CHAPTER 5

Redefinition of the Role of Monks in Modern Society: Economy as Monastic Opportunity

Isabelle Jonveaux

Fewer and fewer young people today wish to become a monk or a nun. The scarcity of vocations is now taken for granted in Roman Catholic Church, and some communities in West Europe are searching solutions to avoid closing. Does that mean that secularized society no longer needs monasteries and “administrators of salvation goods” as Max Weber (1995) put it? At the opposite of this decline and marginalization of consecrated life as lived out by the professed, we notice a growing interest in monastic life through more and more people who come to monastery for a visit, a retreat or only to buy monastic products at the shop. The problem is not so much that monastic life is outmoded but rather that monks and nuns are less and less present in society as religious professionals, as though religious virtuosi are no longer plausible in secularized society.

In this chapter I will seek to investigate the renewed role of monasticism in a society that is no longer interested in eschatological salvation. In this effort, I choose to enter monastic reality through economics, and I will seek to demonstrate in this chapter the pertinence of this approach. After having explained in a first part the place of economy in monastic communities and what its study reveals about monastic life and its evolution, I will discuss the new commercial activities of monasteries and the new role that they may give to monasteries in a secularized society.

My contribution is based on field inquiries and interviews with monks and nuns carried on between 2004 and today in male and female monasteries in France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and Austria. The communities that I studied belong to Benedictine, Cistercian and Trappist orders.

What Does Economy Reveal About Monastic Life?

It is obvious that monasteries are not primary groups of economic action oriented toward a performance in this sphere. But monasteries nevertheless “engage in economic activities” and are, according to Max Weber,
“regulatory groups...whose norms regulate the economic behavior of the participants and whose organs do not continuously direct economic activities through participation, concrete instructions or injunctions” (1978: 339–341). Because monastics live together and live out all aspects of their life in the same place, hence are in this sense “total institutions” (Goffman 1961), monastic communities are also confronted with the economic aspect of existence, even though they originally aimed to free themselves from earthly conditions.

Before I explain how commercial activities could give new opportunities for monastic communities to conserve plausibility in secularized society, we have to pay attention to what economy means in a monastic context. It particularly has to be placed in the perspective of tensions present in monastery between religious life and economic activity.

**Economy and Religious Life: A Long Story**

It would take far too long to explain the whole history of the topic of work and economy in monasticism, but I will briefly mention the key points of this debate. From the very beginning of monasticism, work and economy generated deep tensions within religious life. As Christian men and women wanted to go out of the world and give themselves totally to prayer and contemplation, monks at first thought that they did not need to work: God would provide for their survival. The works of the Desert Fathers, for example, include stories of monks who received their food directly from angels (Guy 1993), but the Desert Fathers also quickly realized that they could not live as angels and that work was a necessity for their material or biological survival. Subsequently monastic work was institutionalized through rules such as that of Pachomius (†346) and later, of course, the famous rule of Saint Benedict (†550) which even integrates work in the definition of monk: “When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks” (Rule: Chap. 48). Nevertheless the tension between work or economy and prayer life did not disappear with the redaction of rules or institutionalization of communities in defined monasteries but continues throughout the whole history of monasticism. More particularly, this question has often been the cause of reforms or creations of new monastic movements. The balance between manual labor and prayer often produced a genuine economic rationalism that led to a famous paradox underlined by Max Weber (1948: 334):