

Vocation: Living a Spirit Filled Life Part 1: Classic Three Vows

Poverty, obedience and chastity / celibacy are the classic vows of an ascetic life. The renunciation of worldly pursuits was considered a prerequisite for both spiritual attainment and spiritual vocation.

Similarly, indigenous shaman often occupied literally and figuratively the boundaries of their communities. Often living just far enough outside the village to both act as an interpreter of the natural world and to interceded with this same world on behalf of their human community.

Modern day shamans and followers of a spiritual vocation often are unable to completely withdraw into a world of their own choosing. So a compromise of sorts must be struck, it seems, between the demands of ones vocation and the demands of the mundane world.

Or so it would seem. In this series, we will reexamine many of our present day assumptions of what it means to live a spirit filled life as both a vocation and a journey.

We begin by reexamining the value systems underlying Christian asceticism and the Christian monastic movements.

Monasticism is the religious practice of renouncing all worldly pursuits in order to fully devote one's life to spiritual work.

From <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monastic>

An **ascetic** is one who practices a renunciation of worldly pursuits to achieve spiritual attainment.

From <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ascetic>

A renunciation of “worldly pursuits” presupposes matter as corrupt. One need only examine the religious beliefs of the Christian monastic movement to uncover an utter disgust for the body and its instinctual needs. Hunger, fatigue, thirst and sexual expression were controlled via fasts, the practice of keeping the eight liturgical hours and in extreme cases physical abuse and self-mutilation.

Further, the severe repression of these natural instincts triggered a equally severe and rampaging shadow. Evidence points to the rise of extremism and intolerance within the Catholic church when higher percentages of its hierarchy were chosen from among its monastic clergy instead of the usually more grounded pastoral orders. Examining each of the classic ascetic vows more closely also exposes this ‘matter as corrupt’ bias with its corresponding backlash.

Poverty as a vow was intended to limit one's appetite for material goods, food and drink, and the reliance on others to supply comfort. In this way, wealthy and aristocratic entrants into the monastic life were forced to learn concrete ways to not only care for themselves, but also contribute to the well-being of their religious community. Many of these same values can be seen in modern communes and other intentional communities.

Poverty in this context also implied a denial of personal comfort and restrictions on material accumulation. However, the wealth of the bishops, archbishops, cardinals, popes and the church itself is almost unimaginable in economic terms. One need only examine the luxuriousness that is considered *de rigueur* among the Catholic hierarchy to wonder whose poverty they are vowing to uphold.

Obedience is such a loaded term. In holy, monastic and tertiary orders, obedience was ultimately to the church and its teachings. But this obedience was personified as obedience to the pope and the entire chain of church leadership. In many ways, the Catholic Church resembles a military organization. Comparing western orders with their eastern counterparts however, one additionally finds a counteracting force that resides within the mores and customs of the community and culture at large within eastern society.

So unlike in eastern contexts where the community and cultural standards evolve over time and then inform the larger context within which the eastern orders exist, western orders recognize no outer context and adapt slowly if at all to changing cultural and community standards.

In fact many of the church's responses are a reassertion of beliefs and standards out of step with the current standards or even worse the imposition of new standards in direct contradiction to the prevailing social milieu. The church's stand on abortion is a primary example of this stance. While initially silent on the use of abortifacients, which were widely used across all time periods of the ancient world and middle ages, it was only when women began actively challenging prevailing notions of womanhood and seeking a broader voice in both spiritual and secular life that the church began advocating against abortion.

In Sufi orders, priests, monks and spiritual seekers could branch out to follow a new leader or even blaze their own trail as long as they had a wealthy patron. Movement out of an order was not considered a renunciation of one's vocation. In Catholic orders however, faced with a system that called for them to give up their quest for priesthood, many women felt forced to leave their religious orders. Obedience under these conditions would have forced these women to abandon their true spiritual vocation and undermine their spiritual growth.

And the failure of the celibacy/chastity vow, will probably become a text book case of sexual repression when historians and anthropologists review the issue of pedophilia among not only Catholic priests abut also among their Protestant counterparts.

While, the church is engaging in subterfuge by blaming the epidemic on gay priests (which makes one wonder given all the women and girl victims), sexual abuse of children is quite simply the tip of the iceberg. The ritualized emotional, physical and intellectual abuse of children and young people in addition to the sexual abuse had yet to be addressed.

Still even as these and other flaws are uncovered, a reasonable person can still point to the scandals as evidence of the societal standards acting as a context within which even the church has to evolve and change. We must also note that even the eastern orders are undergoing a change as they migrate into western cultures and lose the connection to cultural standards that supported their existence across numerous centuries. And so it would seem that religious and spiritual orders both eastern and western are experiencing the twin difficulties of growth and change.

But even given all these problems, and some would say in spite of these problems, many people are still able to not only seek a spiritual life, but also thrive within these structures. So one must ask how these vows may assist in the crafting of ones vocation given the realities of today's world.

And we need to assess the essence of these vows to comprehend how they might operate within a modern context.

Katrina Messenger
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