

Monastic commitment

Continued from page 12

sexual freedom: it also idealises romantic love: being one half of the perfect couple is widely believed to be the surest path to personal fulfilment — although the high incidence of marital breakdown might suggest that such expectations have become hopelessly unrealistic.

Again, commitment seems to be the problem. The most challenging thing about monasticism, and arguably its most useful lesson for the rest of us, is sticking at it. It is no coincidence that St Benedict highlighted stability as one of the essential features of the monastic life.

I HOPE those communities now extending this offer of taster hospitality get a good response, though I fear that there may be precious few signing up for the full package. A bit of everything is what people want these days, and sticking at it — whatever “it” might be — too often seems like an obstacle to our fulfilment rather than its means.

Sometimes I wish we had a kind of monastic National Service, akin to the tradition of temporary monasticism found in some Buddhist countries. This is not as implausible as it might seem. The Melanesian Brothers and Sisters, the Anglican religious order in the Solomon Islands, take vows for five years at a time. Unlike most religious communities in the UK, the order is youthful, vibrant, and growing.

The predictable objection to the idea of temporary vows in the context of traditional monastic communities is that it would undermine

the principle of stability, which is the very basis of their life. I wonder. Presumably among those who signed up for a limited term, there would be some who would stay longer, perhaps even for life — as is the case with the Melanesian Brothers.

It is possible that by removing the forbidding notion of a life-sentence, the prospect of being a monk, a friar, or a nun would seem a good deal more feasible to people who might like to explore the possibility, but felt unable to make a life-long commitment at the outset.

In this country at least, the future for the monastic life looks bleak — although, of course, there have been some exceedingly low points in past centuries as well. Whether communities today can survive by adapting to changing cultural circumstances, or whether the monastic life has had its day, only time will tell. I pray, though, there will continue to be monastic communities, shining as a beacon of inspiration to us all, for many generations to come.

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