

# DEMYTHOLOGIZING CELIBACY

Practical Wisdom  
from Christian and Buddhist Monasticism

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## Introduction

In the early seventies one of America's most well-known and well-published Catholic writers came out with a book called *The Jesus Myth*.<sup>1</sup> The author was Father Andrew Greeley, and many Christians were understandably shocked when they saw the title, assuming he intended to call into question the Christian faith in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. Upon reading the book, however, they quickly discovered—as Greeley made clear in a prefatory note—that he was using the word “myth” to mean not legend, but a symbolic story that reveals the inner meaning of the universe and human life.<sup>2</sup>

Celibacy has become a myth, but in two quite different senses. As a result of the recent and intense media coverage of clergy sexual abuse, many now believe that celibacy is a myth in the commonly accepted sense of the term and regard it as pure fiction, little more than a hypocritical cover-up for widespread promiscuity and abusive behavior.

At the same time, a long Catholic tradition of speaking about celibacy as a higher calling, a special charism given to a few privileged souls, has transformed celibacy into a myth by presenting it as a quasi-angelic way of life, beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. This mythologized notion of celibacy would frequently be spoken of in language so rarified that it rarely if ever dealt with the actual practice or experience of this particular way of life.

This double mythologizing of celibacy—dismissing it on the one hand, divinizing it on the other—has made it almost impossible to think or speak of it as a normal—though admittedly not

common—way of life, one that is especially suited to those who are intent on devoting themselves to developing the life of the spirit.

Conversation with Buddhist monks who maintain their ancient tradition of following the celibate path is one way of coming to understand that celibacy can be lived with integrity and can be meaningful without being in any way connected to the “myth” of Jesus or even belief in a personal God.

The seeds for this book were sown in October 2004 when fourteen Buddhist and Catholic monks who reside in North America came together for the first meeting of “Monks in the West.” The conference was organized by Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID), the North American branch of an international organization of Catholic monks and nuns committed to fostering interreligious and intermonastic dialogue at the level of spiritual practice and experience. The meeting was hosted by Dharma Master Heng Lyu and Reverend Heng Sure at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, California. Representatives of various monastic traditions within Buddhism and Catholicism spent two full days together sharing their experience of the rewards and challenges of living the monastic life in a Western secular culture. I was privileged to be part of that conversation.

We devoted the first day of our meeting to spiritual autobiographies. Each of us recounted what drew us to the monastic way of life and, more important, what keeps us there. Some of the participants said they knew they wanted to be a monk when they were still young boys; for others the attraction to monastic life came later in life, after they had undergone an existential crisis (“I am going to die”) or experienced the emptiness and sometimes bitter aftertaste of material success and sensual pleasure.

For some, becoming a monk meant going to a far-off land to embrace a new and exotic culture; for others being in the monastery was not all that different from the life they had experienced growing up in a tightly knit ethnic or religious community where everyone shared the same values and customs. In some cases the monastic life offered expanded opportunities for edu-

cation, work, and travel; for others it demanded they renounce the success they had achieved and the possibility of further advancement in a chosen profession.

Some who became celibate monks had been married or in one or more relationships; others acknowledged that they entered monastic life without ever having experienced a sexual relationship, or even because they were afraid of their sexuality and wanted to avoid dealing with it. More often than not, they discovered that denial and repression only made it more difficult to deal with sexual issues later in life.

There were stories of difficult relationships with superiors or confreres, some of which continued to cause pain and distrust. Others spoke of superiors who trusted and supported them during times of vocational crisis and in this way helped them to trust themselves and to deepen their commitment to the way of life they had chosen.

Stories were told of the struggle to remain faithful to contemplative monastic practices while responding to the many demands that are made of monks—especially of superiors—either by their own communities or by others. “How can we keep our best monks from burning out?” was a question that was asked repeatedly.

Toward the end of the meeting, as we named some of the common questions and concerns that emerged, we acknowledged how often we had expressed our conviction that monastic life, lived fully and well, is a powerful expression of a rich and fully human existence. Since both Buddhist and Catholic monks refrain from sexual activity and from the possession of personal property, we asked what it is about these central monastic renunciations that help a monk become a well-rounded, authentic human being.

When we turned to the question of holding a future meeting, the rapport, friendship, and encouragement we had experienced left little doubt that we wanted to continue our relationship. We also wanted to invite other monks to experience the richness of an interreligious conference that focused specifically on monastic issues.

The topic for a follow-up meeting emerged quickly and was unanimously accepted: “Authentic Practices of Celibacy and Intimacy in Monastic Communities of Men.” We agreed to meet again in two years to examine the teaching of our respective monastic traditions on celibacy as well as to consider how celibacy is actually lived out in our monastic communities. Our purpose in doing this would be to learn from one another how we might live the monastic life more authentically and thereby become more fully integrated and self-transcending human beings.

Monks in the West II took place at Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, in October 2006. Twelve Buddhists joined ten Catholics for a three-day conversation on celibacy and the monastic way of life. The conference was divided into three parts: the “Why” of celibacy (*Theoria*); the “How” of celibacy (*Praxis*); the “What if . . .” of celibacy (*Therapia*).

Each discussion was introduced by presentations on Buddhist and Catholic approaches to the topic, one of which, Brother Gregory Perron’s paper, “Entering the Heart of our Heart: A Reflection on the Why of Catholic Monastic Celibacy,” appears in full in *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue’s* online Bulletin (no. 78): [www.monasticdialogue.org/](http://www.monasticdialogue.org/).

This book is not intended to be a report on Monks in the West II per se.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it might best be described as a modest effort to demythologize, reevaluate, and reflect on the meaning and practice of Catholic celibacy—specifically Catholic *monastic* celibacy—in the light of some Buddhist teachings and practices as these were heard and understood by a Catholic participant. If certain aspects of the tradition and practice of celibacy are treated in detail while other important dimensions are only alluded to, the reason—in part, at least—is that my reflections on celibacy were shaped by the presentations that were given prior to each session of the conference: Venerable Kusala Bhikshu and Brother Gregory Perron, OSB, on *Theoria*; Venerable Berthold Olson and Father Terrence Kardong, OSB, on *Praxis*; Ajahn Pun-nadhammo and Abbot John Klassen, OSB, on *Therapia*. Since the entire conference was recorded, it was possible to incorporate insights and points of view that emerged during the course of

the discussions. I also used and wish to acknowledge with gratitude a paper Reverend Jisho Perry wrote in preparation for the conference in which he developed a Buddhist understanding of the meaning and purpose of monastic celibacy.

Along with the other Catholic monks who took part in the conference, I was deeply impressed by our Buddhist brothers' commitment to the practice of celibacy as a path to liberation and wisdom, as well as by their understanding and willing acceptance of the demands of a chaste celibate life. As we listened to one another, we became more conscious of significant differences between some Buddhist teachings and practices and those of the Christian tradition. However, rather than concluding that if one view is accepted as right, the other must be rejected as wrong, we recognized that the teachings and practices of different spiritual traditions can complement one another, and that a particular spiritual path can only be fully understood and appreciated by those who have chosen to walk it.

When people of diverse religious traditions speak openly of their personal convictions and listen nonjudgmentally to the convictions of others, they often become more appreciative of the strengths of their own beliefs and practices, and, at the same time, more aware of their weaknesses. That was certainly true for the Catholic monks who participated in *Monks in the West II*. As we grew in our understanding of celibacy as a path to spiritual growth, we recognized the ways in which the Christian teaching and practice of celibacy have been shaped by and given expression to a deep love for God and neighbor. But we also recognized that the Christian understanding and practice of celibacy have been distorted by misogyny and an exaggerated suspicion of the body.

Another important awareness that emerged from this conference was how uncritically Catholics tend to think and speak about the monastic way of life (and therefore about celibacy) as a uniquely Christian phenomenon. Nothing could be further from the truth. To "demythologize" celibacy also means becoming aware that at its deepest level monasticism is an expression of something fundamental to the human person: the thirst for that which is ultimate. For that reason, some have spoken of a

monastic “archetype” present in every human being.<sup>4</sup> The monk is one who willingly—though not always without pain—renounces lesser goods, choosing “blessed simplicity” in order to devote himself entirely to the pursuit of what will fully satisfy his longing.

Celibacy is further “demythologized” when we become conscious of the fact that monasticism as an institutionalized, celibate way of life in support of an intense search for meaning, integration, and perfection flourished in the Hindu and Buddhist world of Southeast and East Asia centuries before the birth of Jesus and continues to be practiced by contemporary monks of these religious traditions. Christian monasticism articulates the archetypal monastic vocation by making it into a response to Jesus’ invitation to seek perfection by abandoning everything, caring for the poor, and following him: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. . . . And everyone who has left houses<sup>5</sup> or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:21, 29). By adding this specifically Christian understanding to the practice of celibacy—itself a “natural” rather than “supernatural” phenomenon—Christian monks demonstrate the meaning of the dictum of Scholastic theology that grace supposes and builds on nature (*gratia supponit naturam*); it does not supplant or destroy it.

Celibacy is the most characteristic feature of the monk, male or female. In his masterful work on John Cassian my confrere, Father Columba Stewart, speaks of the intentional celibacy of the monastic life as “the principal marker of its social distinctiveness.”<sup>6</sup> Its meaning and significance for Christian monks will be closely related to their desire to follow Jesus by giving their lives to God alone. But celibacy also has enormous meaning and significance for monks who are not Christians or theists. Once we come to know and appreciate the spiritual witness of monks from other religious traditions, it is no longer possible to say that celibacy can only be lived with integrity and generosity if it is understood as an expression of total and exclusive devotion to

Christ, to the kingdom of God, and to the church. This is the meaning celibacy has for Christians, but to imply that it is the only reason for celibacy fails to take into account the wisdom to be found in the teaching and practice of a monastic tradition that predates ours by at least six centuries and continues to enrich the world today.

I should be clear at the outset that this book will not address the important and thorny question of obligatory celibacy for Roman Catholic priests. The focus here is on chaste celibacy as an essential component—along with the renunciation of personal property and egoism—of the monastic or, more generally, the vowed religious life. Nor does it address the question of celibacy for women, and thus gender specific language will generally be used.

Finally, it should be noted that while the teaching of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, was very much a part of Monks in the West II, especially in the presentation and discussion on the “why” of celibacy from the Catholic point of view, Merton’s personal struggles with celibacy toward the end of his life were never alluded to, much less discussed. Nonetheless, I have decided to devote an entire chapter to this crucial period of Merton’s life because it so clearly and dramatically demonstrates the meaning of celibacy for those called to the monastic life and the struggle of one monk to remain true to his calling.

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William Skudlarek, OSB

June 24, 2007

Feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

Patron of Monks