Monastic? Apostolic?

What’s the difference?
By Sister Jeanne Knoerle, SP

Choices, choices
Describing the various ways religious life is lived — especially for those discerning about the possibility of choosing to live such a life — is fraught (as almost everything is these days) with a great deal of complexity and ambiguity. What is the difference in the lifestyle of a monastic community and the lifestyle of an apostolic community? What are the reasons for those differences? What will be the effect of those differences on my life should I choose one or the other?

Common threads
Perhaps the best way to begin to address these issues is to establish, first of all, the basic similarity, the common fundamental thread that is true for all forms of religious life, no matter what the lifestyle differences. That deeply shared commitment is, in the words of Sandra Schneiders, who has written the most comprehensive examination of contemporary religious life to date, an “exclusive, lifelong God-quest centered in a particular kind of celibacy lived in community and mission.”

That commitment implies and requires a life of deep prayer to which all religious are called, whether monastic or apostolic. Therefore, no matter what choices we make concerning lifestyle, no matter what way we balance work and prayer in our lives, our primary commitment as religious, to the exclusion of any other primary relationship, is to the love and worship of Jesus and to the prayer which supports that commitment.

Having established that unchangeable bedrock of all religious life, we then must look at how we make choices about the ways we want to live out that commitment. It is here that we see the differences between monastic and apostolic forms of religious life begin to emerge. The lifestyle choices of those communities are not the same, primarily because of what each of them considers the primary focus of their lives and the lens through which they assess ways to address that focus.
How they differ

Monastic communities, and hence their lifestyle, began very early in the history of Christianity. Their life is based on two non-negotiable characteristics that are central to their daily activities and lives: the primacy of prayer, both individual and liturgical, supported by an atmosphere of silence and solitude, and life together in a stable community.

Apostolic communities, on the other hand, which are a more recent form of religious life, have a different set of non-negotiable characteristics that are central to their lives: loving ministry to others that requires the mobility to respond when a need appears, and the responsibility to be a contributing member of their community.

Sandra Schneiders suggests, therefore, that perhaps a better set of descriptors for these two lifestyles might be stable and monastic for the first and mobile and ministerial for the second.

Because their lenses differ, a different set of actions to carry out their commitment to love God results. For monastic, or stable religious, the primary emphasis of their activity is to pray communally and individually and to develop an atmosphere and schedule where that can best be done. This requires a regular schedule and an expectation that all members will follow it whenever possible.

For apostolic, or mobile and ministerial religious, the primary emphasis of their activity is to minister to others and to develop an atmosphere and schedule where that can best be done. This requires flexibility and the expectation that not all will necessarily follow the same schedule.

These differences in behavior come about simply because their filters for discernment differ, not because religious in stable, monastic communities are not interested in serving others in ministry (they are, as we shall see) or because members of mobile, ministerial communities are not interested in prayer (they must have deep prayer in their lives, as we shall see). They simply...
choose to do those things in different ways and in a different order.

The lifestyle for you
Nonetheless, the emphases they choose create unique life experiences, and the choice of joining one type of community or another must be made, therefore, not only on the basis of one’s primary commitment to Jesus, but also on the basis of which of the lifestyles described above will, in the long run, help a potential member best fulfill that commitment.

Therefore, it is important to look at the specifics of the life of each of these types of communities and to understand how differences in schedule and atmosphere and priorities inform and shape their external lives, knowing that they do not change the underlying nature of religious life itself.

Life as a monastic
Stable, monastic religious join a particular community and generally remain in that community for the rest of their religious life. Their days are devoted to using the environment of silence and solitude created there to deepen their prayer for the world. Their ministries are often done in that monastery and are frequently related to helping others develop their religious life and spirituality — retreat work, spiritual direction, writing, etc., or to physical care of or support for the house, perhaps by managing a gift shop, or the neighborhood, by running a food pantry or soup kitchen, etc. When some members engage in ministries outside the house, those ministries are chosen to keep intact the integrity of regular prayer as the primary filter of their life.

Apostolic Life
Apostolic religious, on the other hand, will almost always be more mobile because their priority is to serve others wherever a need surfaces. That need may take them to distant places, or it may invite them to serve very close to home. It may at times make life in common with other members possible, or it may make it necessary for...
some to live singly for some time because there is no other member of the community in that place. Because members of a mobile, ministerial community cannot always count on a stable community in which to live, they may find themselves at various times of their lives moving from one community to another.

The place of prayer and the way in which community life is lived is obviously clearer in a stable, monastic community than it is in a mobile, ministerial community. This newer form of religious life, only several centuries old, is still organizing itself, still settling in to the many changes in contemporary life across the world and trying to devise ways to meet them effectively. This challenge requires of each member a deep, personal commitment to a life of prayer and of community that is often not supported by a common schedule or a stable community. Because of their greater mobility, members of apostolic communities, therefore, must find ways themselves to make prayer and contemplation a regular and constant part of their lives. All members must deeply believe and clearly understand that their prayer and silent contemplation spill over into their work — and that it is that joining of the contemplative with the active that makes their work fruitful.

This challenge is not easy because it cannot be done corporately. It must be accomplished by each member and/or by each house as they struggle to develop a daily schedule that allows for and encourages times of silence and solitude despite an environment which is active and external.

Such changes also require new ways of understanding what it means to live in community. Some new understandings about what living in community means and some new community living arrangements are just now emerging.

These include such patterns as living with a fairly stable community that has been together for some time; arranging for groups of sisters to come together several times during the year from various places to pray together—
er, renew community ties, discuss with one another spiritual and community concerns; encouraging sisters who live in close proximity, though not in the same house, to come together once or several times during a week to pray, to share a meal, to talk with one another. These newer patterns also include sisters living alone and away from other members. These sisters must find creative ways to be contributing members of their community. Such new patterns are still emerging.

A common challenge
In the long run, the primary challenge for members of both monastic and apostolic communities is one of continuing discernment about how best to live their lives. Each member should not simply believe that her decision and the reasons for it at the time she made her first decision to join that particular community will remain constant. On the contrary, because life is continually changing, she must discern regularly whether her reasons for following the way of life she has chosen have grown or shifted or changed significantly and may demand a re-balancing or re-commitment, or whether they remain deeply embedded in her.

For instance, a sister in a monastic community may want to ask herself: How do I keep my relish for prayer constantly before me when my days are overwhelmingly the same? Is my prayer deep and constant enough to sustain the lifestyle I have chosen? How can I develop and sustain a deep love and respect for people I live with who are very different and sometimes very difficult? How do I set the priorities in my life? What are the basic lenses I should use to evaluate how honest and loving I am? How do I balance my work and my prayer? What kind of ministry to others best suits my lifestyle and my commitment to deep prayer for the world?

Or a sister in an apostolic community may want to ask herself: Does my ministry flow from my prayer and does it encourage me to deepen my prayer, or does
my commitment to my work overshadow my prayer? What really is a ministry? How does it differ from “work”? What criteria should I use to choose a ministry or to accept one that is available? Should the issue of how I live in community enter my discernment about what ministry I undertake? In choosing my ministry, how do I balance my own needs and desires, those of the people I will serve and those of my community?

These are not easy questions to answer, nor are they ones that will enable a potential member who is looking at a community to assess the life of that community with any degree of accuracy, since she does not yet live that life. But, once she makes a choice, those questions will become some of the daily lenses through which she makes further choices about how she lives her life within that community.

And that brings us full circle to the issue of complexity and ambiguity. Religious life is filled with both. Its fundamental reason for being is clear and unambiguous and may seem simple to an onlooker or an observer: to live a life of unconditional love for Jesus. But such a life demands constant discernment and daily decision making, and that process of evaluation and re-commitment gives religious life a deep richness, powerful overtones of love and a quiet depth as members underscore daily their total commitment to Jesus.

1 Sandra Schneiders, “Finding the Treasure,” p 364
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