Increased contact with other religious traditions and their own lived experience has invited Catholic monasteries to explore temporary vocations as a means of true renewal.

Temporary Monasticism

By M. BASIL PENNINGTON

In certain Buddhist cultures it has always been the accepted practice that boys and young men would become monks for a year or two, or longer, before going on to marriage and a career. The time spent in the monastic habit was a time for coming to know one’s self, to touch the Ground of Being and become a person of compassion.

Classical Hinduism recognizes four stages in a man’s life. The first is that of the brahmachari, the life of a student under a master or guru, usually spent in an ashram following the monastic way of life. Only after passing through this was a man thought fit for the life of the “householder.” Years later, when he had completed his responsibility as a father with the marriage of his oldest grandson, he would return to the monastic way, perhaps with his wife, to pursue there a holiness and dedication that might prepare him for the fourth stage, that of total renunciation.

Within the Christian tradition there has not been such a formal recognition of the contribution that a time in the monastic way might make to a man’s life. The call to the monastery has traditionally been seen as a call to a permanent life apart. However, there has always been a period of trial before one permanently embraces a lifetime commitment. In the Eastern Christian tradition this has been treated with greater flexibility than in the West. A man might remain a novice all his life, taking the monastic habit only on his death bed. Thus it was possible that a man might spend any number of years in the monastic way and still be free to leave and embrace the married state with all its secular responsibilities. A stronger


legalism in the West tended to mark out the period of novitiate very precisely, though more recent legislation extended this period of probation by adding the requirement of some years of temporary profession. The fact is that for most who actually enter monasteries, monasticism proves to be a temporary vocation. Relatively few of those who come as postulants ever make solemn vows. And in our times we have even seen not a few of those who have made such vows apply to the dispensing faculty of the church to be released from them.

Increased contact with other religious traditions, so strongly encouraged by the Second Vatican Council, plus their own lived experience, has invited Christian monastics to explore even this area in their efforts to bring about a true renewal of monastic life in the church today. Many Catholic monasteries are now welcoming temporary vocations.

The way in which this participation in the monastic life is being offered is widely variant. Assumption Abbey, the Cistercian (Trappist) monastery near Ava, Mo., after an initial exploratory visit, welcomes men right into a full participation in the life of the community. The men are accepted for a month or longer, with the understanding that there will be a periodic review. If it is seen that the monastic way is not proving fruitful, the man is encouraged to look elsewhere for what he is seeking.

Other monasteries have a more precise program for temporary monastics, sometimes called long-term retreatants. At New Melleray Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa, the third floor of their large guesthouse has been given over to its Monastic Associate Program. The time one participates in this program varies from a week to several months. St. Benedict’s Abbey in Snowmass, Colo., has a very well defined six-month program that begins on a precise date when three or four men are ready to take part in it. Here perhaps more than anywhere else, the program has led to the participants deciding to move ahead into the novitiate with the intention of a permanent commitment.

I have spoken so far only of men. Though temporary...
monasticism for women seems to have been wholly lacking in the other traditions as well as our own, today this too is a possibility. The Abbey of Our Lady of the Mississippi in Dubuque, Iowa, offers a “Long Term Guest Program.” Women are welcomed for anywhere from six weeks to six months, with the possibility of extending the period. The participants live in the community and share in all the activities of the community except the chapter meetings.

So far, about a dozen have taken part in the program at Our Lady of the Mississippi—religious, married women and even a lay hermitess. Both the community and the participants have been “extremely well satisfied.”

This has also been the evaluation of almost all the programs in monasteries of men. For example, Steve spent a year at Assumption Abbey before returning to his ministry as lay activist for social reform. The community at Ava was sorry to see him leave. For his part, Steve found the time spent in the Abbey sent him back renewed, far better prepared to meet the trying demands of his important ministry. Father David, a middle-aged Jesuit, found six months in a Trappist monastery a wonderful break in his successful teaching career, the best of sabbaticals.

Some monasteries welcome temporary vocations as an important part of their “recruitment” program. And some, indeed, offer such an opportunity only to those who are thinking in terms of a possible permanent vocation. Others, however, go so far as to exclude from participation in the temporary monastic program anyone who is thinking of a more permanent commitment, offering a different and separate program for these candidates. Thus, Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey in Lafayette, Ore., which has a “Long Term Resident Program” that welcomes men for one to three months and occasionally six months, conducts a separate “Observer Program” for candidates to the permanent community and desires to keep participants in the two programs quite distinct. Certainly the experience one has of the monastic life when he considers a lifetime commitment is quite different from that of one who comes to stay only a few months or a year. The kind of relationship he establishes with the community would be different.

Our Lady of Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, S.C., which has had a very successful “Monastic Guest Program” for some 10 years, welcoming men for a month to a year, has recently developed a “Monastic Affiliate Program” that looks to allowing men to join the community in a rather flexible way for an open-ended sojourn, which is periodically evaluated.

SOME COMMUNITIES open their program to Christians of other churches and even to non-Christians, while others restrict participation to Catholics. Most communities limit the number of temporary monastics they will accept, usually in proportion to the size of the permanent community. Thus the number of men and women accepted for temporary monasticism is fairly restricted. Some monasteries give the participants a special garb, at least for choir, but most leave them in their regular secular attire. In most of these programs the participants are not asked to contribute anything for room and board. They are, rather, expected to take their part in the daily labors of the community and thus earn their daily bread just like the rest of the community. However, some communities are open to the possibility that some candidates might prefer to devote themselves more fully to prayer and study and will accept some remuneration in place of the daily labor.

The screening process described by Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Va., which accepts men for one to three months, outlines what is probably the common “screening process” for temporary monastics: “The applicant must come for a preliminary stay (one week) and interview. He must have a serious prayer life and appropriate personality traits to live in a monastic community. If deemed unacceptable, he would be told this. We have a review at the end of one month if it is a three-month request, to be sure all things are going smoothly for the candidate and the community.” Some communities, like Assumption Abbey, will allow the initial visit to evolve into the longer stay, especially if the candidate has come from a distance and has had previous written contact with the community about his temporary vocation. On the other hand, some require more previous contact, such as Guadalupe Abbey, which asks three prior visits. There seem to be no age limits, though in fact most of the participants so far have been young or middle-aged.

While classically, in other traditions, the temporary monastic period has been a preparation for adult life, Catholic men have also been finding it a useful experi-

(Continued on p. 385)
Love Stew

IT IS NO SECRET that falling in love demands that both lover and beloved be aggressively selective in their perceptions of each other. From Shakespeare’s love-poisoned midsummer lovers in an ersatz Elizabethan Athens to Cher and Nicholas Cage hopelessly moonstruck in a Hollywoodized Brooklyn, fantasy’s victory over reality has been essential to romantic comedy.

Add to this dramatic stew an Italian operatic sensibility that idealizes the American male macho insensitivity and the Oriental female susceptibility to victimization—as exhibited in Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly.” The story actually deals, however, with a French diplomat who is—at least in his own mind—a klutz in his own country but at least tall in China, and a transvestite actor in the Beijing opera who is the object of the French diplomat’s affection. This indicates the complexity of the ideas that drive David Henry Hwang’s extraordinary new play, M. Butterfly.

The Chinese-American playwright boldly dramatizes the energetic acts of self-delusion necessary for the diplomat to maintain a relationship with a transvestite for 20 years. Hwang is secure in his Oriental and Occidental dramatic roots: If it is hard to believe that Shakespeare’s Queen of the Fairies, Titania, could fall for an ass, it is even harder to believe she would fall for Bottom—pun obviously intended—who was apparently less attractive to her as a lower-class British man than as an animal.

And if Cher is moonstruck, John Lithgow as French diplomat Rene Gallimard is thunderstruck. The object of his affection is the transvestite actor, Song Liling, played by B.D. Wong, who toys with him, torments him, satisfies him, sets him up and knocks him down for 20 years. He/she even provides him with a child.

But B.D. Wong’s Song Liling is clearly a man acting like a woman. Though somewhat disquieting in the first two acts, this wise acting decision reaps bountiful fruit in the third act where it becomes clear that Gallimard may well have also recognized the ruse all along. Hwang reverses the usual route by which a butterfly frees itself from a cocoon by having Wong silently transform himself from outrageous female impersonator to dapper 1988 male; by means of makeup removal and a simple costume change, Wong tucks whole halves of himself into a Giorgio Armani-clad cocoon.

Eventually stripping away even these sartorial artifacts to stand naked before his former worshiper, Wong confronts an Occidental male who persists in seeing only what he wants to see. With male-like bullheadedness, Gallimard demands fantasy, not reality, thus joining the ranks of Occidental dramatic heroines like Blanche Dubois. To quote Eric Bentley, Gallimard’s “perception is riveted to need.” But the self-deception is mutual; for just as Gallimard needs to delude himself, Song Liling needs to believe that Gallimard is capable of accepting the real Song who stands there naked, a mix of truth and falsehood, female and male, East and West, but real.

This EXTRAORDINARILY imaginative play is a set of dramatic Chinese boxes that eventually destroys itself in a blaze of male and female self-immolation. It is also a dizzying play of ideas with a shattering climax inevitably destined by the characters who embody the ideas. “M. Butterfly” establishes David Henry Hwang as the voice of the Asian-American experience as Maya Angelou, James Baldwin and others have been the voice of the Afro-American.

The blood-red set and exquisite costumes by Eiko Ishioka provide an ideal extension of the play’s dualities. Only John Dexter’s occasionally awkward direction of the minor characters mars the production. But even his clumsy British directing technique accidentally adds another national accent to this extraordinary transnational and transsexual—but quintessentially American—love stew.

GARY SEIBERT

M. BASIL PENNINGTON
(Continued from p. 381)

ence at transition periods. For example, Bill was a most successful entrepreneurial capitalist (to use his own description of himself). In his late 30’s he came into contact with monasticism and was amazed to find men as dedicated to getting close to God as he had been to getting close to money. Realizing no man can serve two masters, he spent three years detaching himself from his many financial operations. With this complete, he plans to spend a year in a temporary monastic program to discern what is next for him while he deepens his union with God through prayer.

In discovering temporary monasticism, Catholic monasteries have discovered another avenue through which they can make an effective contribution to the health and holiness of the whole church in response to Pope Paul VI’s request that monastic communities share the riches of their life in ways that are consonant with the integrity of that life.

DAVID E. DECOSSE
(Continued from p. 384)

poverty, means giving up wanting what we don’t need. Life settles back into being—not passive, but full of truth, love, justice. Every aspect of life—birth, death, drugs, sex, housing and indifferent politicians—is a part of an always redeeming mystery of love in which we participate. “The gift is life which comes from God—God’s own life,” the pastor said.

During Advent, Father Grange relishes the seemingly impossible promises of Isaiah: The virgin shall be with child; the shoot shall sprout from the barren stump of Jesse. Isaiah also proclaims: “The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.”

Father Grange thought of life now in the South Bronx. “It’s not the way it’s supposed to be,” he said. Then he thought of the prophecy and the fullness of time, and his faith in the message softened the streets around the church. “There is that in the world,” he said. “There is that promise, that harmony, and it will take place.”

AMERICA APRIL 9, 1988

385