...!

Enough of that! Another question asked is in what out-of-the-way periodicals are my writings likely to be found these days? There is first of all The Catholic Worker (Box 33, Tivoli, New York 12583). Monastic Studies (Pine City, New York 14871). But then I am likely to be in one or other of the "little magazines" or other literary reviews. One such, a new magazine, is the Unicorn Journal (317 East de la Guerra, Santa Barbara, California 93101). I write also occasionally for better known magazines like Poetry or the Sewanee Review. The Seabury Press (Episcopalian) recently published a pamphlet commentary of mine on Camus's novel, "The Plague."

May Easter bring you peace and inner strength. The world badly needs peace--and may not get it. One gets the feeling that difficult times are ahead for everyone: certain problems are so great and so complex that they seem to have no human solution. But the peace of God "which surpasses all understanding" can be the ground of unexpected solutions. Let us remain in that peace, or at least let us desire to, and try to.

Cordially yours in Christ,

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