

NEW MONASTICISM WHAT IS IT AND WHO IS IT?

Many people have said they don't get what New Monasticism is. I therefore thought it would be good to start to blog to explain how I think the term is being used. The first thing to say is that I have never liked the term because it has caused so much confusion, however, for some reason those outside the Church do get it, so this is why I think the term has got used. The confusion I think is for those who have some form of church experience, and therefore it is confusing and conjures up an idea of people being over pious and wearing mediaeval clothing – this is absolutely far from the truth.

This being so I am going to define as simply as I can what it is:

1. [A commitment to a Rhythm of Daily Life](#)
2. [A commitment to contemplative forms of prayer and meditation](#)
3. [A commitment to spiritual practices and radical community](#)
4. [A commitment to missional loving service as an individual and as an ecclesial community.](#)

I will unpack each of these key elements before proceeding with exploring key elements.

1. A Commitment to a ROL

Traditional religious communities follow a rule of life which has elements of prayer & worship, work, rest, eating and so on. This has set times of prayer which can be as many as six to even eight set times a day. New Monastic communities hold onto this concept of a Rhythm of life which is less prescriptive about when but encourages the follower that there should be some form of Rhythm of work, prayer, rest, participation in community and loving service to others – but this needs to relate to the personality, vocation and life situation of the individual. In this way New Monastic communities are like what are called 'third order communities' in that a Rhythm of life (ROL) is more tailored to the individual. However New Monastic communities commit to seasonal vows, promises and practices that are usually written together by a community, and not like third orders who have a totally individual ROL that was written by an individual. These communal and shared seasonal vows tend to be committed to every year in New Monastic Communities.

Further the ROL of the communities will have certain charisms – values and understandings particularly catered to the particular calling or vocation of the community. For example the community I am part of sees itself as specifically urban, also a learning community, and seeking to serve God in the context of Peckham.

Like traditional religious communities, New Nonastic communities structure their ROL around spiritual practices. In this way a ROL creates a structure for an individual to thrive – like a plant growing into a lattice or frame to allow it to flourish. In this same way a ROL seeks to be a deep way of following the way of Jesús as seen in the Gospels, seeking to be faithful to Jesús's teaching to the disciples. In this way the structure of a ROL allows the follower to be open to the Holy Spirit in the context of life. Not unlike the ability of musicians to be spontaneous in a Jazz Band. The focus then of a ROL is to engage with the question 'How should we live to be faithful to Jesús?' This then is a deeper question than 'What should we believe?' Because it is about application of belief to the practice of living well.

Put another way the high point of the Gospels for religious communities is the New Commandment – To love God love yourself and love others as put by a former Benedictine Abbot. In this way New Monastics see a ROL as essentially a structure to promote:

1. Orthopathy – right feeling or being – wellbeing
2. Orthopraxis – right living
3. Orthodoxy – right thinking.

So a good ROL needs to include the head, heart and life.....

2. A commitment to contemplative forms of prayer and meditation

Following in this series building on my two previous posts, I want now to make a case that a form of contemplative prayer is essential if this is really New Monasticism.

Whether you read the work of Shane Claiborne, and American New Monastics, or those coming out of the Catholic Worker Movement and liberation theology in South America or Europe, a recovery of contemplative prayer is for me, essential.

Contemplative Prayer is a commitment to a form of prayer that is about encountering God, and it starts with silence. There is nothing like silence to have to face who you are beyond the ego, pride, entertainment, immaturity, that forces you to face who you are, and an openness to encountering God on God's terms. Prayer is so often dumbed down in today's world, where at its worst prayer is uploaded as God as heavenly counsellor who then downloads answers back to the individual. This is so utterly individualistic and consumerist it misses the point. Ultimately prayer is a medium of encounter with God. It is inherently mystical, uncontrollable, and other.

Too often I hear people say – I am an extrovert – contemplative prayer is not for me – because it is for introverts. This is just so wrong and a collusion with the shadow or false self (see the work of Richard Rohr and others on this subject). There are different forms of prayer, ones where we encounter God from nature, from mystical experience outside of ourselves, but importantly here, also encountering God from within ourselves, where God often speaks through the details of our lives. The bible often uses the language of the followers of Jesus as having 'a temple of the Holy Spirit' within them. This then requires us to seek God from within as well as without.

New Monastics I think therefore draw on different forms of contemplative prayer. For some more into mystical theology and a bit more catholic draw on the Benedictine, Franciscan and Ignatian. Others draw on a revitalised Celtic tradition of nature inspired Christian prayer, and others draw on more contemplative prayer coming out of the charismatic movement discovering spiritual practices. All these traditions draw on a similar root of contemplative prayer. Without this focus on getting beyond your thinking and feeling, the individual is too locked into their own self. True contemplative prayer seeks to get beyond this as part of a call to prayer as part of 'Prayerful-Action'. This form of prayer is about seeking to catch up with what God is doing, and less about ego-consumptive gratification – the curse of so much of modern Christianity.

To be able to love God, love yourself and love your neighbour (Summary of the New Commandment of Jesus) each Christian needs a healthy, nourishing and sustaining form of Christian spirituality. This comes from study of the Bible, dialogue amongst Christians and importantly here – from Prayer.

In the ancient prayer traditions of the Church, there are two forms of prayer – the Via Positiva – the sense of the presence of God, and the Via negativa – the sense of the absence of God. When we encounter God, then this can lead to joy, warmth and that sense of contentment. But sometimes God feels very absent, which is hard and painful.

Some very unhelpful writers have said that pain is an abomination to the spiritual prayerful path. This I would say could not be further from the truth. Pain is part of the human condition, for us to grow in our spirituality from infancy through adolescence into maturity, minus the false self and ego, change is painful. Infact the mystics teach us, that without pain we would not change. This is the challenge of going deeper with the path of Jesus, and prayer is very much part of this process.

Given all of this, I am convinced that contemplative forms of prayer are not just desirable for new monasticism to be real and deep enough to sustain such a way of being a Christian disciple, I want to argue it is essential. Otherwise New Monasticism just becomes one more romantic fadism that had great promise, but did not deliver.

If New Monasticism is going to be focused on 'contemplative action' then it is essential that those who are activists don't just act out of their own strongly held convictions, but God MUST be the source of the action. And equally that Prayer that does not lead to loving service, is again wrapped up in self-serving Christian spirituality, loses the DNA of Jesus who reminds us that he came in the very nature of a Servant.

So if there is no contemplative prayer, I want to argue it's not new monastic, and it is therefore not following the path that leads right back to the Desert Mothers and Fathers who began Christian Monasticism on a focus on prayerful action in the deserts of Alexandria, Syria and Palestine.

3. [A commitment to spiritual practices and radical community](#)

Following on from the last three blog posts, this blog attempts to explore what is New Monasticism regarding Spiritual Practices and Radical Community.

Spiritual practices in traditional religious communities relate to the vows the individual is expected to make – such as poverty, obedience, chastity and stability. These then relate to a Rhythm of prayer, work, rest, being community and aspects expressed as worship, community and loving service.

In New Monasticism spiritual practices or disciplines will relate to the seasonal vows or promises an individual is making together with others as an expression of the charism or calling of a particular community. There are therefore spiritual practices related to these vows. As said earlier these vows create a construct into which the individual grows and lives like a plant growing up a lattice. So in the Wellspring Community of which I am a part – these spiritual disciplines are:

- prayer and devotion
- learning and reconciliation
- service and hospitality
- work and wellbeing

Now each of these disciplines relates to a whole host of practices that the individual seeks to consider in a pattern that relates to them, and also in a pattern that reflects to daily and weekly flows of the community.

For example for prayer and devotion this includes a whole set of practices that need consideration...

Will you follow the way of Jesus Christ through the practice of prayer (in listening and in stillness; in silence and aloud; individually and in community; daily and within a weekly rhythm), and the practice of devotion (in meditation; in contemplation; in leading and participating in communal worship; and in the giving of time and resources)?

Now moving onto Radical Community. Being and doing human community is tough. We have all grown up in such an individualised, consumerist, commodified and egoic world, that makes mediating being a human community really difficult. It is true to say that we all as individuals bring our strengths, weaknesses and wounds. That is why in all the New Monastic communities I have been part of, everyone is expected to have their own external spiritual director and also therapist if needed, as there can be a danger that people play out

their stuff in community. Community can lead to the best or the worst of us as individuals. This is why the fruits of the spirit are essential – kindness, gentleness, patience etc and also the need for humility and mutual vulnerability.

One innovation I think that is crucial are different spaces of belonging. There is need to mark different spaces for the spiritual journey. In traditional communities these are known as Aspirants, Novices, Professed. In New Monasticism I think we use some of this language – for Aspirants, Participants and Professed. All part of the New Monastic Communities but different spaces.

So coming back to what is community – this is where I am going to disagree with a lot I have seen. With so much of our culture minimising real community – community does mean I think the need for residential community – people actually living together and minimally people living dispersed but near by. In my community in Peckham there is a mixture of the two – but where we do want participants and the professed to love nearby and ideally with others.

So the internet website Facebook and all the rest are great reaching out into the world – but they can never be a real relational community because you don't have to face your false self or your shadow side through a cyber connection... these are networks not a form of religious communities. I do believe New Monasticism needs to be localised if it is really committed to radical community that does worship, mission and community together. These communities are called to contemplative (or prayerful) action – prayer and service as real people in real contexts where all religious communities are called to serve the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the searching. These are all needed if there is an attempt to be an authentic and radical New Monastic Community.

4. [A commitment to missional loving service as an individual and as an ecclesial community.](#)

In this the fifth blog on the essentials of New Monasticism – we look at the element focused on loving service.

As New Monastic Communities draw on a mixed vocation of Monk and Friar, they hold onto contemplative prayer and missional loving service. This is why sometimes New Monastic communities are called 'small missional communities' as a particular focus on 'prayerful action'.

So here loving action has a number of elements

- the alleviation of the suffering of the poor in sharing food, money and resources. Social and economic justice.
- hospitality in terms of friendship, kindness and human dignity.
- opening up the gospel in relational approaches to sharing the Good News of Jesús and the love of God.
- challenging injustice, oppression of people, the environment, other animals and the planet. Social, economic and ecological justice.

For those of us who are Anglican – this loving service is deeply tied into the Missio Dei – the mission of God or more accurately – Missio Trinitatis – the mission of the Trinity. Which is summarised as the marks of mission:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom

- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

(Bonds of Affection-1984 ACC-6 p49, Mission in a Broken World-1990 ACC-8 p101)

It is vital then in an New Monastic Community that individuals are committed to mission and loving action just as much as they are committed to community and contemplative prayer. These need to be shared by the whole community and well as individual actions.