CHAPTER 43

MONASTIC INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

FABRICE BLÉE

Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) is a new, creative, but still somewhat small movement within the monastic family of Saint Benedict, a movement which is explored within this chapter[1]. It developed at a time when the decline of European powers in the wake of two world wars signalled the end of one world order and the emergence of another. It came into being precisely because Benedictines and the two branches of the Cistercian family were willing to respond to a general call to mission launched in 1957 by Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical *Fidei Donum*. Pius was concerned about the situation of the Church in a world marked—especially in Africa—by decolonization, the rise of communism, and a revival of Islam. In response to this situation, monks created AIM (Aid for the Implementation of Monasticism) in 1960. The driving force behind its creation was the Dutch Benedictine, Cornelius Tholens. Instead of aligning himself with the effort to spread the 'true faith' that—according to the encyclical—stood in opposition to other religions, he proposed that 'before anything is put in place, it is necessary that the abbots recognize, on behalf of the Order, the duty of the monks of the Order of Saint Benedict to interact with peoples, races, and religions' (Leclercq 1986: 8). That set the tone. Monks who were sent to the missions (some of them, at least) were intent on opening up a way of dialogue for a Church locked in its universalist pretensions and at a loss in the face of profound social transformations. This bold initiative predated the openness of the Second Vatican Council, which in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*) in 1965 urged the Christian community to acknowledge its solidarity with humankind and its history. In the report of the pan-monastic conference held in Bangalore

[1] Translated by Father William Skudlarek, OSB, monk of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, and Secretary General, Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIMMID).

in 1973 under the aegis of AIM, we read: 'The world today thirsts for liberation. To address any current problem without taking into account the situation of the entire world would be wrong from a methodological point of view. The monk should not be a narrow-minded person, but one with a planetary consciousness' (O'Hanlon 1974: 20). Early on, monks recognized their unique role in the encounter between East and West and in providing the spiritual foundations of a dialogue for peace. This outlook characterized the meetings held at Loppem (Belgium) and Petersham (USA) in 1977 and led to the creation of MID as a subcommittee of AIM that would be dedicated to dialogue with monks of other religions, mainly Buddhists and Hindus.

Despite their compliance with the spirit of the Council, members of MID had to gain credibility within the larger family of Saint Benedict, which sometimes suspected them of betraying the Christian faith by favouring a syncretistic and relativistic attitude. But MID was not a marginal movement made up of a few monks in thrall to exotic spiritualities. On the contrary, strongly supported by Catholic authorities since its inception, it promoted a new ecclesial consciousness based on an approach to hospitality that was shaped by the Gospel commandment to love others unconditionally. This chapter focuses on the meaning of that approach. It will not deal with the history of MID—its chronology, key figures, and important events—since that has already been done in my book, *The Third Desert. The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* (Blée 2011). Rather, the chapter intends to highlight certain aspects of the dialogical attitude that characterize MID and to point out its relevance for a Church and a world in crisis. It will show that MID, far from straying into questionable practices, paves the way for the 'open-hearted Christian' (*chrétien hospitalier*) by proposing a new religious paradigm able to respond to the theological and social challenges of our time. To do this, we will proceed in two stages. First, we will investigate the significance of this new approach to other religions and its roots in the monastic tradition. Then we will look at the challenge it places before the Christian community and how it contributes to the development of a new world.

The Way of the 'Open-hearted Christian'

As a result of the 1983 exchange programme in Japan between Christian monks and Zen monks, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) added a fourth type of dialogue, the dialogue of religious experience, to the three dialogues of life, action, and theological exchange. This type of dialogue is defined as 'dialogue where people rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with respect to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute' (PCID 1991: 42). Such a dialogue cannot be reduced to talking about one's spiritual journey or listening to one another, let alone to a purely bookish study of another's beliefs. Rather, this form of dialogue calls one to know another's religion

'from the inside', to embrace another religious experience. Henri Le Saux, Thomas Merton, Christian de Chergé, and Bede Griffiths are pioneers of MID, and are among the best examples of it. Raimon Panikkar calls this dialogue 'intrareligious'. The document of MID, 'Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue. References and Perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics' (Béthune 1994) defines it as the act by which a Christian engages 'in a practice of contemplative silence developed in another religion' (Béthune 1997: 99), with the reminder that the adoption of these spiritual practices means welcoming generations of spiritual searchers without whom they would not exist.

This welcoming approach is considered by MID as the *sine qua non* for authentic knowledge of another religion and true dialogue. Others, however, are uneasy about this way of engaging in dialogue, believing that it involves syncretistic and relativistic practices that are contrary to the Christian faith. As renowned a theologian as Hans Urs von Balthasar (1983: 152, 160–161) went so far as to refer to it as treason. As for Louis Bouyer, he agreed with Robert Charles Zaehner, who looked on it as the 'work of the devil' (Balthasar 1983: 152, 160–161). However, Christian identity is not the monopoly of those who feel they must protect themselves from any outside influences. In fact, 'contemplation is not more Christian', wrote Béthune, 'because it is less influenced by the outside' (Béthune 1997: 104). This is how monks in dialogue answer those who ask, 'How can you reconcile exclusive devotion to Christ with your offer of unconditional hospitality?' (Béthune 2007: 15).

The response of MID is not timid. It claims to be the bearer of the great Christian tradition founded on hospitality and love of others. In doing so, it allows many believers, those who are monks and those who are not, to claim their membership and their rights in the Church. At the same time, it promotes a new way of being Christian in the world, a different way of understanding their following of Christ—a way we refer to as the way of the 'open-hearted Christian', or the new Hospitaller.

There is nothing original about this expression (*chrétien hospitalier*). Hospitality is, after all, a fundamental virtue of Christianity. And yet in this lies its strength, for it emphasizes that the monk who engages in dialogue gives contemporary expression to this virtue. Jesus is the first to set an example. He welcomes strangers and is welcomed by them. In addition, institutions of hospitality appear very early in the history of the Church, specializing in service to the sick, the poor, and pilgrims. Monks are particularly sensitive to the practice of hospitality, making it one of their principal charisms, as can be seen from the fact that an entire chapter is devoted to it in the Rule of Benedict (*RB* c. 53). At one and the same time, MID ensures continuity with this traditional practice and marks a break with it by being open to religious otherness. In order to take into account the relationship between continuity and rupture, we must contrast the dialogic way of monks with one of the most radical expressions of Christian hospitality in defence of the faith, the Knights Hospitaller of Saint John of Jerusalem. While there is obviously a great difference between this medieval military order and MID, there are also significant similarities between the two movements: the defence of pilgrims and the use of the sword in the service of the faith.

The Defence of Pilgrims

The Order of Hospitallers was established in Jerusalem in the eleventh century by the Benedictine, Brother Gerard, as a *xenodochium*, an establishment to welcome and care for pilgrims who came from throughout the entire Christian world to pray at the holy places. In a similar way, monks engaged in dialogue head east, going as far as India and Japan, in defence of pilgrims, but their approach is poles apart from that of the Hospitallers. We can note three major differences. First, they are the protectors of pilgrims symbolically understood. In the literature of MID, pilgrimage is often used to designate not a geographical route, but a journey within. As Mary Margaret Funk, OSB puts it, 'No need to go on pilgrimage if I am not present to where I am!' (Funk 2003: 54). In saying this, she echoes mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, for whom it is useless to run off on pilgrimage. In the words of Tauler, 'Let me tell you the route that is the shortest and most direct: enter into your depths' (Durel 2009: 321). The pilgrim is one who sets off in search of his or her own heart, that intimate part of ourselves open, here and now, to the divine presence that both transcends and elevates our true nature, or as Merton says, our 'real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts' (Merton 1975: 296). Monastic interreligious dialogue belongs to this journey to the Kingdom. Here the Christian life does not primarily consist in adherence to a static set of doctrinal formulations. In contrast to a theological approach that imposes a clear and unambiguous picture of the goal, it is instead inspired by the image of a way to be followed and a quest that demands faith and courage. What is claimed is the right to begin the journey and to discover for oneself, humbly and at a pace that is one's own, the mystery underlying all creation. As they make their way, pilgrims can drink from sources located outside their own religion. Merton shows the way when he describes his reason for travelling to Asia. He is, he says, a pilgrim 'anxious to obtain not just information, not just "facts" about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience' (Merton 1975: 312–313).

Herein lies the second difference between monks in dialogue and the Hospitallers of St John. The latter defend the pilgrim against the pagans; the former defend their right to walk with them. This right needs to be protected not from attacks made by the adherents of other religions, but from the pretension that separates us from them, namely, the conviction that we alone possess the truth. For monks in dialogue, the divine reality goes beyond what any tradition is able to say about it. If monks of various religious traditions recognize each other as companions, supporting one another on their respective journeys, it is because they are engaged in the same spiritual quest towards the mysterious reality that gives life to all but can never be contained.

The third and final point concerns the very notion of defence. Unlike the military order, MID does not stand in opposition to anyone, whether that be on the battlefield or on the field of doctrinal controversy. Its purpose is not to defend any particular dogma. During the first interreligious meeting at Gethsemani Abbey in 1996, the mandate of the Christian monks vis-à-vis their Buddhist dialogue partners was not to speak in the

name of their Church or official Church teaching, but from the 'silence of deep religious experience' (Mitchell and Wiseman 1997: xv). Can one rightly speak of 'defence' from the MID's point of view? The question arises when one considers the position of Le Saux with regard to his awakening to the living God on the holy mountain of Arunachala at the spiritual heart of Hinduism: 'I have now accepted, if it be pleasing to the Lord, to be nothing else henceforward than a true Christian *sannyasi*, to be willing to remain forever in silence in my cave, without any desire to give witness' (Le Saux 1986: 44). If open-hearted Christians seek neither to condemn nor to convert, that does not mean they are indifferent or resigned. On the contrary, they assert that such liberty is needed if one is to come to a self-awareness that makes it possible to listen and to be challenged by both the Wholly Other and religious otherness. In response to accusations of relativism and syncretism, monks point to two great truths—not dogmatic, but pastoral—that flow from their experience of dialogue. The first is that it is no longer possible to speak of oneself as a Christian without reference to other religious experiences. Meeting one another allows us to come closer to the truth and to become better Christians. Interreligious encounter purifies us of our pretensions, the necessary condition for arriving at the second truth: humility and simplicity with regard to the ineffability of God. The expression of one's faith is freed by a rejection of pre-established truths that immediately set themselves up as law and demand adherence. Basically, what is being defended is access to God rather than simply a creed, doing so in reference to the virtue of the Christian, which, according to Merton, is 'something creative and spiritual, not simply a fulfilment of a law' (Merton 2003: 139).

The Sword in the Service of the Faith

Even when the Order of Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem became militarized, the Order maintained its primary vocation of caring for pilgrims. Theological justification for the soldier-monk was given by Saint Bernard, who, writing about the Knights Templar in *De laude novae militiae* (1129), said that 'the reason they carry a sword is because they are the executors of the divine will, both to punish evildoers and to glorify those who do good. When they put a criminal to death, it is not homicide, but, I dare to say, malicide' (Richard 1969: 141).

The taking up of weapons is obviously irreconcilable with the mission of MID, except perhaps in a symbolic sense. Symbolic warfare is part of the Christian imagination. Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians speaks of the virtues needed to wage the interior spiritual combat to which the disciple of Jesus is called (Eph. 6:10–19). The sword is a metaphor for the Spirit of Christ, and it is precisely this metaphorical sword that is taken up by monks in dialogue. The role of the Holy Spirit is a central theme in the literature of MID, and it is thanks to the Spirit that the monk opens a new path to the mystery of God through an encounter with religious otherness. It is by the strength and courage given by the Spirit that monks can accept the injunction of Saint Bernard, who prohibits the knight of Christ to retreat even in the face of three enemies (Sicard 1992: 8). The monk in

dialogue also does not flee from the enemy, the one whom the Church traditionally understood to be the person who believes and prays differently, the pagan outside the Church, the heretic within. Béthune speaks of taking the risk of welcoming the enemy, the stranger (Béthune 2013: 45). Here, however, one approaches the enemy, not to defeat or trouble him, but to love him, doing so for the sake of reciprocal hospitality and without any ulterior motive, except for the sake of better understanding one's intimate relationship with the divine. This is where the welcoming attitude of MID begins, in the act of being welcomed by the other even before we welcome them, in a willingness to let ourselves be challenged by the difference of the other.

But this attitude is not without difficulties; the questioning it gives rise to can sometimes lead to unbearable anguish, as Henri Le Saux discovered. As is the case for the soldier-monk, here too, confrontation is real and danger is involved (Béthune 2005: 17). The risk of getting lost is inherent in interfaith dialogue. Being introduced to other ways of believing and praying can cause confusion and may even lead to a decision to change one's religion. The way of dialogue is not without pitfalls. For this reason MID insists on being well prepared, on coming to interreligious dialogue with a good understanding of one's own tradition and a deepened relationship with Christ through prayer. This requirement leads to another that is also true for the soldier-monk. Combat does not allow a bracketing of one's faith. The knight wages war and does so justified by faith. Similarly, monks in dialogue do not forget who they are, nor do they forget their relationship to Christ, when they are being welcomed by Buddhists or Hindus. According to Panikkar, the suspension of judgement, understood as the act of temporarily putting on hold what characterises me as a believer, is impossible in interreligious dialogue, because it is precisely my faith that sustains me in the encounter with the other (Panikkar 1999a: 73–81). Béthune captured this idea in his paraphrase of the Gospel: 'But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and dialogue will be given to you as well' (Béthune 1997: 113). Dialogue is not something that is added to my faith, but the way it is expressed. It is the new name for love (*Ecclesiam Suam* 73). Those who are seeking the Kingdom awaken to it and through it become agents of the works of righteousness (*GS* 72. 2).

MID does not conceive of hospitality without seeing it in relation to transcendence. It is not natural to offer a fearless welcome to the stranger who can threaten my well-being, unless I am supported by the love and strength that comes from the Spirit. Hence the all-important role of contemplative practice, because, as Merton recalls, the 'contemplative seeks to liberate his soul from all external control... and to surrender it to the truth and creative freedom of the Holy Spirit' (Merton 2003: 129). In North America, therefore, MID has been a promoter of 'centring prayer', so that Christians are prepared to engage more fully in a spiritual dialogue with the traditions of Asia.

If, as Le Saux maintains, only 'a contemplative spirituality can be the proper foundation for a pluralistic theology', contemplative prayer does not of itself lead to an attitude of hospitality towards other religions. The example of the Desert Fathers is illuminating here. It is not uncommon that monks who engage in dialogue with Eastern traditions rediscover the spirituality of the desert (Le Saux 1981: 213). However, Fabrizio Vecoli

shows that there is a disparity between the Desert Fathers and monastic interreligious dialogue with regard to welcoming the stranger. There is no doubt that the former made hospitality a key element of their spirituality, but it was offered to a minority, usually hermits who were passing through, while pagans and heretics were often rejected and identified with demons (Vecoli 2011: 167). Saint Bernard's contention that destroying evil justifies the killing of the one who bears it would seem to be applicable here. It can be argued that contemplative practice does affect the way one relates to religious otherness, but it does so in terms of the theological categories used to articulate the way religious otherness is understood. Note that for most of the Desert Fathers, the miraculous power of pagan masters is real, but it is evil and therefore must be combated. MID breaks with the exclusiveness of the first monks in its openness to ascetic practices that were developed in other religious traditions, for example Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Concretely, this means that the hospitality extended to religious otherness becomes itself an ascetic way. It is the way to mysticism (Béthune 1997: 34).

This relationship to other believers can be spoken of as the desert of otherness (*désert de l'altérité*), the third desert after the desert of sand (from which Christian monasticism emerged), and following that, the desert of stone that is the monastery. Like Jesus, monks engaged in dialogue are driven by the Spirit to this desert, where they are tried by adversity, in this case, the adversity of religious difference, and asked to reaffirm their choice for God. The demons vanquished by the monk in the space established by relationship are not demonic forces ascribed to non-Christian practices, but the human tendency to identify God with our understanding of God. The opportunity is given to break from the bonds of self-sufficiency that ultimately make it impossible to hear the various ways the divine mystery reveals itself to humans, while, at the same time, veiling itself from their sight.

Challenges and Promises of the New Paradigm

The monastic life has always found ways to flourish, even when attempts were made to eradicate it. Even more, it has been able to bring a breath of new life to society, especially in times of crisis. The way of the open-hearted Christian proposed by MID is one way it can be expressed today, when it is so easy to meet people from other religions. Note that this expression is just one way of articulating the experience of MID and, as such, does not in any way exhaust its richness and diversity. Monks in dialogue have different experiences of religious otherness and different reasons for engaging in dialogue. However, there is what could be called a typical profile of a monk in dialogue. Experience alone has little impact; reflection is needed if it is to have coherence and meaning. In other words, people are aware of MID because of the writings of those who report on interreligious encounters and systematize their understanding of monastic dialogue by giving it a theological foundation and orientation. MID is greatly indebted to a small number of people, the pioneers, of course, and also their successors such as Pierre-François de Béthune, OSB (the first Secretary General); Jean Leclercq, OSB; Pascaline Coff, OSB; James Wiseman, OSB; Mary Margaret Funk, OSB; and William Skudlarek, OSB. With limited resources and representing only a minority of the Christian monastic world, this organization dedicated itself to dialogue and worked to bring a new ecclesial consciousness to a society in crisis by promoting a spirituality that respects differences. If Christian monks who offer a welcome to followers of other religions are the hope of a better world, they are first and foremost a source of renewal within monasticism itself. They propose a monastic ideal between interiority and a dialogue that challenges a complacent routine.

In their meeting with other contemplatives, monks in dialogue rediscover in a new light the experience of God as the centre of their life. It was precisely the experience of God that was adopted as the theme of the pan-monastic conference that was held in in Bangalore in 1973. Panikkar, one of the participants, defined it as the unmediated consciousness of ultimate reality. The conference signalled a return to the basics of monastic life, which, according to Merton, do not consist of monastery walls, or the habit, or even the rule, but refers to something deeper, namely, full inner transformation. All the rest exists simply to serve this purpose (Merton 1975: 340).

This is not without consequences for what it means to live the monastic life. Called to live in the presence of the Ultimate, a monk cannot regard anything other than God as absolute. Monks, then, are by definition nonconformists, exiles with nowhere to lay their heads. As a witness to impermanence and universal relativity, simplicity, and the spirit of childhood, a monk is not attached to any religious formulation, accepting sooner or later the call to make a solitary leap into the darkness of the heart without anything to hold on to, having no recourse other than allowing oneself to be led by the Spirit to unknown places, without worrying about tomorrow or one's Christian identity. These few characteristics of the monk, as they are depicted in the literature of MID, suffice to show that MID is itself a critique of a monastic structure that pays scant attention to contemplative prayer (Merton 2003: 214) and is not attuned to the modern world. MID continues to reflect on the type of monastic life that can meet current needs and the challenges faced by the Church and the world.

Towards a New Ecclesial Conscience

The type of Church that is latent in the paradigm of the open-hearted Christian can only develop in the context of an appropriate theology, some aspects of which can be found in the literature of MID. The theological foundation for openness to otherness is primarily to be found in the dialogue of salvation that God initiates with humanity and that springs from the intrinsic relational nature of the Trinity. The providential nature of cultural and religious pluralism is another theological foundation. But what seems even more fundamental is the role of the Holy Spirit. In his speech of 22 December 1986—a text that has become foundational for MID—Pope John Paul II said that the Spirit is the source of all

true prayer, Christian and other (John Paul II 1987: 69). This idea is not new; it can already be found in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. The difference, however, is that the monk in dialogue refuses to limit the work of the Spirit to planting seeds of the Word. The Spirit does not wait for Christianity to expand its presence in other traditions, but invites Christians to deepen their awareness of its mysterious presence in dialogue with religious traditions that the Spirit has raised up outside the Church. 'Is it not incumbent on Christians', asked Le Saux, 'to try to understand the presence of the Spirit outside the boundaries that it so readily places around its activity?' (Le Saux 1966: 38). Approaching otherness in this way inevitably leads to a fundamental questioning of our theology, or better, to the theological renewal that MID calls for. This renewal is in line with recent theological developments that recover the role of the third person of the Trinity, going so far, in some cases, as to give the Holy Spirit the primary place (Phan 2013: 21–41). However, we still have to take into account Le Saux's assertion that a theology of the Spirit is impossible (Le Saux 1998: 336). Le Saux is basically warning against the temptation to define what cannot be defined. The risk is to make the Spirit into a concept, even though the Spirit is first and foremost, but not exclusively, an experience that shatters any formulation.

Hence the paradox: the increasing awareness of the action and bounty of God that comes through contact with religious otherness is accompanied by an apophatic theology that leads to a 'mutual impoverishment' and the impossibility of giving a name to the Ultimate. Humility before the greatness of God allows us to appreciate the many and varied forms of religion, even those that are foreign to us. The open-hearted Christian invites us to reclaim the divine in its immanence and transcendence. Many who have been involved in exchanges with Buddhists and Hindus call for a return to a more embodied spirituality. Through the practice of yoga or Zen, one becomes aware of the body and its importance in relation to God. Moreover, the spirituality of the monk is more embodied when it is anchored in the reality of a dialogical relationship with others. On the other hand, engaging in a contemplative way of another religion might lead to the experience of non-duality, as was the case for Le Saux, or emptiness, as was the experience of Merton. For both, their involvement with another contemplative practice deepened their appreciation of the ineffable nature of God. Finally, one is brought to the realization that the presence of Christ far surpasses what Christian piety has to say about it. 'I believe that the Church is still a child', writes Christian de Chergé. 'The Christ in whom she lives is far, far greater than she imagines' (quoted in Leray 2012).

The theological necessity of preserving the mystery of God fosters a Church that is still evolving, that refuses to base its identity on an arrogant attitude of disrespect for the other. This is a Church that chooses to be vulnerable in order to discern the signs of the times and act as leaven (*GS* 40.2), a Church that is willing to recede so that everything that is true, good, and beautiful in the human community may be elevated (*GS* 76.6). This certainly does not imply a weakened view of one's Christian identity. It is rather an affirmation of love for the master, Jesus, who became a little one with the little ones and who asks us to deny ourselves in order to follow him. By calling the Church to become poor, MID urges it not to confuse unity with uniformity and to stop preaching the catechism against people, as Henri de Lubac said. How often have theologians denigrated the religion of others in order to validate their own? The open-hearted Christian rejects any approach to other religions that would simply disqualify them by characterizing them as pantheistic, polytheistic, or animistic, often doing so without taking into account the way they are actually practiced, or—even more often—without any genuine dialogue with them. This Western propensity to categorize a priori has hindered the development of certain aspects of Christianity. Hence, according to Panikkar, the historical mission of contemplatives and, in particular, of the monk in dialogue is to 'liberate the Christian faith from the limitations of Western culture' (Béthune 2005: 15). What is needed, according to MID, is a pragmatic approach: we need to live something before we name it; we need to listen carefully and non-judgementally to what is different before proposing a systematic understanding of it. The primary intention of this pragmatic approach is not that we will be enriched by new ways of representing the divine mystery through our contact with other religions, but that our way of representing it may be impoverished and Christ may be stripped of the Western clothing that we have put him century after century. At the pan-monastic conference in Bangkok in 1968, Leclercq already spoke of a 'dehellenization' of Western monasticism, and even of the need to 'debenedictinize' Christian monasticism so that it could become a truly Asian form of monasticism and not Western monasticism in Asia. The monk in dialogue is, therefore, not afraid of novelty. On the contrary, as Béthune has written, 'we must let God create something new among us' (Béthune 1997: 95). The open-hearted Christian, therefore, aspires to a world Church that strives to bring together people of good will so that the Spirit of Christ will be free to accomplish its work of bringing individuals and the whole human family to the full realization of their dignity and reverence for their respective belongings. Perhaps this will be a way of fulfilling the hope expressed by the Second Vatican Council: '. . . thus, with the needed help of divine grace men who are truly new and artisans of a new humanity can be forthcoming' (*GS* 30. 2).

Towards a New Age of Peace

In their promotion of dialogue, monks defend the image of a Church that does not care so much about itself as about the common good (*GS* 3. 1–2). For Le Saux, the purpose of dialogue 'is not, at least in the first place, the promotion of the temporal or spiritual welfare of anyone of the groups which share in it. It aims first at the spiritual (and where necessary, the temporal) well-being of the whole of mankind, indeed of every member of the human family, in his actual situation and environment' (Le Saux 1981: 209). Very early on, MID was aware that the crisis in the world was such that the survival of the human race was at stake and that its role was to lay the foundations for a spirituality that could serve a newly emerging humanity. The human family is now united to a degree that it has never been before. We are entering a new stage of history (*GS* 4. 2), an age certainly full of promise, but one that is threatened by the powers of darkness (*GS* 37. 2). While open-hearted Christians are not opposed to the emergence of a global world, they propose that it comes into being in a culture of peace. In this sense, they are being

faithful to the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. They are attentive to the signs of the times and respond to the call to engage in a dialogue with cultures and religions (*GS* 4. 1), and to do so without any hidden agenda. Moreover, they refuse any attitude that infringes upon the dignity of persons and peoples (*GS* 25. 1).

The risk inherent in globalization is the erasure of the diversity and richness of the different identities that it represents in favour of a uniformity or standardization that serves the interests of a dominant elite. This is what Panikkar condemns when he asks: '... is pluralism the stratagem to induce people to give up their own identities in order to create a new world order in which all cats are grey, all differences abolished under the pretext of tolerance and peace?' (Panikkar 1999: 28–29). The intrareligious dialogue that he promotes, and that is promoted by monks as well, is based, rather, on a recognition of the irreducible character of otherness. MID does not urge its dialogue partners to gather around a common standard, whether that be ethics, theology, a humanitarian or environmental cause, or even an experience of the Ultimate, and even less that it submit to 'pure reason'. It does not aspire to be an organization of united religions or to strive for a single world religion, but to create a space for 'mutual trust' (*GS* 81. 4), which alone can bring about peace, doing so naturally and with respect for the specificities of each. A common ground is, however, necessary. What is the basis for the open-hearted Christian's proposal that different believers engage with one another? Contrary to much current understanding, dialogue gives reason for hope not because it reveals how similar we are, nor because it looks for ways to overcome differences, but because dialogue, in fact, elicits tension and draws us into the third desert. Christian de Chergé mused, 'Do our differences actually mean communion?' (de Chergé 1997: 111). Following a meeting with Tibetan monks, a Benedictine remarked, 'We could not really understand the Tibetans, and they did not seem very interested in our views' (Corless 1991: 11). That comment does illustrate the difficulty of dialogue, but certainly not its impossibility. For Béthune, elements that cannot be resolved create a 'force field' that eventually undermines our certitudes and leads us to deeper questions (Béthune 2014: 32). It is in this space of questioning, which coincides with the desire for a better understanding of self, of others, and of the mystery that unites them, that the monks meet. The open-hearted Christian is interested in the opening of oneself, aware that peace and unity cannot be forced, for that would run the risk of violating the dignity of persons. What can be done is the activation of one's own ability to welcome the other. That is the fundamental appeal of MID: that everyone creates in the self a space to receive and to be received in conformity with the spiritual and theological categories of their own tradition. It is in the fertile convergence of people making themselves available to one another that hospitality becomes possible and leads to a spontaneous dialogue that results in friendship and makes possible a heart-to-heart relationship.

A relationship of this kind signals the passage from communication to communion. For the open-hearted Christian, the reason such a passage is not only possible, but has actually been experienced by a Merton, a Le Saux, a Griffiths, and a de Chergé, is our primordial unity. In the words of Merton, '(...) we are already one. (...) What we have to be is what we are' (Merton 1975: 308). It should be noted that for MID, this unity is not the result of dialogue, the culmination of an effort to overcome differences. It is the starting point, from which it is possible to arrive at an understanding and appreciation

of these differences. This is a far remove from a universalist perspective that erases all particularities in an experience of the Ultimate located in a 'beyond' of all religions. It is precisely in the tension between the universal and the particular, between the one and the many, that the heart-to-heart union of the dialogue partners unfolds. It is in this common space that all of them, rooted in their respective traditions, recognize each other, not in a standardized vision of the Ultimate, but in their ardent desire to submit to it with ever greater humility. For the theologian Ewert Cousins, who had served as an advisor to the North American Commission of MID, this unity is the foundation of universal peace. It is there, he says, that each one discovers anew the wisdom of his or her religious heritage and releases the creative energy for renewed harmony among peoples (Cousins 1992: 178). MID thus lays out a middle way between, on the one hand, the risk of a world order that degrades the human person by cutting it off from its roots and its relationship to transcendence and, on the other, that of a return to Christendom, which, in reaction to this global order, adopts an anti-dialogic attitude, accusing the Church of Vatican II of complicity. In short, the open-hearted Christian does not seek to abolish borders or to push them back in order to extend power, but to cross over them in quest of mutual understanding between rootedness and openness.

Concluding Remarks

The dialogue of monks is at the level of prayer and recalls the medieval dictum, 'If the heart does not pray, the tongue labours in vain' ('*Si cor non orat, in vanum lingua laborat*') (Béthune 2014: 24). This approach to dialogue is unexpected in a Church that has long held to another dictum: 'As we worship, so we believe' ('*lex orandi, lex credendi*'). However, this kind of dialogue at the level of prayer is actually one of the most fruitful forms of dialogue, because it encapsulates the spirituality of the Gospels (Béthune 1997: 61). The principle of dialogue is truth and its way is love (Le Saux 1981: 211). To the various interreligious initiatives supported by the Church, MID contributes the dimension of gratuitousness, without which dialogue runs the risk of being reduced to negotiation, diplomatic activity, or a conversion strategy. Each of these activities has its own rationale, but they are unable to initiate the kind of change that is needed to respond to the signs of the times. Allowing themselves to be guided by the Spirit at the heart of religious otherness, monks are motivated by nothing other than the desire to do the will of God. That is why their involvement with Hindu or Buddhist meditation goes well beyond a personal practice or a monastic exchange. It contains the seeds of a theological renewal, a new ecclesial consciousness, and social transformation. Monks also act as prophets by the fact that they recognize that other believers have a prophetic function to help them, the monks, come to a better understanding of their own identity. In this regard, Merton, Le Saux, Griffiths, and de Chergé are models, not necessarily to be imitated, but whose spirit needs to be preserved. That is what MID is doing by opening the way of the open-hearted Christian to everyone. Monks are far from being the only ones who are committed to this way, but by their charism and the structure of their dialogue, they preserve and promote

it for the whole Church. Being both at the heart and on the margins of the Christian tradition gives them an unrivalled position, combining creativity and credibility in order to give humanity the means of survival, as they have often done in past times of crisis.

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PREFACE

To leave the world in order to seek salvation, to consecrate oneself to God, and to find a way of life that sustains such aims—these are impulses that have been shared by countless men and women over the centuries. Monasticism has a very long history, and it has existed in many forms. It is to be found in Christianity, and in Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and other religious traditions as well. The subject of this Handbook is Christian monasticism, which is itself a complex and variegated case. The Christian experience of monasticism is fluid, for it has evolved differently in the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican traditions, and its evolution continues in the contemporary ecumenical movement known as 'new monasticism'.

It is the intention of this book to bring together, for the first time in one volume, the multiple strands of Christian monastic practice. It is a further hope that, by presenting a broad range of approaches to the subject, the book will embolden readers to move beyond their accustomed disciplinary boundaries and to consider new possibilities and new ways of thinking about monasticism. Titles in the Oxford Handbooks Series are not meant to be encyclopedias; nor are they meant to be seen primarily as useful collections of information. A Handbook, as the publisher remarks, is intended to serve 'as a discipline map'. It surveys a field, it indicates debates and controversies, and it points to areas that are likely to repay further research.

The forty-four essays in the volume span a period of nearly two thousand years—from late ancient times, through the medieval and early modern eras, on to the present—and, in fact, to the future, for some contributors have reflected on what might lie ahead. The book's organization is for the most part chronological, and it is expansive. Its purpose is not, however, to construct a narrative history, but rather to attempt to balance some essential historical coverage with examples of what is significant and meaningful in current discussions of monasticism. The tendency of medievalists, for instance, to approach their work from a multidisciplinary perspective is instructive. Contributors have come from a variety of backgrounds, and they have addressed their topics in distinctive ways; readers of this book will note differences in outlook as well as method. We must remember, too, that monasticism is a site both of lived experience and of academic enquiry, a circumstance that gives this project a deeper resonance than might otherwise be the case. A number of contributors belong to monastic and religious orders, and their descriptions of religious life are at times especially eloquent.

Most readers will probably see the Handbook, at least initially, as a place to investigate one or two topics that are of particular interest to them. Few will open it with the intention of reading from beginning to end. Yet for me, in the course of planning the

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