

PRAYER AS THE FOUNDATION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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When considering the drastic loss of faith in recent times, we must recognize that we are dealing here with the demonic. Let me quote from Matthew 12:43-45. These are the words of the Lord:

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, it roams through arid regions searching for rest but finds none. Then it says, “I will return to my home from which I came,” but upon returning it finds it empty, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and brings back with itself seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they move in and dwell there. The last condition of that person is worse than the first. Thus it will be with this evil generation.

Domination by the Demonic

What Jesus is saying here is that what can happen to an individual can happen to a whole society and culture. Pre-Christian cultures are often dominated by the demonic because the devil is the prince of this world. The people are deceived and they worship false gods and live immoral lives. When Christian missionaries are sent, they literally encounter the demonic and they overthrow the prince of darkness with the light of the Gospel. The people gradually convert and darkness is dispelled with light, error and



falsehood with truth, sin with virtue. So eventually you have a Christian nation and the spirit that animates that nation is Christ’s spirit, the Holy Spirit. But when secularism comes in, the separation of public life from Christian faith, the Christian spirit is dispelled, leaving it empty but still swept clean and in order. That is, the moral values are left there, the outward trappings of a Christian social order, but Christ is not publicly acknowledged as the foundation of that society or its moral values. Therefore, seeing that the soul of the nation is empty, no longer filled with the Christian spirit, but now secularized, the devil decides to come back. But he brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself and they move in and dwell there, and the

last condition of that nation is worse than the first.

Effective Strategies for Evangelization

A post-Christian culture is worse than a pre-Christian culture. This is the challenge of the New Evangelization and why we must pray for the Pope and the bishops to devise a strategy for the New Evangelization that will be effective and able to expel the demonic and bring back the spirit of Christ. I am of the opinion that the heart of the New Evangelization must be the revival of the consecrated life and, in particular, cloistered contemplative life, for three reasons:

The first is that, in re-evangelizing a post-Christian nation, we are dealing with the demonic. That the devil

exists and is active in our world is a tenet of our Faith. He is the prince of this world, and Jesus came to cast him out. A large part of the Lord's ministry was taken up with exorcism and other encounters with the evil one. In fact He began His public life after His baptism when the Spirit drove Him into the desert to fight Satan to merit for us the graces we need, personally and apostolically, to deal with the demonic. Now, as I mentioned, after a culture has been evangelized and converted to Christ, the presence of the demonic is minimal. He has been cast out. The whole culture is impregnated with the Christian spirit. But when a Christian culture has been secularized and the Christian spirit no longer animates it, it is empty, though in good order. That is when the devil comes back with seven other spirits more evil than himself and the secular society gradually declines into moral relativism and corruption until it becomes demonic.

We are not yet at that stage in the United States. A sign of the demonic is open persecution of the Church, like we saw in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, formerly Christian nations. However, to save our country from falling into the demonic, we need to initiate the New Evangelization, the heart of which is the contemplative life.

And why is that? The most powerful weapon we have in fighting the demonic is prayer. You remember the Gospel story of the boy who was possessed by the devil and his father brought the boy to the Apostles, who could not cast the devil out, so they took him to Jesus, who cast him out. Then the Apostles approached the Lord and asked, "Why is it that we could not expel the demon? You

sent us out before, two by two, and we were able to cast out demons." Jesus responded, "Certain demons can only be cast out by prayer." Some texts add the phrase "and fasting." The point is clear: prayer strengthened by a life of asceticism is the most effective way to defeat the devil.

The cloistered contemplative life is ordered exclusively to prayer, the one force that the Lord said could dispel certain demonic strongholds. The early Christians were aware of this. In looking at the early monastic literature, one of the principal motives which drew men into the desert was to battle with Satan, and this in imitation of the Savior who entered the desert to battle with Satan. And their battles were not merely personal. They were trying to bind the demons, to tie them down so they could not go into the cities, where the people lived, to tempt them. So they saw themselves as soldiers, indeed, officers in the Lord's army engaged in a real spiritual warfare, fighting back the demons so they could not enter into society.

This is what contemplative communities should be, centers of prayer to fight back the demonic. Entering the cloister has always been seen metaphorically as entering the desert, far away from the distractions of the world, and as a place where one fights the demons within oneself—but also to fight back the forces of evil as they attack the Church and society. We are all in the midst of this spiritual warfare, but the fighting is particularly intense in the cloister. If they win the battle within their own souls, within the cloister, then the demonic strongholds will be broken and we can more easily overcome the devil's influence in our families

and in society and successfully re-evangelize our nation.

The second reason is a bit more positive: Prayer, rooted as it is in the Mass, is the most effective way of obtaining the grace we need for the conversion of sinners and the transformation of our society. The conversion of the sinner is the work of God from beginning to end. It is the fruit of Divine grace. Without grace, all our preaching, admonishing, and penance and ready forgiveness is useless. Conversion is the work of grace and grace is obtained through prayer. We must humbly and perseveringly beseech God for the grace of His mercy and forgiveness for ourselves and society.

Now that is the responsibility of all Christians, to pray. But the contemplative life is exclusively ordered to and organized around the ministry of intercession. And because of their consecration to that work, their prayers are especially efficacious.

Sharing in the Work of Salvation

God shares His work of salvation with His people. He associates us in His work of saving the world, but at different levels of causality. Let me explain this with an analogy with the harvest of the field, which is the lowest level of life, vegetative or plant life. There are various secondary causes which make for a good harvest. First, there is the farmer who plants the seed. Then there is the rain cloud which showers down water. Last, there is the sun, which provides heat and energy for life to grow.

The farther the cause is away from the effect, the more universal is its causality and the more simple and united it is. In harvesting a vast

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Prayer as Foundation (cont. from page 7) monks or nuns in his diocese. It's the heartbeat of the apostolic life. This is why Pope John Paul II sent cloistered Carmelites into Russia after the fall of Communism, to bring the New Evangelization there. When Cardinal Francis George was named the Archbishop of Chicago back in 1997, he wanted a cloistered community of nuns in every corner of his diocese, north, south, east and west. So to cover all four corners he brought in the Poor Clares and the contemplative Missionaries of Charity.

Let us apply this to the harvest of souls. Let us say that a diocese has one hundred parishes. And let us say that during the Lenten season there are organized fifty penitential services, and each penitential service requires about ten priests to hear the confessions. They can be compared to the farmers who sow the seed and now are reaping the harvest. But in that penitential service with ten priests, there is only one preacher. He can be compared to the rain cloud. Now that adds up, throughout the entire diocese, during the season of Lent, to 500 confessors and fifty preachers in order to bring the grace of conversion to God's people. But there is only one monastery of cloistered nuns, which can be compared to the sun. They are, spatially speaking, the farthest away from the effects; they never see the people. But they exercise the most profound and universal causality in the conversion of sinners.

Why? Because through their consecration they are closest to the heart of Christ, from which grace and mercy flow. They have separated themselves from the ordinary circumstances of family and social life to be hidden with Christ, who is always at the right hand of the Father, always in intercession for us. This is why every bishop who understands the nature of the Church and the working of Divine grace wants a cloistered community of

monks or nuns in his diocese. It's the heartbeat of the apostolic life. This is why Pope John Paul II sent cloistered Carmelites into Russia after the fall of Communism, to bring the New Evangelization there. When Cardinal Francis George was named the Archbishop of Chicago back in 1997, he wanted a cloistered community of nuns in every corner of his diocese, north, south, east and west. So to cover all four corners he brought in the Poor Clares and the contemplative Missionaries of Charity.



Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, in *The Soul of the Apostolate*, that classic of the spiritual life, mentions a missionary bishop in China, who said he preferred twenty Trappist monks enclosed in their monastery, praying, to twenty active missionary priests. When St. Thérèse of Lisieux was discerning her vocation, she felt a strong desire to evangelize Vietnam, and wanted to do it in the most effective way possible. She entered the cloister in Lisieux, thousands of miles away, yet her prayers were more efficacious than if she were an active missionary there in Vietnam.

Therefore, if we are going to launch a New Evangelization, which will be more difficult and challenging than the evangelization of non-Christian lands, it must be backed up by powerful intercession of cloistered contemplative communities.

The third reason why the contemplative life must be at the heart of the New Evangelization is because the contemplative life, or to use the more traditional phrase, “monastic life,” is the highest form of Christian life and therefore must guide and animate the building up of a Christian civilization.

Who are the patron saints of Europe? Saint Benedict, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross—all monks or nuns. That's not by accident. Monasteries are the bearers and builders of Christian culture. Why? Because “culture” comes from the Latin *cultus*, which means “cult,” that is, the life of worship. Man's highest act is to worship God, and from worship he receives God's blessings in all that he does. “Unless the Lord build the house, the laborers labor in vain.” A Christian culture must be ordered to the worship of God. The Sabbath must be held in high honor. God's people must worship Him, to open their hearts to His blessings.

In the book of Genesis we read that man was created on the sixth day with the beasts. The difference is that man is more than a beast. He was created in the image and likeness of God. In biblical terminology, “image and likeness” is another way of declaring sonship, because the son is like his father; he is the image of his father. For this reason God created the Sabbath, the seventh day, for man. In Hebrew to “seven” oneself means to enter into a covenant with another, to forge family bonds. So on the seventh day, God entered into a covenant with man and adopted him as His son. But man must acknowledge God as his Father, and he does that when he worships Him.

The Sabbath was set aside for the worship of God so that man could lay claim to his divine sonship. God blesses him with His life and grace. But if man refuses to observe the Sabbath and he doesn't worship God, well, he loses his divine sonship. He doesn't lay claim to his likeness to God, and so he falls back to the sixth day and becomes a beast. In the Scriptures, what's the number of the beast? 666. How tall was Goliath, that beast of a man and the enemy of God and Israel? 6' 6". A culture and a people that does not worship God becomes beasts. Beasts attack one another; they seek each other as prey.

Now what is happening in our society? We are falling away from the true worship of God, so we are losing our divine sonship and are becoming beasts, man devouring man in war and, what is worse, in abortion, a mother devouring her child. Governments are devouring their people, as we saw in Nazism and Communism. So we need once again to reclaim our divine sonship and worship the true God in spirit and in truth.

This is something we need to be taught. Good men blindly worship God and often fall into false worship. Man left to himself doesn't know how to worship God. He needs a teacher to instruct him but, above all, he needs someone to imitate, because imitation is the highest form of teaching.

Teachers of Prayer and Worship

This is the role of the priest and the monk and the nun. They are teachers of prayer. Their first and foremost duty is the contemplation of Divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer. Their whole lives are centered upon and



organized around the worship of God, the Liturgy of the Hours culminating in the Holy Mass and then filled in with *lectio divina*, meditation and contemplation. This is the purpose of monasteries. They are places of prayer and worship, where people to learn how to pray, simply by witnessing and participating in the life and worship of the monks and nuns. As I mentioned, prayer is the source and summit of Christian civilization.

Not everyone can spend their entire day and organize their entire life to worship and prayer. They have other essential duties, tied to their vocation. But some people are called to separate themselves from the ordinary circumstances of social and family life and consecrate themselves exclusively to God in worship. That's the religious vocation, and most especially the contemplative vocation. In this way religious, especially contemplatives, can be seen as society's "tithe." A Christian society tithes. When we tithe we give God a portion of our goods as a sign that they all belong to Him. He only asks for a portion, and if we give God His portion in tithe, He blesses us. So God only asks that a portion of His people consecrate themselves to Him

as representatives of all the people. He will bless all the people because of the prayers of a few. And the greatest blessing which they confer upon God's people is to model the Christian life. Religious and, in particular, contemplatives are great models and therefore teachers of prayer and worship, the highest of Christian acts. And in living their vocation faithfully they aid all of society and lift it up to God, pointing to man's true end, to serve, reverence and praise God, so as to save their souls.

Consecrated religious, and contemplative in particular, are not only models of worship, but also of a fully evangelical life, of poverty, chastity and obedience. All Christians should live the evangelical counsels, the spirit of the counsels, but to make this effective and possible, some need to live the counsels in fact, absolutely, under vow, in imitation of Christ as He lived them. That is the role of religious, to replicate as perfectly as possible, in this life, the life of the Lord, not only as He lived it when He was among us, but as He lives it now, in His risen glory at the right hand of the Father, always in intercession for us.

By their total separation from this world, monks and nuns, that is, cloistered religious, best exemplify Christ in His heavenly glory, always in intercession for us. And they do this not only for themselves, but for all the Church in the world, and therefore they must be at the heart of the New Evangelization. ☩

This article was adapted from a talk given at the 2010 IRL Midwest Regional Meeting at the Franciscan Prayer Center in Independence, Missouri. A CD of Father Thomas' talk is available for \$5 each, plus \$4.95 S&H. To order please call the IRL office at 847-573-8975.