

From -- *Prayer and Prophecy: Some Reflections on the British Urban Scene*

The contemplatives are coming back from the desert to the cities

Now the significant fact to which I wish to draw attention was expressed towards the end of the 1950s by the Jesuit Jean Danielou. He wrote:

The Constantinian phase in Christian history is coming to an end. ...The flight into the desert was a revolutionary innovation, dating from the fourth century when St. Antony inaugurated the age of monks, the withdrawal of the Contemplatives from a world in which Christianity was compromised into the solitudes where they might keep alive the faith of the martyrs. That age is passing ---- St. Antony is coming back from his desert.

St. Antony is coming back from his desert. A quarter of a century after Danielou wrote those words, we can recognize their prophetic insight. Today the contemplatives are coming back from the desert to the cities, and the desert life of prayer and struggle is being sought in the urban wasteland. Here men and women find themselves pushed to the margins of social life, here they experience hunger, weakness, danger, the need for support and nourishment.

I have suggested that the Constantinian era is at an end, and that the inner city experience exposes to our vision the truth that the Church is once again a minority group within a pagan society. The recognition of that truth must lead us to a re-evaluation of much of our theology and pastoral assumptions. But recognition depends upon vision, and calls for a reflective, contemplative, listening posture. Without that posture, the city can crush us, confuse us, overwhelm us with messages and signals which we cannot fathom. Hence the urgent pastoral need for inner city contemplatives.

I am not suggesting anything very grand or rarified: simply that the Church in the urban areas needs recover its ability to see: to see God at work in the back streets and among the poor and lowly; to see and to resist evil; to see and to unmask illusion and falsehood; to see more clearly our own way forward. Radical action can only begin with radical contemplation. The desert is the place of discernment, and discernment comes from attention to the skies and to the neglected voices of the streets. A Church which is obsessively concerned with caring is a Church which has lost the ability to see. One could say of such churches, as R.H. Tawney once said of the Fabians: "They tidy the room, but open no windows in the soul."