

## **A Spiritan monk**

By Fr Philippe SIDOT CSSp

To be available, ready to go where the Holy Spirit guides and precedes you, is one of the main attitudes that every Christian strives to have. This is all the more important for a Spiritan missionary with a special devotion to the Holy Spirit, listening to him, following him, responding to his call through his Church, his people. And the first fruit of our "Yes", following Christ and the Spirit, is not about our work, pastoral or other, but our own conversion. How many times have we heard, for example, aid workers returning from developing countries saying that they had received more than they gave? It is the result of an attitude of openness, a real Christian attitude, discovering the richness of the other, by their being different. Even more, it is also a Christian attitude that impels us to accept that the other can change us, that the difference of the other pushes us to change ourselves, to convert our heart for the best.

What I want to share with you in this article is a questioning, a conversion, how the understanding of my Spiritan vocation has been changed by my discovery of a Church different from mine.

I arrived in Ethiopia in 2000 and the first thing that struck me was to find myself in a society much more "Eastern" than "African." Lost in its high mountains, I discovered an Eastern Orthodox Church present here since the fourth century, a Church which is dynamic, full of life, aware and proud of its roots, dating back almost up to the time of Christ. Arrived in Arba Minch, a small town in the south-west, I put myself at the service of our ecumenical project, a joint work of evangelization with this Church. The meeting with these Eastern Christians and the Ethiopian clergy very quickly pushed me to ask myself a big question: how to introduce myself? Indeed, one of the first questions that people ask you here is your religious affiliation. After presenting myself as a Roman Catholic priest, the next question was immediately about having a diocesan vocation or a monastic one. In this Eastern Church there are only two kinds of priests: the diocesan priest, who may be a married man, or the monk living in celibacy, either as a hermit or in community. Far from our Western concepts I had to present myself to the Ethiopian Christians as a Spiritan and as a monk. It is from this situation, of the discovery of the monastic life in Ethiopia that I began to reflect on my own religious Spiritan vocation and to discern a new way of understanding it. My reflection relies very much, not to say essentially, on the intervention of a friend who came to Ethiopia to speak about monastic life, its history, its Eastern roots. He is called Brother Sabino Chiala, a monk of the ecumenical monastery of Bose, in Italy. I am hugely appreciative of him for having allowed me to use his work, especially at the historical level.

### **1. The discovery of the origins of my religious vocation**

My first research was to know what it means to be a "monk" in an Eastern context and perhaps more particularly in Ethiopia. A small trip back through history can be useful. And, in fact, the origin of all monasticism is in the East.

The word "monk" (from the Greek *monos*) is used to show two realities which are at the same time a reality of separation and a reality of unification. Here's how Evagrius the Pontiff defines a monk:

- *A Monk is the one who is separated from and united to all.*
- *A Monk is the one who feels one with all, by the habit of seeing himself in each one.*<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to what people usually think, the monk is not one who is isolated or separated. His separation is directed toward an inner unity and toward a communion, a communion more profound and more real. At a certain moment, in the West, it was felt that it was necessary to specify, to diversify, to define more clearly different form of monastic life. And we began to hear about monastic orders, mendicant orders, later on religious orders or religious congregations. More recently the expression "consecrated life" has emerged, indicating all forms of life of celibacy.

It is difficult to say when monasticism began. It is present in various religions: Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Manichaeism. But all these monasticisms have something in common: a distance is taken, is put between themselves and the world. The monk puts himself on the margin of his community, even geographically, in the desert, in his cell. But he is not an isolated individual, outside the world. Communication is an essential part of monastic life in the East. I have never visited a monastery in Ethiopia which is not in constant link and dynamic contact with the Christian communities surrounding it. St John Cassian<sup>2</sup> quote one of the "sentences of the fathers" who said that "*the monk must avoid the persons of the sex and the bishops.*" "avoid the persons of the [opposite] sex" refers to celibacy, while "avoid the bishops" refers to the ordinations and so he claimed a certain freedom in relation to the ecclesiastic institutions, another type of relationship with the Christian community. We must recognize that in the East, monasticism has always played a decisive role in the Church so much so that, even today, monasticism is defined as "*the heart of the Church.*" This is apparent in the role that the monks have played in the process of evangelization. Here in Ethiopia, we refer often to the Nine Saints. We must also mention the Orthodox rule, which is that a bishop has to be a monk. In short we can say that the monk is an integral part of the ecclesiastical community but always puts himself on the margins, and his presence will always be interesting for the Church if he remains in this marginal space.

If we look more deeply at the origins of Christian monasticism, we find different explanations and assumptions given by the intensive research of recent years. At the very beginning, the search for a true Christian life, according to many researchers, resulted in convergent practices especially the search of martyrdom. But after Constantine, the Church becomes officially recognized and, *de facto*, is subject to a certain secularization and becomes an instrument of power. In response some people sought a certain distance from the official Church, withdrawing into the desert to "re-found" the evangelical radicalism of the original Church. However this reason does not fully explain the

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<sup>1</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *De oratione capitula* (Treatise on prayer), 124-125.

<sup>2</sup> St John Cassian, *De institutis coenobiorum* (Cenobitic Institutions), 11:18

emergence of monasticism because the monastic movement began before Constantine (for example with St Antony and St Paul the hermit in Egypt, Ephraim in Mesopotamia) and outside the empire. We could therefore consider that monasticism was born in the idea of living the Gospel in a more radical way that some people did not find in the ordinary ecclesiastical structures. So they sought new forms of living their faith. In some ways, monasticism is a desire to live the Gospel more radically and, in a subtle way, becomes a form of rebellion against the situation the Church find herself in. Monasticism then becomes a question in the Church, a destabilizing force preventing it from closing in on herself, from finding herself in a power system, linked to the political situation in which she is located.

In Ethiopia, monasticism has always been the “engine” of evangelization, renewal, salvation in times of theological and political crises. Some Ethiopian monks are still much venerated today such as Iyasus Mo'a, who, in the thirteenth century, founded the monastery of Hayq which became a great centre of liturgical renewal, while Tekle Haimanot, one of his disciples, was the great missionary of the South and founded the famous monastery of Debre Libanos. I could mention many others: Basalota Mikael, Ewostatewos, Ya'eqob, Abba Samuel, let alone the "nine saints" at the origin of the Ethiopian monasticism and the great evangelizers of the fifth century.

This historical explanation brings me back directly to the founders of my congregation. Were they of a similar mindset?

Claude François Poullart des Places set up his seminary to educate young seminarians who would work in remote places, enabling the Church to find "workers", (e.g. priests) for these poor parishes, in which the French clergy of the time showed little interest. Very quickly his community was soon requested for the colonies, also work not sought by the French clergy. Similarly Francis Libermann devoted his congregation to the *ad extra* missions, to the slaves who were neglected in the French colonies. And today, my Spiritan vocation reflects this through a service to the Church where she does not easily find workers: in the ecumenical field in Ethiopia. And for many years I can testify to the ecclesiastical resistance to this task which should be at the heart of the mission in this country. Our commitment to development and education follows in the footsteps of Poullart des Places, in the service of the poorest in one of the poorest countries in the world.

## **2. The discovery of the monastic foundations of my religious life**

The monastic phenomenon may have come about because of the reasons mentioned above, but the centuries that followed were those during which monasticism was developed as a system, deepened bit by bit. Through studying its sources of inspiration, the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church, this can be better illustrated.

## A) The Scriptures

Before the texts, we find the models: Elijah, John the Baptist, and later Mary and the apostles. The choice of Elijah and of John the Baptist is interesting, since they they were celibate, but they were also prophets.

With regard to the texts, there is little choice and research is difficult, for the simple reason that the main characteristic of monasticism is celibacy. In the Judaic environment of the time, celibacy was seen as something negative, and fertility as the sign of the blessing of God. This was still the case at the time of the New Testament; as the story of Elizabeth demonstrates. The texts on which we usually rely are Isaiah 56:3-5 and Matthew 19:10-12. The common element of these two texts is "the eunuchism", celibacy, which will be seen later as the most important element in this *forma vitae*. But very little is said about the how and the why. The clearest text is Matthew. Jesus spoke of a voluntary "eunuchism" and indicates the reason: "for the Kingdom" (which does not mean only "to merit the Kingdom" but also "for me." The kingdom of heaven is Jesus himself. Other texts which may be studied but are ambiguous are Luke 18:18-23 the rich young man and Luke 10:38-42, Martha and Mary.

## B) The Fathers of the Church

We can also search for the origins of monasticism in what the West likes to call the "Tradition" and what the East calls the "Fathers of the Church." This source is not unconnected with the previous one. The Fathers of the Church never ceased to strive to live the Word of God in their day to day life, including monastic life. To understand monastic life it is necessary to analyse in depth the Patristic texts, something which, as Western Europeans, we have been little inclined to do. Who among us, on entering in religious life, has received references to the Fathers of the Church? We studied our Rule of life, Constitutions, the writings of our founders, but who has looked in the readings of Cassian, Climacus, Isaac the Syrian, etc.? It is only recently that we are rediscovering these riches, thanks to Vatican II, which has reopened contact with the Eastern world. We get back our own roots. We are setting back to our own roots and, in so doing, discovering that our movement is much older than those we consider to be its founders.

## C) A single spiritual source

The monk has therefore much in common with the Christian community, the Word of God and the Fathers of the Church, but his roots are deeper still. The monk, whatever his prophetic role, has no other origin than that of any Christian living in the Spirit: his baptism. Thus it is not by chance that the Church has never regarded religious vows as sacraments. The sacrament by which Christian identity is defined, *in all its forms*, is baptism. This is the only time of the insertion of a human being in the mystery of Christ and of his Church, his body. It is only in baptism that each man and woman receives the Holy Spirit who, during their

lives, will nourish them as believers. It is the Spirit given who asks us to enter fully into the life of Christ and that enters in our own life little by little. The purpose of monasticism is the same as that of any Christian vocation: to live in the Spirit, or, as says the great St Anthony in one of the letters attributed to him, "to acquire the Holy Spirit."

It is the way, the path, that changes. This is the specificity of monastic life! The gift received at Baptism, the Holy Spirit, who is waiting to be manifested within us, is the sole objective of our Christian life. The highest of these fruits is, according to Paul, charity. Whether lay or clergy, priest or monk, this is the basis; all that changes is the form it takes. Preaching for the laity in his community John Chrysostom said:

*"I do not oblige you to move in the deserts and mountains, but to be modest, obey the rules, humble and charitable in the middle of the cities. All the precepts of the Gospel we have in common with the religious, except marriage."*<sup>3</sup>

We cannot continue without thinking of our founders Poullart des Places and Libermann! Their devotion to the Holy Spirit is without measure and both of them took it from the Word of God. Poullart wanted an extensive training for himself and his seminarians making them to study several years when a seminarian could study only six months before being ordained and sent to a parish. Libermann, Jew and son of a rabbi, having studied Scriptures for years to become a rabbi in his turn, converted after a strong spiritual experience, after having reading the Rousseau's "Emile". But before that, a student of biblical Hebrew had asked him to help him to read the gospel of Matthew in Hebrew. Later he would write in Rome his commentary of St John, while awaiting replies from the Roman authorities on the foundation of "the work of blacks."

Monasticism is a gift to the Church, but to what extent? I want to explore here two aspects: the memory of the return of Christ and the ecumenical quest. In looking at the origins, we have seen that monasticism was born out of a bid for evangelical radicalism within a Church which was tempted to close in on itself within a purely human horizon. The monk reminds us of and points to another world, that of Heaven. And the distinctive sign used is celibacy. It is a most precious gift we can offer to the Church: Remember that Christ has promised to come back and that we are waiting!

The other precious ministry of monasticism is that of ecumenism: assisting in the knowledge and coming together of the different Christian Churches. Monasticism may carry this out on the basis of this fundamental unity which, for certain reasons, has never been absent within the monastic tradition. This is due to the fact that:

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<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew 7.7*

- Monasticism was born in the Middle East and spread in the West, the witness of a Church before the divisions.
- Monasticism has always the same structures in some way, and this despite the Western "specializations".
- The contact between monks of different Churches has always been kept, despite the divisions.

*“When two monks of different Churches meet and go deep in their religious experience (in opposition to the divergent policies or ecclesiastical dogmas), unity is miraculously reconstructed.”<sup>4</sup>*

And actually, I have often seen this in action here. Ecumenism in Ethiopia, on the Catholic side, is more often the subject of special attention of the religious than of the diocesan clergy and, on the Orthodox side, it is the same. Working with the Ethiopian Orthodox priests, relationships have always been easier with the monks than with the diocesan clergy. For example, in 2005, we launched a process of evaluation of our ecumenical project and we visited all the communities with which we work and which we are helping. In the town of Jinka, we support a monastery which is in charge of the training of deacons originating from the nomadic tribes. Unfortunately, there were tensions between the diocesan clergy and their Orthodox bishop. We found ourselves between the two and the bishop asked us not to visit the monastery. We finally did go, invited by the monks themselves. They told us: "We are monks, we don't do Church politics!" In the liturgical and history research that my confrere Emmanuel has undertaken we often need to visit the rock-hewn churches dating from the IX<sup>th</sup> to the XIV<sup>th</sup> century in the north of the country. The reception in the churches held by monks has always been very cordial while in those held by the diocesan priests it has always been more difficult.

## **2. The specificity of my religious life**

If we take seriously the text of John Chrysostom quoted above, we must conclude that monastic life differs from all the other Christian lives by one element: celibacy. But then what becomes of all our ideas concerning the different spiritualities of our congregations, the charism of our founders, the contemplative life or the active one? This reminds us the text of Luke 10, reflected upon in so many ways, about Martha and Mary, on which the division between contemplative and active life was founded, with the suggestion that the first is greater than the second. This concept is absolutely foreign to the Western monasticism of the first millennium, just as much as in the contemporary vision of Orthodox monasticism: there is no specialization! If there is a specialization, it is by accident and it does not represent the norm. From the hermit to the missionary, all are monks.

**"There are those who made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom"**

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<sup>4</sup> Isaac the Syrian

If someone asked us: "What is the specificity of your religious life?" How many of us would answer "celibacy"? We would rather answer by giving the list of our development work, education, evangelization, of our life of prayer, but certainly not celibacy. It could be a "price to pay" for doing the work we are doing, but to consider celibacy as our point of departure, the first choice, no!

And yet it is the point of departure of Jesus. It is the first element of identification that he gives. That is what they have done first, being eunuchs for the kingdom. It is more difficult in the text to find the modalities of this "eunuchism." About celibacy there is little to say and a lot to keep quiet about. The understanding of celibacy went in two ways.

In one way, unfortunately, the discussion on celibacy reached levels of interpretation and of exaggeration contrary to the Gospel, with the denigration of sexual life and marriage for example (synod of Gangra), or the exaggerations on the "marriage with the divine." Celibacy became a gift that someone receives and which must be kept in silence. The monk is characterised by an absence, the absence of a blessing (the blessing of having children) and this must remain an act perceived negatively. Even if it opens on a positive note which could bear fruit, it must keep the flavour of absence, of the silence of the body. But it is also an absence which must not fall into the temptation of the "sacrifice" for a better reward. We must not fall into the question of Peter (Matthew 19:27 *We have left everything and followed you, so what will be our share?*)

In the other way emphasis was put on freedom and selflessness (because we receive a gift and not to acquire a privileged place), celibacy giving a place to something which is given as a vocation. Monastic or religious life is therefore, for us, an attention to receive a gift, a truth which lives in us. This gift, accepted and living in us becomes then a sign for the other Christians. What sign? Here also the Tradition has left us various images, and among them the most interesting being that of celibacy seen as "*isanghelia*", the life of angels. But again, this is not to assert a life of purity as non-exercise of sexuality, but pointing to a life after death (the eschatological element.) Celibacy should then be seen as an attitude of *waiting*. The monks and religious remind the others that, through their abstention from a life of procreation, we are called to await a fullness which is still to come. Celibacy should be understood as a dynamic of this waiting, a sort of invocation, a prayer of the body, with a view to this fullness still to come. More than a negation of the body it is a participation of the body in the call of the Church "Come, Lord Jesus."

What then become of the other "evangelical counsels"? Important question for us Westerners! From the Middle Ages, in fact, next to celibacy, the Western monastic tradition has added poverty and obedience. It can be argued that, according to the gospel, these two dimensions should be considered as the fundamental conditions that Christ asks all Christians to live. To share with those who have less is not a simple counsel given to someone, or a special virtue that someone will try to live, but a fundamental condition of Christian life. Every believer is called to share for daring to assert that he lives following Christ. And if you want to talk about poverty instead of sharing, we must ask ourselves who is really a religious? We may have some things in common but how can we call ourselves *miserable*? We try to share, to be sober but we don't lack the necessary, and in

all cases we are richer than those who lack the necessary. And there is no need of trying to say that there is a spiritual meaning to their poverty. To talk about obedience is the same. The obedience understood as power of decision-making given to the superior means the diminution of this important aspect of the Christian life: each one of us is called to obey, in the image of the one who was really obedient, Christ, who, as it says in the hymn to the Philippians, "was obedient to accept death, and death on the cross." Obedience, true obedience, is really difficult: firstly, obedience to oneself, to one's own reality, one's own truth, to one's own weaknesses; and even more difficult is the obedience to the brothers and sisters and to the will of the Father over us. Obedience means first to listen, and to make real what has been heard. It is obedience to the Word of God which has been revealed to us.

### **3. The two souls of my religious life: action and contemplation**

"For the kingdom of God"

What is the purpose of celibacy? Is it service of the poor, the sick, or service of evangelization, service of the prayer? NONE or ALL at once! In a word: in service of the Kingdom! And in the Gospel it is Christ himself. It is only in the vision of the Kingdom that celibacy is justified, in the presence of Christ and his mission, nothing else!

Religious people, without distinction, are, first and foremost, friends of Christ. We listen to the Word of God, we seek the face of our Creator. In our homilies, healings, teachings... we do not do anything else, we seek nothing else.

It is true that monastic life has experienced a certain decline in recent years and also, because of an excessive antagonism between the contemplative and active life, a certain drift toward an activism that has rendered obscure the primacy of faith and of the proclamation of the Good News of Christ. The Kingdom of God demands before anything else a conversion to Christ. Monasticism and religious life are therefore not a life of perfection, but a way of conversion! Let me tell a story from the Ethiopian monastic tradition:

*"It is telling a story about an old man who practiced an ascetic life in a region close to the sea. When he practiced his asceticism Satan came to him and said: "Why did you come here? " The other answered: "because of my Lord Jesus Christ!" At this time Satan came back to him and said: "Why did you come here? " And he answered: "I have already said! Because of my Lord Jesus Christ." And yet again he came to him and asked the old man a third time the same thing and the old man replied the same. And the Lord who sits in the sky but sees all down here (cf. Ps 112 (113) :5-6) sent one of his angels to the old man who said to him: "Stand up that I can guide you toward a wise man and he can pull you out of the trap into which you fell without knowing." And immediately he took him, and brought him before the cell of Abba Poimen in Scete, and he abandoned him there. The old man knocked at the door and Poimen came to him and greeted him with joy. Abba Poimen questioned him about his problem and he told everything. During this time an angel of the Lord said to Abba Poimen: " I brought this man*



*for you to release him from the trap, which is within him, because Christ, the friend of men, has not allowed him to free himself from this trap." Abba Poimen said to the old man: "If the devil returns say: it is because of my sins that I came here." The angel brought him immediately and departed. As the old man was practicing his asceticism Satan came and asked him: "Why did you come here?" And the other answered: "because of my sins." And Satan answered: "very little was missing for the bird to fall into the trap but the bad Poimen has given him the chance to escape." And Satan left him."<sup>5</sup>*

But if the horizon of monasticism is the kingdom with the requirements to follow Christ and of conversion, you can ask if it is appropriate to speak of a monasticism (or religious life) as contemplative or active? If we take the text of the institution of the apostles in Mark 3:13-14 we see Jesus who "...called to him those he wanted. They came to him and he appointed twelve, to be his companions and to be sent out to preach..." Is Jesus calling them to remain with him or to send them to preach? For Mark there is no contradiction. This is because they remain with him so that they will be able to go to and preach. The old dichotomy that opposes contemplative life and active life is false because it considers the contemplation as an abstraction, as living in the abstraction or a world of ideas. For the Fathers of the Church, the object of contemplation is love and love is God and the service of the brothers and sisters is this love, which is a fruit of the gospel. In the text with Martha and Mary, in the West, we depend on the Latin version. In Greek it is not Mary having the "best part" but the "good part." St Gregory the Great says that the active life remains necessary when the contemplative life is an act of freedom. He said:

*One and the other are a gift of grace; however, as we live in the middle of our brothers one (the active part) is necessary, the other (the contemplative part) is a free choice. Who, in fact, knowing God, can enter into his Kingdom if he has not done any good? Without contemplative life those who do not neglect the service may enter into the kingdom; while those without active life, neglecting the service they can give, cannot enter it.<sup>6</sup>*

Again, how can we not think of Libermann and his "practical union"? Just as our Fathers of the desert, he knew how difficult it is to have a purely contemplative life, especially as missionaries. The only way therefore is to submit fully, in everything that you do or live, to the Holy Spirit, to be totally united to God. This practical union is really one of the objectives of monasticism.

In the patristic tradition, we can therefore say that the two "parts" are considered as linked and necessary, even if a kind of primacy is given to the listening to the word of God (the intimacy with the Lord.) Monasticism, as any Christian life, cannot be understood if it is not primarily a life of listening and obedience to the Word of God, a life with the Lord. In the East, monasticism, avoiding specializations, has always insisted on the importance of the reading of the Word of God.

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<sup>5</sup> The Sentences of the Fathers, series Ethiopia, Geronticon 214

<sup>6</sup> St Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezekiel I, 3:10 AM*

But if the primacy is on this listening to the Word, this listening is not trapped in itself. This listening must bear fruit, which becomes life, which becomes "faith working through charity" (Galatians 5:6) A listening which does not become a living charity is not listening to the Word of God. The love of neighbour, life with others, becomes the consequence of monasticism. The Fathers of the Church insist on this aspect: No solitude can erase the commandment of love. (Isaac and Filossene.) It is to keep this condition that the monastic tradition has always insisted on the two elements which seem to contradict the contemplative solitude: work and hospitality.

Charity is therefore necessarily at the forefront of monastic life just as of any Christian life. This is a charity which must nevertheless be the fruit of listening to the Word, not a strategy. This insistence to distinguish contemplative life and active life has pushed us towards two extremes: on the one hand, a contemplative life that seems separate from reality and on the other, an activism that sometimes becomes a philanthropy or a missionary strategy whose aim is to convert the entire world.

The dynamics of monasticism, by contrast, is that only the one who has experienced the beauty and greatness of the mercy of God, can only proclaim them to all. Outside of that, nothing has a meaning not even the most strict asceticism or the most effective activism. Only charity is worthy of being pursued. The problem is not to perform this or that service but to serve, to live a practical charity inspired by the gospel, to become men and women of compassion. Returning to Mt 19:11, to give place to the gift of celibacy becomes to give room for the other and for God. The solitary person is one who, in the desert, seeks full communion with the entire universe. He is not the one who seeks to escape the dangers of life, the burdens of daily life, but the one who carries the same burden, but in another way, in a different place.

Once again I can only quote the last words of Libermann on his death bed:

*“Be fervent, fervent, always fervent,  
And above all, charity, charity, charity especially.  
Charity in Jesus Christ,  
Charity by Jesus Christ,  
Charity in the name of Jesus Christ.  
Fervour, charity, union in Jesus Christ.  
...  
God, that is all; man is nothing.  
...”*

I can finish now by saying that, as a Spiritan in Ethiopia, I really do feel to be following our founders as religious, but also as a monk inheriting from a tradition from the beginnings of the Church. To be present in an Eastern Church only strengthens, enriches my vocation. And I cannot prevent myself from dreaming: a text of Vatican II tells us:

*To enhance the efficacy of their apostolate, Religious and associations of the Latin Rite working in Eastern countries or among Eastern faithful are earnestly counselled to found houses or even provinces of the Eastern rite, as far as this can be done.*

When could we have a Spiritan province of the Ethiopian rite?

Philippe SIDOT, Spiritan monk.