

In Search of an Authentic Christian Life—Style :

LUTHER AND MONASTICISM

Michael von Brück*

Martin Luther, the other reformers, and with them the whole reformation tradition, have been extremely critical towards monasticism and have succeeded in abolishing it to a great extent in their traditions. The question is: why? And what was the basis for their judgement which could be of importance for us in rethinking the role of monasticism in our context of changing society and religion.

The methodological and didactic difficulty for this paper is that we have to focus on Luther's specific arguments which are understandable only in the context of 16th century Christianity and of the subtle arguments Luther was fighting in the theological debate against the Roman church. To be understandable to our friends from other religious traditions we have to simplify the analysis considerably; but it is hoped that Luther's point is not lost thereby. Rather we hope that such simplification and typologization will enable us to consider and discuss similar arguments, tendencies and developments in other traditions as a contribution to reconsidering the essence and importance of monasticism in the 20th century context in India.

I assume that other religious traditions could benefit from Luther's insight and criticism in order to be able to engage in

*Dr. von Brück, in 1976-77 a research student at UTC, is at present a Research Scholar at the University of Madras. This article will be continued in a later issue of *Forum*, when Dr. von Brück will reflect on types of monasticism contextually viable in Asia today.

spiritual reconstruction. This might be even more so since a striking and surprising parallelism to Luther occurs also in Buddhism. To some extent this is the case with Tsongka-pa, but even much more so with Shinran (1173–1262). Shinran, the Japanese saint and founder of the Shin-sect of Buddhism, bases his teaching on the same spiritual experience as Luther: to be saved by the grace of God (Amida) alone. He was most concerned with the assurance of salvation for the sinner, and he got this assurance because of Amida's vow to save all sentient beings. What was required on man's side was trust in this vow. But even man's faith was Amida's gift, according to Shinran. Finally, Shinran drew the same conclusion concerning monasticism as Luther: he left monkhood, married and established lay-communities. Even the social and political circumstances were similar. But we cannot follow up this rather interesting subject here.

After living for some time in monasteries of different religions it is my experience that Luther's understanding of monasticism is relevant today, especially in a multireligious and strongly "monastic situation" such as India. Modernity is a challenge all religious traditions have to face. Religion changes; 'reformation' is an ongoing process. Thus, expressions of the monastic archetype change, too. We all are engaged in structuring and re-structuring our life-style and thus in trying to find identity in the midst of the problems of our age. Problems of faith (and losing faith), prayer, righteousness and self-righteousness, relationship between community and solitude, grace and effort, meditation and action are common to most of our traditions. We can learn from each other, share our quest and possible answers so that we grow together towards realization in the service of God, the One (or however we call it), and our neighbour, i.e. to grow in *prajñā* and *karuṇā*

2. Monasticism in the New Testament and Early Church:

The centre of Jesus' teaching was the good news about the coming kingdom of God. He himself is the representative of this

kingdom. Those who share in him share in the kingdom. This kingdom of God is the fulfilment of history and of every man. We can say that all individual as well as cosmic evolution comes to a climax, and this climax is the coming kingdom. Man has to change his mind and heart (*metanoia*) in order to be able to participate in the kingdom (Mk 1. 15). It requires actually a radically new orientation towards life: "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Lk 9. 62). This means that all worldly or egoistic considerations have to be given up in order to realize the kingdom of God. This is also meant by Jesus' parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl: the merchant sells all his belongings just to get this one pearl, which is the kingdom (Mt 13. 44-46). So many of Jesus' other parables make this one point clear: you cannot follow him in compromising with other desires, obligations and duties. You cannot follow your spiritual call and compromise with fulfilling your worldly desires for wealth, power etc. (Lk 16. 13). Jesus is extremely radical at this point. He goes to the root. He points to the root of human alienation from God, which is called sin in the Biblical tradition. This root is in the depth of the human heart. It is man's attempt to be independent from God, to trust in his self-power, to establish an ego resisting the divine presence. There is a new order of things to which we are to commit ourselves: the Kingdom of God.

Jesus also emphasizes that the kingdom is a collective affair. It has to be shared and is to be realized in sharing, because all beings are closely interrelated, not only humans, but all creatures. The characteristic mark of this coming community is that it is not based on the individual's desire for power nor on a compromise of different egos, but on the fact that serving the other is serving God and that this service is ultimate joy and fulfilment (Mk 9. 35; Mt 25. 31ff). It is the end of the ego-delusion, that is the end of sin.

Now the early Christians heard these teachings and they witnessed the power not just in words but in the tremendous divine presence in Jesus. Many expected the end of the world to come very soon after Jesus' resurrection and the collective renewing experience of the Spirit (Pentecost, Acts 2). Therefore they were not very much concerned with worldly things. A certain asceticism was natural, because everything was unimportant in view of the kingdom coming very soon. Jesus himself, however, did not follow an ascetic lifestyle (Mt 11. 18f; Mk 2. 18-22). In him there was the beginning of the great kingdom. This experience released joy. There was no need for asceticism but in the light of Jesus the whole creation came to fulfilment, became purified and good.

But in order to be with and in Jesus Christ no compromise was possible. Jesus himself condemned the rich and blessed the poor (Mt 6. 19-21; Lk 6.20-26; Mk 10. 25; Lt 16. 19-331). Mk 10. 21 as well as Mt 19. 21 and Mk 10.29 state clearly that the rich who cling to their possessions cannot follow Jesus. But those who renounce now will be blessed in heaven. This cannot be understood in a temporal sequence only. Rather, there is an intimate relationship between the freedom *from* worldly possessions which enables man to be free *for* the spiritual goods. The one who is concerned all the time with gathering external and material things exhausts as it were all his energy in the wrong direction. This is clearly implied in Jesus' way.

But this does not mean necessarily that every follower of Jesus has to be a monk. On the contrary, Peter and the other apostles were married (1 Cor 9 5). But Paul preferred sexless life and advised people to do the same if they could (1 Cor 7. 10). And there is another argument: the time is short (1 Cor 7. 29). The point is not, however, to have or not to have, to marry or not to marry, to be ascetics or not. The point is the inner attitude. Paul writes that you should have *as if not* (1 Cor 7.29-31). Whatever you have you can use or possess, but you should not be possessed by it. You can work and act in the world, but you

should not hunt for the fruits and gains of that work. Nothing should divert your attention from the one important thing: to follow Jesus.

What is taught here is extremely similar to the Bhagavad Gītā's concept of *naṣkarma* and *karma phala tyāya*, which means the work which is done while renouncing the fruits of action. This is also close to the Buddha's middle way.

Now, I cannot go into details in describing the development of Christian monasticism.¹ Already at the end of the first century Ignatius of Antioch writes to Polycarp about special virtues which should be followed by some Christians, and this means especially renouncing sexual life.

Two tendencies became important: First, the church became more and more *institutionalised*. Larger numbers of people joined the church, and this meant also an increase of problems of spiritual discipline, social equality in the congregations, etc. Especially when Christianity became the state religion in the early 4th century, political and hierarchical interests became dangerously predominant. Thus, responsible spiritual seekers had to escape into the deserts in order to establish a living sign of and for Jesus' uncompromising attitude described earlier. Antonius' motivation to become a *sannyāsin* is certainly very much grounded in these circumstances.

Secondly, especially in Origen we see a tendency to *combine mysticism and asceticism*. Origen was one of the greatest theologians of the early church. He emphasized *gnosis* (*jñāna*) as the vision of the eternal bliss. Asceticism is for him the preparation for the reception of higher divine graces. However, he does not forget that the struggle against our egotistic desires does not cease as long as we live. His asceticism, therefore, does not lead towards a passive mysticism but enables man to carry on in the struggle against the evil forces according to the commandment of Christ. Origen does not advocate a separation from the

1. Cf. B. Lohse, *Moentum und Reformation*, Göttingen 1963, esp. pp. 18ff.

world. You should be different *in* the world, not through external separation, but through the quality of your action and being. The whole of life is penitence. We never reach perfection, but we are called to be on the way towards perfection. It is a gradual inner transformation, which is necessary to be in Christ. In order to become transparent for the divine grace, some kind of asceticism is necessary. It is not an end in itself which could give us external merits.

Antony was the great Father of the Desert. Pachomius founded the first stable monastic communities. He stressed discipline, asceticism and obedience – including binding vows – and especially strict rules for the communities which became so important later on. Again, the monastic call is a special gift for him, which cannot be followed by everybody. But more and more there was the tendency to believe that to be a true and perfect follower of Jesus you have to be a monk.

Through the centuries the monastic orders grew tremendously. They were the strongholds of education and culture when the Roman Empire collapsed and the Germanic tribes took over. The monasteries were the seed for a new civilization. They became very powerful and engaged in politics; worldly interests took over also in the orders, and the spiritual climate worsened on a large scale. Most of the orders had to undergo this deterioration of spirituality, first because of the nature of the human heart, which is selfish in a layman as well as in a monk, second, because the orders became very much entangled in the power struggle of the churches.

3. Martin Luther's Attitude towards Monasticism

This year we celebrate the 500th birthday of Martin Luther, who was born in 1483. The reformation which he initiated changed the world. He did not only break the power of the Roman church over Europe, he did not only boost the movement of humanism and democracy which shaped the centuries after him, he also contributed deep insights to the Christian faith

which were obviously to a large extent forgotten by the church of his time.

Martin Luther was a monk. And as a monk he came to his great theological discoveries which would change the world; as a monk he rejected monasticism and married a nun. What were his reasons? And can his arguments help us today in India to clarify our responsibilities as religious people in today's situation?

Let me start with a biographical note. Luther's decision to become a monk was a sudden one and a surprise for the people around him. His father was against it. The story goes that on a journey near the town of Erfurt, Luther encountered a thunder-storm. There was a flash of lightning around him. And in his fear he uttered a vow to Saint Anna that if she would help he would become a monk. Against his father's compromising advise he did not want to break the vow. He took it extremely seriously and became a monk. This story sheds some light on the monastic vocation. It is serious. It links man with God in a very special way. It is the practice of obedience.

We can assume that Luther was a good monk. Not just because he observed the rules, but because he wanted to use his new *āśrama* to find God. He was not one of those forced into the institution and dissatisfied with it because of the hypocrisy or corruption or selfishness or political and social miss-appropriation of the power the monasteries had. He became dissatisfied with the form of monasticism he lived in because of a spiritual insight.

a) *Theological Background:*

In order to understand this we have to look into the basic theological discoveries he had made. He had struggled as a monk to observe the rules, pray, fast and meditate in order to become a better disciple of Christ. He wanted to overcome sin, and yet the more he tried he felt that the problem increased. He realized

that all we do is ego-action. *We* cannot earn any merit, *we* cannot become better, *we* cannot change ourselves. Especially on the religious path man is caught up in a vicious circle. In order to become centred in God alone what he has to fight is nothing else than the ego. Man's desire is not easily stilled. It may be directed from desire for material things towards spiritual things or even salvation, but it is still desire. Desire is the root-cause, for evil is not overcome but strengthened precisely in so far as the monk wants to "attain" God. The religious temptation is the most subtle temptation, and as long as man goes for any kind of merit, strives to do virtuous deeds which should make him holy, he is still on his ego-way and not at all surrendering to the grace of God.

Luther's attitude towards monasticism is a consequence of his theology and is understandable only with this background. We cannot go into all the details here, but may focus on five points.

1. Luther's central insight is built around the *doctrine of justification*. His thought is not so much concerned with metaphysical questions, but focuses on the soteriological problem. As we have seen already, he tried to live a holy life as a monk but realized his sinful nature the more he tried to 'attain'. Thus, his question was: How can God be graceful towards a sinner? He realized in meditation on texts such as Rom 1. 17; 3. 28, etc that justification is not at all the work of man, but an action of God which man can accept in faith. Thus, it is not man's doing which makes him acceptable to God, but it is God's saving action which declares man to be just, and this declaration accepted in faith transforms man practically. How is this possible? Because man circles all the time around his ego, he is caught up in his ego-desires which separate him from God as well as man. If he accepts everything from God, his ego becomes less important, he can surrender into the will of God and therefore unify his will, judgement, desire, and finally the whole being, with God's will, judgement and action. This is faith. Thus, Luther's insistence on the *sola fide* (by faith alone) is an

important existential insight for overcoming the limitations of the ego.

Monasticism, however, was understood as a special offer to God. It was basically a search for merits, which Luther denounced as an external attempt to please God, to make a bargain with God, as it were. The vows of chastity, obedience and poverty were, according to Luther, only a more subtle attempt of the human ego to 'control' God and this was impossible on the basis of his experience of faith.

2. *Being is primary over doing.* This again has to be seen in connection with justification. Man cannot work for his own salvation. It is God in Christ who acts for salvation. Insofar as man is in Christ, he participates in the Holy Spirit of God (Cf. esp. Rom 8). The Spirit, then, works in man. He is the subject, not any more the old ego. In Christ, we have a new being. The old nature has died, and the new being in Christ is there (Rom 6. 1ff). Only if our ontological status is changed, i.e. if we are in the new order of Christ, with a different subject of our actions can good works be done.

Luther is more interested in the *motivation* of any action than in the action as such. Suppose somebody is engaged in charity. The fact as such does not yet show whether this is a good work or not. It can be an extremely selfish thing done because man just wants to show his goodness. It can be an action of pride, which is extremely egoistical. On the other hand, it can be an expression of the joy received in the new state of being. It can be a thankful act, done in faith and freedom from the ego.

Here, Luther's understanding of freedom comes in. Freedom has a double nature. It is freedom *from* as well as freedom *for*. It is freedom from the law, a law made to tame the powerful ego (all morals etc. are to be seen in this light). As far as man is in faith, he is free, because his ego is destroyed, i.e. the law does not apply for him. He is in a new power of motivation, which is good as such, because it has God as the subject. And

therefore man is free *for* good works, service to his fellow beings, etc., which is Jesus' understanding too. Monasticism which does not integrate the 'spiritual' and the 'mundane' as two interlinked dimensions of realizing freedom *from* and *for* concerning the one Reality, is not living according to the model Jesus has given.

'Religious laws', such as the monastic vows, can hide this problem and make the jump into the real realm of freedom impossible. They want to establish 'goodness' on the level of the old man and its ego-motivation. This was Luther's experience in the monastery.

3. Luther's understanding of society is a *democratic* one, at least in religious terms. He rejected the idea of 'ordinary Christians' and 'better Christians' in a religious order, because all men are equal *coram Deo* (in front of God). No one is better than the other in the community of Christ, because Christ is in and among us. Christ is not partial and demands the same from all of us: faith.

This argument is not concerned only with monasticism, but is the basis for Luther's attack on the priesthood of the Roman church. Every Christian is a priest, in so far as he is a new creature in faith. No special human priest is necessary, because the spirit of Christ is in everybody. Different people may have different gifts and functions, but those gifts do not qualify for hierarchical subordination.

4. Monasticism was very much connected with a *devaluation of the body*. This was rejected by Luther. The body, according to Luther, is not worse than man's psyche. On the contrary, it is the will and its ego-power which rules the body. Therefore, if the body is disobedient, the problem is in the psychological structure. The New Testament understanding of 'flesh' (*sarx*) and 'spirit' (*pneuma*) is not concerned with the physical body. Flesh is everything under sinful nature, body as well as psyche. Spirit is everything which is under the new rule of Christ, i e. in

the order of faith. Therefore, the body and all material processes are good if they are seen in faith. Christ puts everything into a new light, the *physis* as well as the *psyche*. Devaluation of one of the two would be against God's good creation.

5. Luther suspected *selfishness* in some of the monastic ideals. A secluded life in the cloister might be nice, because one has time for prayer and study, but it could be selfish and the life of a parasite. Service to others is a spiritual virtue higher than service for ourselves. God cares for us, so we should care for others. In his sermons on Lk 6 he says again and again: All our works for God are futile, because he does not need anything, we cannot make him stronger or richer. But in faith we are motivated to thankfulness and praise. Thus, all our works should be directed to serving the needful neighbour.

These are Luther's main points of criticism against the monasticism of his time. Most clearly he has formulated his position in the book *De Votis Monasticis* (About the monastic vows).² This was an extremely successful book which saw two Latin and one German editions during the first year. Thus it influenced reformation history considerably.

b. *Luther argues against monastic vows in five steps.*

1. *The vows are contrary to the Word of God.* The New Testament declares Christ as the only way towards salvation, thus man cannot add anything. But that is precisely what monks and nuns try to do, though nothing is said about the vows in the New Testament.

2. *The vows are contrary to faith.* Here Luther argues in line with *sola fide* which we have already discussed. In fact, the monk seeks to abolish the unique grace of baptism. The monastic vows were understood as a 'second baptism', and this was

2. Luther, *De Votis Monasticis Tudicium* (1521) WA 8 (Weimar Edition, Vol. 8). An excellent study of Luther's attitude towards monasticism has been produced recently by H. M. Stamm, *Luthers Stellung zum Ordensleben*, Wiesbaden 1980.

unacceptable to Luther. Man wants to rely on his own wisdom and power instead of trusting in God, and this is the old problem of religious man as expressed already in Jesus' criticism against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and his benediction of the weak and sinful ones who do not have anything they could pretend to be. Luther says sarcastically about the hypocrisy of the proud monk :

Behold, O God, I vow to you to be no longer a Christian ; I revoke the vow made at my baptism ; no longer shall Christ be my support, and no longer shall I live in him. All that is past, outmoded, worthless. Beyond Christ, outside Christ I make to you a new and better vow : I seek a life in my own works of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and in the works prescribed by this rule. Through these works, in fact, I shall become just, I shall be saved, and I shall make myself profitable to others, for their justice, their salvation.

But precisely in connection with this argument, Luther leaves room for a genuine monasticism and vows free of hypocrisy and betrayal of the saving action of God. We will explain this positive attitude later.

3. *The vows are contrary to evangelical liberty.* Here, Luther reviews briefly his understanding of freedom developed earlier in the treatise *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (1520). He holds that the liberty of conscience should not be bound by any human obligation. The vows are nothing else than human obligations, used and misused by men with clear hierarchical and political interests. At best vows were regarded as works to gain merit, but merit are futile since God is the only subject in the process of salvation. This is precisely the freedom we gain in faith, when works can become the fruit of faith. Theoretically the vows could be kept in such a way as to express Christian liberty instead of covering it. They could be seen as Christ's operation in man.

In the beginning, monasteries were schools of learning and joy. But in Luther's time they were repressive, people were forced into them, they were means of politics and power etc. The vows were a means of pressure and power in the hands of the mighty abbots. And this had nothing to do with the gospel.

4. *The vows are opposed to the commandments of God.* Instead of sanctifying God alone, monks tended to sanctify and obey their order. The orders contributed to the fragmentation of Christianity and fought one another. The vows, he argues, could not bind against the will of parents and the needs of others, because to obey parents and to love and help the neighbour was the commandment of God. Luther's argument here presupposes a contradiction between the two and makes sense only with this background. It might go hand in hand with his experience, but it is not at all an argument against monasticism in general, of course. Luther's insistence on obedience towards parents in any case is not justified even by Jesus' teachings, because the spiritual call can well alienate somebody from duties towards parents, family, etc. (Cf. Mt 4, 22 etc.).

5. *The vows are opposed to reason.* Luther says in this connection, that reason is not the measure for religious judgments, i. e. reason cannot say what God is. But reason can clarify what God is not. Thus, it has a negative function here in this argument. It is especially the irrevocability of the vow of chastity which is against reason, according to Luther. There were so many monks and nuns who were chafing under monastic life because of this problem. Luther argues that the vow is not always valid: if somebody has vowed to do a pilgrimage but it was found that he was physically unable to do so, the vow was not any more binding. Luther wants the same reason to be applied with regard to the vow of chastity, because it is connected with so much wrong pride and hypocrisy. He denounced the idea that virginity is a value in itself. This, as we have seen, is against the *sola fide*. If virginity or chastity is helpful and the right way

for some people, it is all right. But it is not more valid than married life.

These are Luther's main arguments. They are not of equal importance. Some are based on profound theological considerations—such as the *sola fide* argument—some are just concerned with some grievances in monastic life as Luther had experienced it. This negative experience was so overwhelming for him that he certainly did not do justice to the whole Western Christian monastic tradition. Monks like Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross etc., definitely do not fall under Luther's accusation of corruption. Besides, he did not know much about Eastern Christian monasticism. He was mainly interested in the argument that the gospel is a free gift of God, not depending on some kind of worthiness which we do not have. And the gospel is equally valid for all Christians. To do the will of God is demanded of everybody, not just of an elite of monks and nuns, yet on the basis of faith which is God's action. Therefore, the vow of poverty is ambiguous. If it is done to gain 'merit', it is no poverty at all, but spiritual business. If one gives up possessions, however, for the sake of others—and not for one's own salvation—it is a true act of love without any egocentric motivation. All other arguments which Luther came out with later in his life are based on the ones discussed here.

c) *Luther's positive assertions*

The above, however, is only one side of the picture. From the very beginning as well as in *De Votis Monasticis* and later we find also a different line in Luther's thought which appreciates a genuine monasticism based on faith. In his first lecture on the Psalms (1513–1515) as well as in the lecture on Romans (1515–1516) we find a new theological evaluation of the monastic ideal and no rejection of monasticism *as such* at all.

In his early writings chastity and poverty are evaluated in such a way that they are considered higher than married life and business life, but not everybody can live according to those

rules. Later, Luther had broken with this position which he still held in 1513.

He holds the view already in 1513 that there is no holiness of man which would be valid in the eyes of God. Perfection is not a possible attribute of human nature, but perfection is faith.

As long as we live we are on the way. Luther's understanding of Sainthood is linked with his experience of grace: the saint is the one who loses himself in grace. He is *simul iustus et peccator*, constantly on the way from the ego (so far as he is sinner) to the image of God (*iustus*). But the subject of the movement is not our own will and effort, we are drawn by the love of God. Thus, there is not anything we could be proud of.³

Luther criticizes here already the discrimination of 'religious' and 'profane' works. He observes monastic standards and the evaluation monks give themselves and says that some people cling to 'spiritual activities' such as prayer, meditation etc. but they despise 'lower works' such as physical labour, cleaning the floors, gardening, etc. They grumble if they are told to do such works, and they regard it as a waste of time.⁴ But this attitude is based on a differentiation which contradicts the gospel and a real meditative life. It shows a clinging to certain things, a difference which is made according to one's selfish conveniences. It is nothing else than a more refined and hidden concupiscence.

According to Luther it is arrogance to decide by oneself what is 'higher' and what is 'lower', because God has created everything with equal care. In fact, he is *in* everything be it small or be it big, be it important or unimportant in the eyes of man.⁵ Man's duty is to give God all glory in every sign of

3. Luther, WA 56, 239, 14ff.

4. Luther, WA 56, 348, 13ff.

5. Luther, WA 23, 135, 3ff; 23, 137, 33ff.

his goodness, i.e. in the whole creation.⁶ Monks who want to be better than others in engaging themselves in 'higher' works display only their egocentricity, pride and sin. Thus, the maid-servant can render a much better service to God and man than the monk who has renounced the mundane duties.⁷ It should only be mentioned that Luther stands here in the mainstream of Christian mysticism, especially Eckart, Seuso and Tauler. *What* we do, *which* kind of activity we are engaged in does not matter at all, because everything is God's creation. *How* we do it is the point. Do we do our work in humility, for the sake of God's glory and in a prayerful and meditative attitude, or do we do it with selfish intentions for our personal gain of power and esteem?

Therefore, 'the monk who has renounced worldly desires, can be caught up in much more dangerous desire unless he seeks God only for the sake of God'.⁸ This is the criterion for a genuine life in faith, and it does not matter whether one lives as monk or layman. Monkhood can be suitable and helpful for some people, it can be a call to serve God in a special way. Monkhood is neither superior nor inferior to the life of a householder, it is just different. The spiritual quality has to be sought in both ways of life according to the inner attitude of either surrendering faith or egoistic sinfulness.

Luther's point becomes extremely clear if we go back once more to his understanding of the vows. In the context of his criticism of monastic vows which he regards as contrary to faith, he comes out with an 'evangelical vow' which would be suitable for a type of monasticism Luther could not only tolerate but encourage. This would be a genuine vow, certainly in agreement with Jesus' teaching and the practice of the early

6. Cf. Lohse, *op. cit.* p. 290.

7. Cf. V. Vajta, *Eine Liturgische Kirche*. In: LM 10, 1982, p. 495 (Lutherische Monatshefte).

8. Lohse, *op. cit.* p. 290.

church, but obviously different from the type of monasticism Luther experienced in his time. He suggests the following vow:⁹

O God, I vow to you to live in this (monastic) way, not because I believe it is a way to justice, to salvation, or to forgiveness of sin... That would be an offence to Christ, my Lord, because it would be denial of his merits... But since I must live on this earth, and since I must not be idle while here, I have chosen this manner of life in order to put my body to use, to render service to my fellow man, and to make God's word my meditation, just as others choose tilling the soil, or some other daily employment.

We can summarize Luther's position as follows: Luther was against the monastic merit-system for the theological reasons we have already discussed. He was against the practice of 16th century monasticism for reasons of honesty. He was against the irrevocability of the vows for humanistic reasons. Thus:

1. Luther was against the practice of 16th century monasticism for reasons of *honesty*. Here he stands in line with other monks and nuns who reformed their monastic tradition, such as St. Francis of Assisi or Teresa of Avila. First of all the poverty vowed by the monks was not real. It is true that monks and nuns did not have private property, but the monasteries were extremely rich. Monks usually did not suffer at all from material needs. Economically they were protected and much better off than most of the peasants. The monasteries were involved in the power struggle of the Catholic hierarchy, therefore the vow of obedience was constantly misused. Many monastics had entered the monastery not for spiritual reasons but in order to get privileges. Or they were forced into the monastery by families or political groups to strengthen certain positions or to get rid of them. Furthermore, even the vow of

9. Luther, WA 8, 603, 11.15-20.

chastity was not strictly observed. In many cases it might have been an external rule, but the chastity of the heart was not observed.

2. Luther was against the irrevocability of the vows for *humanistic* reasons.¹⁰ Real spiritual vows, such as poverty in spirit, i.e. simplicity, honesty and humility were precepts for all Christians. Obedience was first of all obedience to Christ. This is also true for every Christian. If it was obedience towards superiors, it was the practice that those who were charged with command (bishops, etc.) were dispensed from obedience. Thus, the vow could be revoked in cases where the hierarchy was interested in revocation. Why not allow the revocation of the vows if there was a problem of conscience? This was Luther's question. He assumed that the problem was considered much more under political than spiritual considerations. Concerning the vow of chastity Luther said it was a different thing to choose chastity freely than to stick to it against one's inner drive. He felt that making a vow of chastity was to make a vow concerning a drive which was not in all cases in one's power. Thus, in case of a problem it would be much more honest and according to human nature to revoke the vow instead of betraying it in the heart. What binds man as an irrevocable obligation is love. Love can be expressed in different ways. Man cannot say once and for all which ways are suitable for him.

We see that Luther's arguments are of a diverse nature. Not all his arguments have the same gravity. His theological considerations are certainly most important. His description of the historical situation of the Christian 15th century monasticism is not necessarily the only possible one.

Not all kinds of monasticism have the form and character which Luther bitterly criticised. There might be a monasticism which could be built upon principles and practice which include Luther's insights. It would be not a 'monasticism of merit'

10. Cf. F. Biot, *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism*, Dublin 1963, pp. 24ff.

but a 'monasticism of praise', monasticism not based on the attempt to attain salvation on the basis of an effort of human egocentricity and pride, but based on the experience that it is God who works both the intention and action of man directed towards a life of meditation, prayer and service (Phil 2, 12-13); it would be a monasticism of the free association of seekers practicing brotherhood and service to the community of all men as a special vocation in and for the wider community. Monasticism would be only one possible expression of such a life, but an important one.