ABBAZIA BENEDETTINA DI S. VINCENZO AL VOLTURNO

The role and prospects of monasticism in society in the third millennium

Monasticism in the era of globalization

Prolusion by the Governor of the Bank of Italy
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Staying outside the world, away from its confusion, from involvement in private and public affairs, devoting himself to the spiritual life and to work in a dimension at once personal and communitarian, allows the monk better to grasp from afar what is happening in the world, outside the monastery.

Many times in the course of history monks have been called upon to shoulder responsibility in society. Gregory the Great had to leave his retreat on the Celian Hill to assume the papacy. He sent missionaries to a land that in the sixth century was on the fringe of the known world, Hibernia; their memory and their legacy are very much alive today.

Monasticism arose before Monte Cassino; it penetrated and spread in Italy and Europe beginning in the fourth century. The Eastern monks, among whom Anthony, Gregory Nazianzen and Basil are towering figures, preferred asceticism and study. With *labora*, added to *ora* by Benedict, monasticism began to exert a more direct influence on a society where there remained only memories and ruins of the Empire.

In our land the population of Latin and Roman descent had dwindled with wars and the demographic crisis; the countryside lay abandoned, grown wild. The new conquerors came wave upon wave, imposing their rule on the old inhabitants. With monasticism, moved by a purely spiritual intent but not neglectful of man as a whole, from the eighth century onwards several requisites of civil live were restored — a social organization and attention to work and the production of essential goods.

In the monastery the culture of the Franks fused with that of the Lombards, as a new civilization emerged.

In the eleventh century Monte Cassino was at the height of its power; as always it was in very close contact with Rome. To the north of Rome flourished imperial Farfa, bound to the Carolingians. To the south, San Vincenzo, at the mouth of the Volturno, had grown to become the largest monastic city of Europe before the Saracens laid it waste in the ninth century; it was a profoundly Benedictine centre, but it too was open to exchange with the Franks and the Carolingians, and, most significantly, it maintained close relations with the

Lombards of Benevento. The Lombard and Frankish foundations in the North and South of Italy were numerous.

Amidst crises and schisms, in the search for an original spirit that repeatedly threatened to fade away, a series of reformed orders were born: Cistercians, Monte Oliveto, Carthusians, Celestines.

Towards the end of the first millennium, while the Basilians remained firmly entrenched in southern Italy up to Latium, the Benedictines had already begun to “unify” Europe.

Many of their monasteries exist to this day, rich in prestige and cultural heritage, in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, the British Isles, the Iberian peninsula. Despite the oppression of the past half century, vivid is the memory of the Benedictine presence in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and other nations of Central and Eastern Europe.

Under the impetus imparted by the monastic communities, agricultural activity revived in the early Middle Ages; the manorial economy came into being and markets were organized. After 1000, with the increase in economic and cultural exchange and the growth in the population, the rebirth of cities began.

The library of the abbey of Monte Cassino was drawn upon by the fathers of the Italian language. By saving classical culture from oblivion, by spreading language, writing and knowledge in actualizing the precept to work and pray, monasticism profoundly influenced the history and civilization of the Middle Ages and Western culture.

With the growth of cities beginning in the thirteenth century and the revival of trade, the mendicant orders arose. The monk’s link with a particular place and monastery was superseded by the friar’s relationship with his order.

The commendam was instituted at the beginning of the fifteen century as a remedy for decline, but it brought with it a centuries-long hiatus in the contribution of monastic life and spirituality to Western civilization.

The friars filled the cities of Europe with their preaching and animated the great universities with research and debate. They ventured to the Far East. With the discovery of the New World, they reached the shores of the Pacific and then the southern part of that hemisphere. They took a clear position in the ensuing great debate over whether the Indians were human; they contributed to stopping the slaughter and strove to elevate them.

With the Counter-Reformation there arose new orders dedicated to the pursuit of essentially spiritual and religious aims that in practice were also of profound civil import.

Their Statutes were diverse, reflecting the times, the goals, the spirit of the founders; the undergirding is always the Benedictine Rule.

In 2000, at the start of the century of globalization and new technologies, the problem of the monk's relationship with the world is posed anew.

Globalization is a historic watershed comparable to the great geographical discoveries and the invention of printing between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As in the Middle Ages, at time of severe crises and epochal changes, new problems — continually arising and demanding action — can get a detached reading and response from those who are not pursuing immediate interests, who are no longer directly involved.

The monk, placing himself outside of time, can once again teach men how better to live their own time.

Who is to say that in the coming decades and in the course of this century it will not be possible to give life to a new historic contribution, starting out from spiritual values and culture, for action on behalf of men and society?

Labor and *lectio* are again summoned to a great test.

More immediately, the monk and the friar can speak to the marginalized and the disinherited; to all people, of peace and brotherhood; and, further, of nature and the ecosystem.

This task is inscribed in the monastic life and in the monastic path of inner liberation that "makes the monk a man of charity", as John Paul II says in the Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen*.

The radicalization of dualism, which in contemporary societies often pits the religious against the secular domain, can surely stimulate fruitful engagement, in keeping with the grand tradition of monasticism.

The precariousness of the lives of multitudes of men and dramas such as poverty strengthen the conscience in the decision to forsake material certainties. They summon everyone to greater openness towards others.

Monasteries, workshops of eschatological wisdom, can increasingly be a concrete reference point on the path of understanding, of love for one's neighbour.

The globalization of trade, finance and people has altered the parameters of our knowledge and actions. In its most recent forms it is based on the computer revolution. It can generate benefits but also foment inequality and exacerbate already severe imbalances. It sets international cooperation on a new basis.

The weaker countries must be succored for the possible impacts; their difficulty in adjusting and reacting has economic, social and political consequences.

It is necessary to carry on with determination and commitment in fully implementing the initiatives to step up international support for these countries. They must be given access to new technologies with which to increase their production of more advanced goods, starting out with the raw materials and natural resources that many of them have in abundance.

A new international division of labour is necessary.

The concern, unease and protests over globalization must be channeled in the right direction for the positive contribution they can make when not expressed in violent form.

The answer lies in the way the benefits can be maximized and spread and disadvantages reduced.

The response to globalization requires global institutions and new forms of participation. A new international economic order is on the agenda.

With regard to migrations, regulation and the necessary processes of integration constitute the main immediate issue to be addressed once untenable prohibitionist visions have been laid to rest. Regulatory action must not only satisfy the demands of security and legality, but also establish requisites of consistency and compatibility, above all at the level of legal principles, in the forms of integration. It is necessary to safeguard the identities of the host countries and to ensure the fertile, non-conflictual assimilation of those positions and traditions of the newcomers that are compatible. Unity must be recomposed around a shared core of values, of rights and duties, of loyalty to the constitution of the host country. Some of the choices made by our neighbours are examples that merit close examination.

The vision of the world as riven by actual or potential conflicts of civilization is misleading. While recognizing identities, which certainly do not cease to exist with the crisis of the nation-state, convergence and integration can give birth to a new, higher synthesis.

The other great category of issues on which we must reflect is work. Work has not ended; there has been yet another transformation in the ever-changing way of fulfilling the command to subdue the earth and have dominion over it.

Man struggles to satisfy the need to work, to procure the goods essential for a decent life.

Unemployment remains a severe problem, particularly among young people, in many regions and areas of our country.

Both in our more advanced systems and in the backward ones, unemployment is the prime form of exclusion from economic and social life and hence from the fullness of civil life; it is first of all a factor of economic inefficiency, considering the waste of labour resources, the lost output of goods and services and the unexpressed demand for these products.

The fact that hosts of young people can risk reaching adulthood without ever having had a chance to work deprives humanity of a potential resource and is an affront to human nature.

It is the task of the governing classes to give young people a tomorrow, to invest, to bet on the future.

The commitment of the State, the social partners, the international organizations, is necessary.

To provide work means being able to promote the growth of the economy, to raise competitiveness, to confront the problem of innovation in the remuneration of labour. It means changing industrial relations; it means seeking to achieve agreements between the social partners for a new incomes policy for growth and employment, not considering this unattainable; it means bringing underground economic activities to the surface and making it possible for them to endure once they have emerged; it means devising and implementing policies that will make effective the right to work enshrined in our Constitution.

Man — be he worker or entrepreneur — is not just an expression of economic needs; he is more than ever, to return to Aristotle, a social animal. The motives for action are not reducible solely to the categories of self-interest, but include, prominently and according to the great scholastic tradition, those of social duty, of service. These principles

are to be found in Kantian morals. The logical consequence of imagining the profit motive as the foundation of human nature would be to justify the most unbridled laissez-faire or social Darwinism, in a vision that would ultimately bestow legitimacy on *homo homini lupus*.

Let us not mistake means for ends: the economy is at the service of man.

Markets and competition work to the benefit of progress if everyone seeks to outdo the others within the bounds of proper conduct. But if the idea in facing one's competitors is to harm them, then competition will not generate an advance but possibly a retreat, because those supplying the best goods are hindered by the obstructionist manoeuvres of the worst. Just think of bribery and extortion or other forms of economic crime.

Ethics does not consist in an ordered system of principles to apply only after business has already been transacted in a wildcat market as a sort of provision for repairing damage already done. Ethics is an integral part of production and exchange, of competition itself. Observance of the principles of correct conduct fosters these activities. Indeed, no economy can prosper without compliance with such rules. Economic activity must be conducted in accordance with the rules of commutative justice.

The market, however, is not all. It registers demand, not needs. Let me recall the teaching of *Mater et Magistra*. As an indication of the broad convergence that can be achieved around this vision of the market, I should like to quote from Luigi Einaudi's *Lessons on Social Policy*: *"Keep in mind that to assert that the market is the best instrument for directing the economy to produce goods and services exactly in the quantity and of the quality corresponding to men's demand is not to hold that the market also directs the production of goods and services in the quantity and of the quality that men would wish. Men express what demand they can, with the means, the money, at their disposal. Had they other, greater wherewithal, they would express a different demand: for a greater quantity of the same goods, or for other goods, different in quality. What is satisfied in the market is demand, not wants or needs."*

In the face of the inequalities that the workings of the market inevitably generate, there thus arises the need for distributive justice. It is entrusted to the State, which must create conditions in which every citizen can contribute to economic progress. This is where taxation and public spending come in.

Politics must intervene, taking the high ground.

Plainly opposed to such a vision are theories of the "minimal State", but also views inspired by a pervasive statism, denying political and economic freedom.

Man cannot be one-dimensional; knowledge may be divided, not whole, but only when this serves to satisfy the methodological needs of cognition and to achieve productive efficiency.

The collapse of some ideals may lead to an emphasis on the pragmatism of weak thought or to the paradoxical ideology of the impossibility of any and all ideals.

In the face of what is now the worldwide challenge of social, political and economic problems, more than ever the world needs strong thought to blend into a single, organic vision the exigencies of the present, the assertion of the dignity of the individual and the higher destiny of every man.

Activities in which non-profit organizations are engaged are not part of the market. The field encompasses health care, education, art, and assistance to the weakest and neediest. In the Middle Ages this sphere was the virtually exclusive preserve of the Church. With the reform movement of the sixteenth century some European countries began to regulate these activities, removing them from the realm of canon law.

In continental Europe, assistance to the poor and other public services were long provided essentially by religious institutions. Later, middle-class associations and workers' mutual aid societies developed.

Between the State on one side and the market on the other, intermediate institutions have emerged to respond to the social problems of our age. These are the manifestation of new forms of organization and relations within society.

Surveys have found that some six million people in Italy are engaged in volunteer work, but the non-profit and voluntary sector has not yet achieved the importance it has in the other leading industrial countries.

In part, the activity of private voluntary organizations overlaps with public welfare programmes.

In the sphere of welfare, the area in which these new forms of assistance can operate is destined to expand, in view among other things of the necessary reduction in public intervention.

Volunteer work springs from an ethical motivation. Its greater effectiveness in satisfying some needs, such as those of personal assistance, stems from closeness, from personal knowledge of problem situations, from the traditionally small size of these organizations.

The strengths of such intervention are great flexibility, informality, and independence of operation. Alongside the increasingly urgent needs of a complex society, new forms of poverty have now emerged. Allaying them is a public function; but the voluntary and non-profit sector can be involved more systematically than is now the case.

Often government is unable to cope with social and collective needs because it has difficulty in recognizing them promptly and responding appropriately. Voluntary associations are more familiar with the new social needs and better able to respond swiftly and effectively.

Appropriating even a small portion of the resources made available by the reduction of government action to the voluntary and non-profit sector is a way of preventing a cut-back in the level of protection provided to the neediest.

Italian welfare state institutions were formed during the fifties and sixties, in a period of rapidly growing employment. There was confidence in the possibility, with the help of economic policy action, of achieving and maintaining full employment.

In the past two decades the growth rate of the industrial economies has fallen significantly.

The social security model devised when economic growth rates were so high is now faced with the threat of crisis.

A rethinking of public intervention, to concentrate resources on the defence of society's weakest, is inescapable.

Reforming the welfare state to preserve its essence is the responsible course, and it is urgent.

Changes in the pension system are necessary to assure the availability of benefits in the long run, eliminating rules and arrangements that clash with this objective. This is the most important of the structural reforms which it is our duty to introduce, also for the sake of to future generations.

Solidarity between the members of society is an essential part of organized political life. The deepening of inequality, social exclusion, and the formation of new pockets of poverty undermine the very basis of civic life.

There is matter here for reflection upon designs for fuller economic democracy.

Education is a public good. But it is "public" by nature, by purpose; this does not imply that it must necessarily be provided by the State.

The specific organization of the school system can be entrusted in part to the initiative of the citizens themselves who, provided that they comply with certain fundamental requirements, can choose the type of education they want and the methods for imparting it.

It is possible to have integrated systems for the production of a public good like education, involving the State, private institutions and the non-profit and voluntary sector, each with its own approach but all complying with certain common standards and rules.

There is a powerfully felt need for the schools, first, and then the training institutions (which must develop increasingly in relation to the schools and to the business world) to raise the level of professional preparation and of cultural attainment.

A fair society must enable all citizens to start out on an equal footing, with equal access to education. It is up to the State to guarantee this condition, leaving subsequent development of curriculum and teaching methods to individual ability and private, non-commercial initiative, with very precise guarantees. Some worthy, initial legislative steps in this field have been taken.

The good of education cannot be left entirely to the market.

Human capital is fundamental to economic progress. Today, in the new economy, investment in education is more and more essential to growth. It is the key to international competitiveness.

More than on a legal order, a more just society must be built upon culture, ethical values, on the knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation.

The need for cultural strength is more acute today than yesterday, if we want not to be overwhelmed by the dizzying advance of technology. Globalization itself is one of those phenomena that the *Book of Genesis* would have Man subdue.

More than ever, what is needed is humanistic culture, in a century that appears to be that of the triumph of technology, to be sure, but also of the meeting between cultures of different continents.

The end of ideology could be followed by the “age of emptiness,” if the return to negative thinking or relativism should win out.

More than ever, philosophy and politics must rediscover their creative and forward-looking capacities.

Economic policymaking must look to the future; it must assign priority to education and to employment; it must create the conditions for realizing the right to work, which is an authentic natural right.

We must prevent decline, signs of which can be seen in some Western societies, partly reflecting demographic problems.

Structural reform is the only way to ensure sustained growth, to enhance competitiveness and ultimately to provide work and a secure future.

Italian society is traversed by complex issues and prospects which, in full observance of pluralism and freedom, ecclesiastical universities and monasteries can study in depth.

The immense intellectual, moral, literary and artistic resources possessed by the monasteries constitute a heritage of inestimable value to the community. More advanced relations with society and with the local territory can be established.

Increasingly, the monasteries can become the locus of hope, places imbued with the past, its wealth of thought and of works, but also capable of turning a penetrating gaze upon the future, which they will serve as the source of memory.

Globalization has to be governed with Man as the end. We must respond by globalizing solidarity.

The monk prays, works and reads: *ora, labora et lege*. He will always read Scripture; he will read the new reality. Work, study and the arts too can turn to new things.

Once again, the *monos* can act in consideration and on behalf of the *demos*, and of the *holos*, the whole.

The labour of the monk can make a fecund contribution to fostering a new Humanism, more than ever necessary if we are to look with confidence upon the advent of the new century.