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Buddhist and Catholic Monks Talk about Celibacy

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The electronic sign at the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport was flashing “Orange Alert” as a dozen Buddhist monks arrived in their burnt orange robes from around the country for three days of dialogue on celibacy with a similar number of Catholic monastics come together from various monasteries at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. As he opened the October 26–29, 2006, meeting, Rev. William Skudlarek, executive director of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID), said, “You (Buddhists) have been at this for some five-to-seven hundred years longer than we have. We have something to learn.”

This was the second Monks in the West interreligious dialogue. The first took place in 2004 at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in northern California. On the Catholic side, the participants came from the Benedictine, Cistercian, and Camaldolese monasteries. On the Buddhist side, they came from the Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan traditions. Through the event, participants began the day with an hour of quiet sitting in meditation and joined the monastic community at St. John’s for their rhythm of daily prayer.

The first session dealt with theory, the “why” of celibacy. Buddhist participants explained that their teachings focus on seeing how suffering is created and cured. Attachments give rise to suffering, so advancement in the spiritual life requires letting go of one’s attachments. Attachment to desires, among which are sexual desires, is a hindrance to spiritual progress. “Raging desire takes away choice, freedom,” said Rev. Kusala Bhikshu, a Buddhist chaplain at UCLA, in his opening presentation. “The senses must be controlled in order to be free.”

Brother Gregory Perron from St. Procopius monastery in Indiana spoke of how monastic life demands a profound understanding and acceptance of solitude. “Celibacy is a tool,” offered Perron, “a skillful means like intentional simplicity of life, by which our heart is burrowed out and the core of our being laid bare. By embracing it, the monk accepts the aloneness that characterizes every human being.”

In response to Buddhist reflections on the illusory nature of the body, Catholic participants pointed out Christianity’s remarkably positive evaluation of the

body in the doctrines of the Incarnation, the bodily Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Both sides acknowledged balancing points of reference as well, such as, in Christianity, Paul's "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24). Though humankind ranks eighth from the bottom in Buddhism's thirty-two-realm cosmology, that level is the only one where spiritual growth can happen. Thus human form is in the end praised by the Buddha.

In the second session, the participants moved from theory to practice. Rev. Jisho Perry from the Shasta Buddhist Abbey in California said that "the whole thrust of training is not to give in to desire that arises." He described the Buddhist method of accepting sexual feelings without either acting on them or repressing them, but just letting them pass through. "The right use of will is willingness, not willpower—the willingness to sit there and let that feeling pass through," he said.

Fr. Skudlarek expressed appreciation for this Buddhist approach to transforming the sexual energy. "I never got a sense in our training of accepting the feeling with awareness and letting it pass without acting on it. You had to fight it! And the more you resisted, the stronger it got!"

Rev. Heng Sure, who teaches at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, presented celibacy as the first step in a three-step process that goes from celibacy to stillness to insight. "It should not be seen just as a difficult adjunct to the spiritual path, but as essential to it," he said. The practice of meditation represents daily periods when the senses are stilled and not allowed to pursue sense objects. "Something happens to the energy in the stillness; the pressure goes away." In married life, he explained, spiritual practice is "partial and piecemeal," making celibacy a more effective means to move toward insight and the peace and happiness that flow from it. In the discussion, Benedictine Fr. Mark Serna, president of MID, pointed out that "in Christianity married people can be holy, too; one doesn't have to be celibate to go to heaven."

Catholic monastics emphasized how, in Christian faith, motivation for celibacy is strongly relational. "For me," said Fr. Terrance Kardong of Assumption Abbey in North Dakota, "it's the deep personal relationship with Jesus that enables me to do something this hard." Fr. Michael Peterson from Blue Cloud Abbey in South Dakota drew a laugh when he shared, "When college kids ask me: 'How can you live without sex?' my answer is, 'God's a better kisser.' In celibacy I transfer my desire for fulfillment to God."

Heng Sure said that the idea of embracing celibacy because it leads to love is not a Buddhist approach. "A Buddhist would say, 'It leads to liberation from further suffering—both personal and, in the bodhisattva path, for everyone.'" Lama Norbu added that the relational dimension, while not highlighted in the Buddhist practice of celibacy, is not absent either. "Monks choose to live in community," he said. "And the core of their spirituality is compassion for others."

The third session focused on how the two traditions handle transgressions and failure. Ajahn Punnadhammo from Ontario delineated the "Four Defeats" in

Buddhist monasticism—sexual intercourse, stealing above a trivial amount, killing a human being, and falsely claiming superior spiritual achievements. He explained how, if a monk should do any of these four actions, he is no longer a monk and is not allowed to be readmitted into the community.

Buddhists listened with keen interest to Abbot John Klassen of St. John's Abbey as he related how, in the sexual abuse scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church since 2002, the bishops have ruled that transgressions against minors would result in expulsion from the priesthood. Klassen observed that "leaders of religious communities took a fundamentally different stance. They had to agree to remove any offender from ministry, but they were not willing to throw them out of the community. They agreed to do risk assessment and develop supervision for offenders. Offenders have understood that because of recidivism and lack of public trust, supervision plans are necessary."

Klassen also described how, in the 1970s, "our awareness of failures moved from the moral arena to the psychological arena." Now, he said, it has moved "to the awareness that sexual abuse of minors is a crime. New guidelines provide a level of behavioral specificity that we've never seen before."

In the closing session, the monks discussed both what contributes toward and what detracts from the development of friendship and healthy intimacy in a celibate community. At the end, Lama Norbu passed around Buddhist prayer flags for all the participants to sign. "I will return to Tibet next summer," he said, "and erect these flags on the highest mountain in the world where the dedicated energies of those here and all the communities they represent will fly up to heaven."