
Barnaby Hughes, bepress (DC Admins)
A truism of monastic life is that it takes all sorts to make a monastery: jokers, saints, teachers, intellectuals and bus drivers. There really is no such thing as ‘a monastic type’, some ideal monk or nun who never tires of prayer, is obedient to superiors, is never late to the opus Dei, is quiet, courteous, gentle and kind. For the reality is that God can and does call to the monastic life those who least expect it, as well as those who seem least suited to it. The diversity of the monastic journeys in Touched by God is testimony not only to the diversity of the monastic life as lived in the English Benedictine Congregation (EBC), but also to the diverse ways in which God calls men and women to live for God and God alone.

Touched by God updates and expands the original A Touch of God: Eight Monastic Journeys (1982), also edited by a Stanbrook nun. Having eight monks and nuns tell the stories of how God called them to the monastic life was a way of fleshing out the theology of Consider Your Call (1978), a composite volume written by many of the most distinguished theologians in the EBC. Those two books are very much products of the time in which they were written, and Touched by God very much a product of the present. The contributors have been carefully chosen to represent as much as possible the diversity of the EBC; this is evidenced especially by the inclusion of a young member of the Lay Community of Saint Benedict, but also by the balance of male and female contributors (six to four). Moreover, excepting the editor’s own community, no monastery is represented by more than one contributor. The collection also conveys the geographical spread of the EBC, with monks and nuns from England and Wales, Ireland and the United States of America, who have lived in Rome, Peru and Algeria.

Although Touched by God tells the stories of ten completely different monastic journeys, it has essentially the same end in view as A Touch of God. As Dame Laurentia writes in her Introduction:

We make no apologies for following the same simple format as that of the original volume, the classic first-person narrative where the monk or nun, far from being a remote or ethereal figure, emerges as Everyman on a journey—essentially an interior one, in search of both ‘the Other’ and the true self. (p.1)

There is an unmistakable ‘I’ in each story, but the stories are never simply autobiographical; each is about a very personal encounter with the
living God. In putting such experiences into words, the authors have not only created a work of deep spirituality, but one of consummate literary skill. A number of the authors publish regularly in theological, historical and monastic journals; one worked in journalism; and another writes novels.

All of the contributors but one, perhaps, would have been, until recently, considered as late vocations. Fr Simon McGurk is the only one who became a monk immediately upon finishing school. Others, such as Frs Alban Hood and David Foster, joined shortly after finishing university. In complete contrast is the vocation of Sr Monica Mead, who made her solemn profession at Curzon Park Abbey at the age of 74, having only become a Roman Catholic in her sixties. Her monastic journey was certainly a protracted one: she married twice and bore four children, living in such exotic places as Malta and Majorca. Another colourful character is Fr Michael Brunner of St Louis Abbey, who worked as a hotel manager for many years, converted first to Islam and then to Catholicism, and is now headmaster of the abbey’s large boarding school. Brunner is one of many converts among the contributors, though most of them had formerly been Anglicans.

What is perhaps most striking in these monastic journeys is the absolute candour with which their authors write. Dame Agnes Wilkins, for example, relates how family troubles affected her childhood development, as well as describing the day she took off her habit and left Stanbrook, intending never to return. Fr Simon McGurk’s journey is one of difficult phone calls from the abbot: go here, go there, take on this job, etc. When sent for theological studies to Fribourg in Switzerland, McGurk met and fell in love with his fellow student Françoise. Still struggling with what to do about this relationship, he returned to a community divided by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council; ‘the church was disastrously reordered for the best of reasons’, he writes (p.173). But McGurk followed his call to the priesthood and Françoise eventually married someone else, though they remained as close as ever over the years.

All of the contributors are to be commended for reliving in these pages what was often a harrowing, but immensely rewarding, journey. Dame Laurentia has done an excellent job in putting this whole collection together, and not least for the amusing description of her own appearance on entering Stanbrook Abbey in 1990,

… wearing a riotously colourful pair of the half-masted trousers that were in vogue at the time, a shocking pink T-shirt and long dangling earrings, all of which prompted at least one of the sisters to predict a rapid exit (p.65).
The stories in this book are, of course, only a beginning; the journeys here recounted are far from complete. Perhaps the only criticism one could make is that the cover picture is from a Californian monastery having no connection whatsoever to the English Benedictine Congregation or to the lives of those monks and nuns whose stories comprise *Touched by God*.

By way of conclusion, Fr Andrew Nugent of Glenstal Abbey was invited, as a guest contributor, not only to tell his own monastic journey but also to sum up the previous nine journeys, which he does in the style of the Desert Fathers. He manages to distil each contributor’s story into a short *apophthegm*, often using the contributor’s very own words. Of Abba Michael (Brunner) he writes:

Someone asked a monk, ‘What do you do in the monastery?’ The monk replied, ‘We fall and get up, we fall and get up’. This is my only expectation in monastic life: to continue my journey toward God with the help of my brothers, falling and getting up again, helping them as well. (p.234)

*Barnaby Hughes*