NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

New monasticism: Envisioning monks without borders

Jamie Manson | Sep. 20, 2012 Grace on the Margins

Part two of a three-part series.

The dwindling number of vocations to priesthood, religious orders and monastic life make it clear that traditional religious life no longer speaks to newer generations the way it has for centuries. But some young people still long for lives of service, prayer and simplicity that are the hallmarks of monasticism.

"Even our elders, our spiritual mentors know that something new is emerging," says Adam Bucko, co-author of the extended essay "New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Life in the 21st Century." [1] The piece is an attempt to put into words what has been stirring in their hearts of many young adults: 20- and 30-somethings who feel called to lives of contemplation and action but who do not necessarily feel drawn to one particular religious tradition or called to the traditional forms of monasticism.

"The sisters, brothers and hermits that have been our mentors all have a real desire to connect with young people, but they are having trouble figuring out how to do it," says Rory McEntee, who co-authored the manifesto with Bucko. "We are hoping to serve as a bridge to connect the generations." Both Bucko and McEntee agree the bridge will not stand without a creative, transformative understanding of monastic life.

To help guide them through their emerging image of the new monk, they rely on *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*, Raimundo Pannikar's 1982 book on new forms of monasticism. "The new monk is an ideal, an aspiration that lives in the minds and hearts of our contemporary generation," Pannikar writes.

But this modern monk "does not want to renounce, except what is plainly sinful or negative," but rather wishes to "transform all things." Pannikar envisioned a new monk that would reach the monastic goal of "blessed simplicity," not by stripping away all things, but through integrating all of the aspects of her or his life.

"All of us, at some time or another, have felt stirrings of what the monk aspires," Bucko and McEntee write in the manifesto. "We have all had moments of 'transcendence,' moments of deep passion for justice and truth, outpourings of compassion for others in suffering, or a perfect feeling of love towards our partner or children. These moments ... touch a hidden dimension inside of us." Bucko and McEntee understand the monk as the person who recognizes the authenticity and importance of these moments and commits to seeking the deeper reality behind these experiences.

Theirs is a vision of a monk who works in the world, who cannot renounce the secular world because there is holiness there as well. "The new monk may be an artist, a scientist, a spiritual teacher, an elementary teacher, a social worker, a waiter. It is not so much the job that matters, as the place from which they approach their work," the manifesto explains.

"The new monk hears the pains and moans of a new creation taking place all around" and "cannot turn away from the suffering," Bucko and McEntee write. It is an evolutionary understanding of the monk that was inspired by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote in The Divine Milieu:

> May the time come when men [sic], having been awakened to a sense of the close bond linking all the movements of this world in the single, all-embracing work of the Incarnation, shall be unable to give themselves to any one of their tasks without illuminating it with the clear vision that their work -- however elementary it may be -- is received and put to good use by a Center of the universe. When that time comes to pass, there will be little to separate life in the cloister from the life of the world.

The word *monk* is, of course, riddled with baggage. For many it denotes male, celibate, Roman Catholic, cut off from the world, tied to one place. But Pannikar believed all should be welcome to explore their contemplative calling. "If the monastic dimension exists at least potentially in everybody, the institution of monasticism should be equally open to everybody," he wrote.

Both McEntee and Bucko take it as a given that all may participate in this vision of new monasticism regardless of gender, sexual orientation, gender expression or relationship status. Bucko's own work with homeless youth has heightened his awareness of the critical need for the full inclusion of LGBT people in religious and spiritual circles. Many of the young people he works with either ran away from home or were thrown out of their homes because their parents refused to tolerate their sexual orientations or gender identities. In most cases, they rejected their children on the basis of their religious beliefs.

For McEntee, broadening the circle of who is welcome to explore their "inner monk" is an important way to reach the new generation. "Many of the arguments we're having now will be gone in 20 to 30 years. The new generation won't be interested in fighting those battles" that many religious groups are struggling over today, such as gender equality and LGBT inclusion. "We will be ready for a whole new conversation."

But their inclusive position isn't founded simply on the desire to appeal to the new generation, but on their belief in the goodness of the human body and human desires. "The new monk sees the body as a holy incarnation," they write in the manifesto, "and part of her spiritual work is in maintaining a healthy, nurturing and transformative relationship with it."

Bucko explains that his observations of both the Catholic Worker as well as the evangelical versions of new monasticism have shown him it is possible to be in a committed relationship and live in a monastic type of community. "New monasticism also encourages intimate relationships, both deep and meaningful friendships and committed and loving sexual relationships. New monasticism is concerned with discovering the divine nature and proper place of all relationships. It is not opposed to celibacy; rather it recognizes it as a profound and genuine calling, albeit a rare one."

This notion of intimacy is in many ways the driving principle behind their interpretation of new monasticism. "Most people nowadays learn about spirituality through weekend workshops, so they don't always have a chance to be connected to each other. It makes it harder for transformation to happen," Bucko says.

The goal is of this movement is to bring in the some of the most sought-after monks, hermits and spiritual teachers to serve as elders for young contemplatives. The hope is that this spiritual mentorship will foster the creation of small, intimate communities of young adults who are committed to sacred activism and to helping one another discover their own vocations.

For Bucko, this vision is inspired by his experience of one-on-one and group spiritual direction, a gift of the Catholic tradition he cherishes most. "We don't want young adults 'following' us, we want to help them both discover their inner resources and create communities of friends. We don't want to influence them, but to help them discern their gifts and help them in their spiritual formation process," Bucko explains.

"Adam and I have been blessed with wonderful teachers and elders for most of our young adulthood," McEntee says. "We would love others to have that, too. We are not looking to create guru and disciple relationships, but

spiritual mentorship. We don't want the wisdom of our elders to die with them."

Their hope is that these small communities of young contemplatives grow organically. "Some groups may want to live together in a more formal monastic way. Others may want to live alone or just with their partners, but gather together regularly with their communities for prayer, contemplation, or sessions with an elder," Bucko says.

Because this understanding of new monasticism is interspiritual, these communities should develop "beyond the borders of any particular religious institution" while also drinking "deeply from the wells of our wisdom traditions," Bucko and McEntee write. This is especially important since many young adults seem inclined to engage with multiple wisdom traditions, such as Buddhism, and spiritual practices, such as yoga and Zen meditation.

To accomplish these extraordinary goals, Bucko and McEntee have identified four specific projects. The first, called HAB [2] (an Aramaic word that evokes the active dimension of love), will be an "ecumenical and interspiritual contemplative fellowship for young people," especially those on college campuses. It hopes to offer educational programs and retreats that are co-taught by respected spiritual teachers.

Bucko and McEntee also envision a seven-year process for those who want to do long-term work with a spiritual director, learn from elders and have a deeper commitment to a community. This includes daily contemplative practices, intellectual study, psychological shadow work and extended retreat periods.

"We foresee this formation as a process that embodies and anchors what 'full commitment to the spiritual life looks' like in the 21st century," they explain.

A third goal is to found New Way Publishing, a small publishing company that produces materials that "look young," and speak to the longings and questions of young adults. These publications will offer dialogues with elders and "help shape what a contemplative culture in the modern age looks like." Bucko and McEntee say "this 'niche' is not something that is currently represented in the publishing landscape."

Finally, they hope to establish "a small, interspiritual New Monastic ashram." This would be "a sacred space to incarnate the New Monastic vision" and a spiritual home for those new monks who are "living active lives 'in the world.' "

Even with four goals in place, McEntee and Bucko are, true to their spiritual dispositions, open to the way in which the spirit will move in the unfolding of these ideas. They already have offers from spiritual teachers, monks and hermits -- many of them Catholic -- to speak to groups of young adults who are interested in contemplation and action.

Asked whether they are concerned about funding and resources, Bucko insists that, like their understanding of monasticism, this is a movement that will operate on a different kind of model. "This isn't about building a big organization and then hassling to get money," says Bucko, who knows well the pains of building one's own nonprofit organization. "This is about utilizing and sharing our gifts. It doesn't cost anything to be friends with people and create this kind of community."

Next week, the final part of this series will offer a reflection on the ways in which these new forms of monastic life and monastic community might speak to the unique religious questions and spiritual longings of young adults.

Read more in this series

- Two young adults offer a new take on 'new monasticism' [3]
- New monasticism: Envisioning monks without borders [4]

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [5]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2016 - 17:25*): http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/new-monasticism-envisioning-monks-without-borders

Links:
[1] http://www.scribd.com/doc/101981052/New-Monasticism-An-Interspiritual-Manifesto-for-Contemplative-Life-in-the-21st-Century
[2] http://www.adambucko.com/HAB/About_Us.html
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/32145
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/32300
[5] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup