
Family Encouragement and Life Experiences: The Road to the Monastic Life *

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Abstract

Twenty-two Cistercian monks from a suburban Atlanta, Georgia monastery participated in ninety-minute personal interviews. The monks were asked specific questions about their families, life experiences, monastic vocations, and prayer lives. They came from diverse family backgrounds and life experiences. The main research question that guided this paper was: What role did family encouragement and life experiences play in their road to the monastic life? The overwhelming majority of the monks' parents supported their son's monastic vocations. All but two of the monks were raised in Catholic families and most were raised in what they considered to be religious households. Prior to entering the monastery, the monks had been gainfully employed in a variety of occupations and endeavors such as the military, education, retail, construction, the diocesan priesthood, and as a member of a religious order.

Keywords: monastic life, Cistercian monks, monastic vocations, Roman Catholics, family encouragement, life experiences

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The original purpose of this project was to study the prayer lives of the monks at the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, a Cistercian monastery in Conyers, Georgia (Smith, 2014), but I soon discovered that the monks also had very interesting vocation stories (Smith, 2015), and that their families and life experiences directly or indirectly influenced their choice of the monastic life. These monks are known as Trappists, which is a popular name for their Roman Catholic religious Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Lekai, 1977; Bianco,

1992; de Waal, 1998; Delisi, 2003). This paper will discuss the influence that the monks' families and life experiences had on their road to the monastic life.

The Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit is located thirty-five miles east of Atlanta, Georgia, and it was the first Trappist monastery in the United States founded by American Cistercians. It is also the first daughter-house of Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, which was home to the famous monk Thomas Merton. Twenty-one monks from Gethsemani founded the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in 1944. The monks built the original structures, including a large church. During September and October of 2013, the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit was home to thirty-eight monks including three visiting monks and three monks who have since died. The monastery is supported by a retreat house, a conservation burial ground, a bookstore, a garden supply shop, a stained glass business, and a bakery which produces fudge, biscotti, and fruitcake.

Other than recent studies by Bendyna and Gautier (2009) and Gautier, Wiggins, and Holland (2015), social researchers have mostly neglected the study of the relationship between family encouragement and religious vocations. For example, various reviews of the scholarly literature on the relationship of family and religion did not mention this topic (Wittberg, 1999; Christiano, 2000; Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Bartkowski, 2007; and Cornwall, 2013). However, longitudinal research conducted over nearly forty years clearly and definitively indicates that families do matter in the transmission of faith and values to young adults, particularly the role that parents play in the religious development of their children and grandchildren (Bengtson, Putney, & Harris 2013). Smith and Lundquist (2005) and Smith, Longest, Hill, and Christoffersen (2014) acknowledged that parents are the most important influence on the religious and spiritual lives of their children.

Whiston and Keller concluded that, "the empirical research regarding family influences on career development indicates that families influence individuals' career development in identifiable and predictable ways" (2004, p. 561). It should be noted that Catholics prefer to think of religious vocations as callings rather than careers (Fichter, 1966). Whiston and Keller (2004) found that parental relationships, and specifically the level of parental attachment, influenced career development. For Catholic men considering the priesthood, a young man's mother has historically played an important role in encouraging his vocation (Greeley, 1990). Hall and Schneider (1973) noted that when they were boys, priests tended to be emotionally closer to their mothers than to their fathers.

What kind of family is likely to encourage vocations? Gautier, Wiggins, and Holland acknowledged that, "There is no such thing as a "typical" family of a priest or religious" (2015, p. 2). Hoge, Potvin, and Ferry (1984) concluded that vocations primarily come from middle class families of all sizes, where the parents are Catholic and had attended Catholic schools, practice their religion, have close relationships with their children, are somewhat ambivalent about their attitudes toward vocations, and whose children are attending or had attended Catholic schools.

McAllister found that “It is important that the family background of the religious be a stable and supportive one” (1986, p. 161).

Gautier, Wiggins, and Holland (2015) reported similar findings about the families of the religious, priests, and seminarians in their study. Family members had been raised Catholic, attended Mass weekly, prayed daily, acknowledged that their faith was important to them, and were active in their parishes. In response to the question, “In general, how supportive was the family to the idea of priesthood or religious life as a vocation?” 60% of the family members of religious men and women responded that their families were very supportive, and 27% responded that they were somewhat supportive (Gautier, Wiggins, & Holland, 2015, p. 43). More than half of them indicated that they had encouraged a family member to pursue a religious vocation. More than 60% of religious, priests, and seminarians noted that they received encouragement for their vocation from family, particularly their mothers and grandparents. Only a few family members discouraged them from pursuing a religious vocation. The religious, priests, and seminarians were also more likely to have attended Catholic schools.

Previous studies revealed that families were more hesitant to encourage religious vocations. Fichter (1967) found that parents were reluctant to recommend religious vocations to their children, especially vocations of contemplative religious orders. Greeley (1990) noted that by the late 1970s only 50% of Catholic parents said they would be happy if their son became a priest, a noticeable decline from previous generations. Similarly, Wittberg concluded that “parents and other family members are much less willing to encourage a son or daughter to join a religious community than were parents of previous generations; they are more likely, in fact, actively to discourage such a notion” (1994, p. 259). Hillery commented that “When a prospective candidate for monasticism first announces his decision to be a Trappist, the reaction from family is often one of shock, disbelief, and disappointment” (1992, p. 98).

Factors other than families have been identified as influencing religious vocations as well. Greeley concluded that “the principal reason for the decline in support for the priesthood as a vocation for one’s son seems to be closely linked to the general deterioration of institutional Catholicism in the United States, which itself is closely linked to the birth control stand of the church and confidence in the papacy” (1977, p. 160).

Among new members of religious institutes since 1993, Bendyna and Gautier found that “Parents, siblings, and other family members were among the least supportive” (2009, p. 74) of their initial thoughts about a religious vocation. Not surprisingly, “Some members experienced a great deal of encouragement and support from parents and other family members, others encountered a great deal of opposition” (Bendyna & Gautier, 2009, p. 75). Once parents had become accustomed to the fact that either their son or daughter was now a religious (a member of a religious institute who lives a consecrated life in community and professes religious vows), they offered more encouragement, although siblings and other family members were not as encouraging (Bendyna & Gautier, 2009). Gautier, Wiggins, and Holland noted that

new (since 2000) religious, priests, and seminarians experienced, “increased levels of encouragement currently in their life and ministry from all relatives” (2015, p. 4). Bendyna and Gautier (2009) also reported that the most recent generation of men and women religious had more diverse life experiences than previous generations of religious, and that 90% of them had been employed and 70% had earned at least a bachelor’s degree before becoming a religious.

Methods

A micro-sociological approach was used to study the monks’ lives (Collins, 2014). I used the monks’ personal narratives/life stories to understand their lived experiences (Chase, 2011). Personal narrative analysis underscores the linkages between individual and social experiences (Riessman, 1993; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). “Narrativization tells not only about past actions but how individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning” (Riessman, 1993, p. 19). I focused very closely on how the monks described their prayer lives, vocation stories, families, and life experiences. As Wuthnow noted, “religion is increasingly understood...as a social practice that interlaces with other aspects of everyday life” (2011, p. 15). “Lived religion is messy” because people reinterpret it and rethink it in the attempt to bring meaning to their lives (Baggett, 2009, p. 239). Monks, like people outside of the cloister, live with some degree of messiness in their religious lives. They too struggle, maybe even more so, with acquiring meaning in their lives. That being the case, what then motivated and drew these men to the monastery? The major research question that guided this paper is: What role did family encouragement and life experiences play in their decision to become monks?

I was pleased when twenty-two of the thirty-eight monks at the monastery volunteered to participate. Several of the monks I interviewed suggested that the subject matter of this study might have deterred some of the monks from participating. As one of them stated, “It’s just not fashionable in a monastery to talk about prayer... I mean, I would never talk to any of the monks like I have to you.” Echoing this thought, another brother noted that “Prayer is something we don’t share or discuss in general. And even here, you know, it isn’t something we talk about. It’s a private thing and unfortunately, you know, through the years I’ve never sat down with hardly anybody and talked about prayer.” I think it is important to note that during a chapter meeting, one of the monks who acted as my gatekeeper shared with the community an overview of the project. The community discussed it and voted to allow me access to the monastery. I was fortunate that several monks had a very good understanding of social science research and they helped to dissipate, but not completely eradicate, any fears or qualms that some of the monks had about the project.

The twenty-two monks who were interviewed ranged in age from 29 to 102, with an average age of 68, which was also the average age of the thirty-eight monks at the monastery. The median age of the interviewees was 65, the same median age as the whole community.

The modal age for the interviewees was 85 (three were that age), while for the whole community there was a bimodal distribution. The ages 65 and 85 occurred most often, three monks were 65 and three monks were 85.

I chose participant-observation and intensive interviewing because as McGuire stated, “these methodological approaches are best suited to trying to grasp the meanings of a situation for the participants themselves” (1982, p. 10). I visited the monastery on two separate occasions during 2013: September 16-20 and September 30-October 4. I resided for four nights each visit in a guest room in the retreat house which is located on the grounds of the monastery adjacent to the church and the monastic cloister. A sign-up sheet was posted on a bulletin board near the monks’ mailboxes in the cloister. Interviews were available from 8:30-10:00 a.m., 10:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m., 2:00-3:30 p.m., and 3:45-5:15 p.m. Monday through Friday. I interviewed thirteen monks during my first visit and nine during my second visit. The interviews were conducted in a small conference room on the first floor of the retreat house. The first part of the ninety minute personal interview was devoted to gathering some basic demographic and biographic information, while the second part of the interview addressed each monk’s prayer life. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. I employed a former student to transcribe the interviews. I also participated in the Liturgy of the Hours at 4:00 a.m. Vigils, 7:00 a.m. Lauds and Mass, 12:15 p.m. Midday Prayer, 5:20 p.m. Vespers, and 7:30 p.m. Compline. On my second visit I did not participate in Vigils. After Compline, I compiled a daily set of field notes.

I reread each of the transcripts and field notes at least four times, marking relevant passages and potential quotations that accurately reflected their vocation stories. I also wrote separate notes for each transcript.

Family Backgrounds of the Monks

Not surprisingly, there are similarities and differences among the monks’ family backgrounds. Their families were mostly supportive of their monastic vocations. Only one monk was born in the American south, but he spent his teenage years in Washington, DC, while another monk was born in the mid-west but spent his teenage and young adult years in the south. The other monks were from the mid-west, northwest, and mostly the northeast, although one monk was from Africa, one from southeast Asia, and another from South America. All of them, except for one monk who was an orphan, were reared in two parent households. One of the foreign-born monks was adopted at an early age by a European couple. Almost all of their mothers were full-time homemakers, except for several who were teachers, secretaries, or social workers. Few of their parents were college graduates, although several had graduate degrees. Most of their parents were high school graduates, although some parents had only an elementary school education or had not completed high school. Several

parents had no formal education. The monks' fathers were employed in a variety of occupations: county agricultural extension agent, police officer, IT manager, construction, engineer, diplomat, accountant, credit analyst, business executive, upholsterer, musician, machinist, telephone serviceman, post office employee, movie theater owner, farmer, fruit and vegetable wholesaler, grocery store clerk, food processing, and an automobile factory worker. Most of the monks, except for one who was raised Methodist and another who was raised Presbyterian (but born into a Buddhist family), grew up in Catholic families, including the monk who was an orphan who was raised in three Catholic orphanages and four Catholic foster homes. Besides the monk who was an orphan, another one of them was an only child. Most of them had between one to six siblings, while two of the monks had ten siblings. Sixteen of the monks were raised in what they considered to be a religious household, while three indicated their homes were not particularly religious even though they were raised Catholic and went to Mass regularly. The three other monks made no comment about the degree of religiousness of their childhood homes.

Selected Life Experiences of the Monks

The monks in this study also had very diverse life experiences before joining the monastery. One monk (technically he is an oblate, meaning one who does not take vows) is married and has a son who is married. Two monks served in the navy, three in the army, and one in the marines. Before entering the monastery three monks were employed as college professors. One monk was a teacher of meditation, taught high school, and was involved with several new religious movements. One monk was a priest in a religious order for 18 years and served in a number of parishes and retreat centers before joining the monastery. Another monk was a diocesan priest and served in a number of parishes for 20 years before joining the monastery. Another monk was a member of a religious order and taught high school. One monk taught preschool and another one taught art. One monk taught middle school for 15 years and then became a travel agent. One worked in a hospital and as a house painter after leaving seminary and another monk worked for various building contractors as a carpenter/designer. One monk worked for an electric company after high school and in a furniture factory after dropping out of college, while another monk was employed in a retail clothing store for 10 years. One monk worked in a bank and later became involved in food service management. After high school one monk (who was not Catholic at the time) spent one year at a monastery, then left and worked in a supermarket and a laboratory before converting to Catholicism and becoming a monk, while another monk worked as a flight attendant, a laboratory supervisor for a pharmaceutical company, and a hotel clerk before becoming a monk. One monk worked as a hospital orderly, a pastoral assistant in a parish, and as a counselor. He was a member of several different religious orders before becoming a monk.

Most of them attended Catholic elementary and high schools for all or part of their elementary and secondary education, although their post high school schooling varied widely. Two of them did not pursue higher education and either entered the monastery after military service or after being in the work force for a number of years. In reference to their highest educational degrees earned, two of the monks have doctoral degrees, four have master's degrees, and two have a licentiate (an ecclesiastical academic degree) in philosophy. Six of them earned bachelor's degrees. One of them had completed four years at a diocesan seminary, but chose not to be ordained a priest and another one chose not to be ordained a deacon and left the seminary after earning his Master of Divinity degree. One monk went to business school for a short time following high school then entered a seminary for three years before leaving, and then he served in the military. Two monks joined monasteries after graduating from high school and did not go on for further higher education. Several of them have taken additional academic coursework beyond the bachelor's degree which did not lead to a graduate degree. One monk completed a year at a community college then eventually joined a monastery. One monk studied philosophy and theology and eventually completed three years of college but never graduated. Another monk served in the Peace Corps for two years then lived in a Benedictine monastery for several years.

Family Encouragement

Not all of the monks commented on whether or not their parents and siblings encouraged them in their religious/monastic vocations. Among those who did, the most common response suggested that their families were supportive of their decision to pursue this particular lifestyle. For example, one of the monks said, "I think my mother offered me up as a sacrifice when I was born to be a priest or religious...and so it sort of came true." This monk left the monastery after some years and stated that, "My parents were devastated when I left... throughout the years my mom would ask, are you going to go back?" He eventually returned to the monastery and his parents were extremely happy with his decision. When he left the monastery his mother began praying to St. Therese that her son would rejoin the monastery and he noted, "She (his mother) was grateful to St. Therese that I got back to the monastery." One of the monks left the church for 30 years and did not practice Catholicism or anything else and during that time his mother "Prayed and prayed and prayed that I would come back to the church. And never thought that I would come back to it out the back door because it was very hard for her when I left for the monastery." Another monk indicated that his parents strongly encouraged his vocation. "Oh yes, see my mom wanted to be a nun so she could relate. My dad, he sees it in me; he always has." Even this monk's grandmother, his mother's mother, "was very happy for me." One of the monks who has been a student of Eastern spirituality for nearly his entire adult life stated that his parents were "Totally positive (about his monastic

vocation) because they were totally positive in terms of my spiritual growth.” Another monk reflected on the many times his parents were supportive of him during his lifetime. “Yes, first of all as we were raised, my parents were always very affirming in whatever we chose...They were always supportive.”

One of the monks had originally studied for the priesthood, but left the seminary after several years, served in the military, and then worked in a retail business for 10 years. He was in his early 40s when he decided to enter the monastery, and his parents had mixed feelings about his monastic vocation because he had left the seminary earlier in his life. “They were, I guess you’d say, they were supportive, but they had their doubts, you know.” Another monk who had studied for the priesthood as a young man and left the seminary after four years was accepted to the monastery as a middle-aged man. He said, “I went home, told everybody, some were pleased, some were not pleased. My brother wasn’t, he didn’t mind me being in a monastery. He wanted me to be closer because he doesn’t fly so his chances of coming here, which he hasn’t anyway...My father was living at the time and so he was, I have a stepmother and they were very supportive. I would say the majority pretty much were supportive.” Like the previous two monks, this next monk had studied for the priesthood and left the seminary shortly before he was to be ordained a deacon. He then spent about 10 years working before entering the monastery. When he left the seminary he said, “I think they (his family) were a little disappointed at some level...But they didn’t hold it against me.” When he decided to enter the monastery, “they were a little bit concerned about that because that was a real separation. They thought they were going to lose me. So there was a little bit of resistance to that. But as time went on and I got here they realized it wasn’t as bad as they thought.” Another monk was a diocesan priest for 20 years when he decided to become a monk. He said of his family, “They were not surprised. I mean, people and family and friends who knew me didn’t express any great shock. I guess they could see, well they told me that they knew there was always a contemplative side to me or, you know, a need for solitude or whatever. My father didn’t understand what a place like this was about. He was in failing health; he only came here once. And then I think he understood. He was kind of happy about it... (My mother) was really good about it. And they both supported my being a priest and all that.”

Only one monk did not have family support for his monastic vocation. This particular monk shared that his adoptive family was not supportive of him becoming a Catholic and then a monk. He was born into a Buddhist family and then was adopted at an early age by a Presbyterian family. They wanted him to marry and become an accountant, but over the years they have gradually accepted his Catholicism and his monastic vocation. They have noticed how happy he is and they are now supportive of him.

Two of the monks had rather interesting memories of their parents’ initial reactions to their decisions to become monks. One of them said that his mother was rather upset with him when he did not come home from college for Easter. He had also missed celebrating her

birthday which was over the Easter holiday. Instead he was visiting the monastery. When he returned home before going back to college his mother met him at the front door and said, "Have you been down at that monastery again? And I said yes. And she said, are you going to enter it? And I said yes. And I had not made my mind up until she asked me." The other monk had been allowed to stay at the monastery as an observer and wanted to let his parents know where he was at. At the end of the second day of being an observer he called them and said, "Look I just called to tell you I'm safe and sound. I know this is going to sound strange but I think I found what I'm looking for. I think I'm home. They said well where are you? I said well I'm at a Trappist monastery in Georgia. They were like, well, you know, don't do anything stupid. That's nice. I said yeah, I know it sounds crazy. I'm just telling you that's what it feels like today. I don't know what it's going to feel like tomorrow."

Selected Life Experiences

There were three themes that emerged from the monks' comments about their life experiences that significantly influenced their road to the monastic life. The first theme was the need that some of the monks expressed for living in community/monastic spirituality. The second theme was that some of them always knew, even at a young age, that they had a monastic, contemplative vocation. The third theme was about certain events that triggered their desire to become monks and set them on a path to the monastic life.

As a young man, one of the monks was studying to be a diocesan priest, "I loved the seminary, but the seminary back then was run pretty much like a monastery, very strict, really structured.... I realized when I leave the seminary this is not going to continue and I think that's pretty much why I left." He left primarily because he feared that the sense of community he experienced in the seminary could not be replicated or found in the typical parish rectory. Like the previous monk, this next monk was in seminary and was preparing to be ordained a deacon when he realized, "God wasn't calling me to diocesan priesthood. He was calling me more to this place." This monk was in search of "something more and different and deeper and more spiritual" than what the diocesan priesthood could provide. Similarly, this next monk left the seminary, joined the military, entered the workforce, and eventually considered a monastic vocation. He did not reconsider becoming a diocesan priest. He left the seminary because he believed he had more of a contemplative calling. Another monk had served for 20 years as a diocesan priest and was in search of community life. Monastic life in its totality, or "the life," is what drew this priest to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit. He said, "Like marriage or the single life, you don't have to advertise that. You don't go recruiting people to get married or to live a single life. It speaks for itself. And I think this kind of life, and not just as defined here, but say religious life with very broad strokes. People who develop a certain sensitivity towards beauty and life and God and all that stuff. That attracts." Another monk, a priest, had previously

belonged to a religious order and was drawn to the monastic life initially through centering prayer. Gradually over time his prayer had become more contemplative and he realized, especially after a heartfelt prayer experience, that he should join the Trappists at Holy Spirit.

One of the monks knew from the time he was a teenager that he wanted to be a monk. At 18 years of age he realized he was too young to become a monk so he joined the military for four years. While on his first annual leave from the military he visited Holy Spirit, “Stayed a month, and I fell in love with the place, the community. I knew that this was where I belonged.” After finishing the remaining three years of his military commitment he joined the monastery. This monk believed that his military service reconfirmed the strong sense that he had in his teens that he was called to monastic life, “I think life does talk to us. I think things happen in our lives if we have the eyes to see that they point in a direction.” Another monk noted, “I always knew that I was meant to be monk.” This monk also served in the military and was stationed near the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. “So I went to Gethsemani and was blown away. I think that was the seed of the monastic vocation right there.” Another monk believed he had a vocation, since elementary school, to become a brother in a religious order. He joined several different religious orders and worked in various occupations before eventually discerning that he was called to the monastic life.

Another monk, who had left the monastic life eight years earlier, was walking past a church, one which he passed every day but had not entered for many years, and he felt compelled to go inside. “So I opened up the doors and Mass was going on. And I walk in and that was it. It was another one of these experiences of, you know, you’re going back...It was the same draw, the same pull. And it made sense, it all made sense.” Another monk, who was scheduled to start his first year in a diocesan seminary, was reading a pamphlet about contemplative life while on the subway on his way to his summer job. He came across a passage that stated that one of the popes had said cloistered contemplative life is the most effective apostolate. According to this monk, “It was like Uncle Sam and the poster saying, I want you. And I had to do it...I had to. I had to...I was finally doing the thing I was made to do, connecting with the person I was made to connect with and that was Christ.” Another monk was a student in Washington, DC and was active in the racial integration movement. He believed that the best thing he could do to eliminate segregation was to pray. He noticed a picture in the *Washington Post* about a new monastery that was being built in Conyers, Georgia. He visited the monastery and joined, “Knowing that as coming into the Deep South, knowing that I was coming into the South to pray concerning the problem of segregation. I was drawn right into the heart of it.” Another monk, who was a brother in a religious order, had started reading Thomas Merton and became interested in monastic life. His provincial demanded that he quit reading Merton and he did, but by that time he had caught the contemplative bug. Eventually he visited Gethsemani, but there were over 200 monks there so he visited Holy Spirit and joined the community. Another monk, a self-described long-haired

hippie in his youth, discovered his monastic calling in what some might call a most unconventional manner. According to him, “I would roll a joint and smoke it and walk down to a place where there was a good view of the reservoir and I would sit there and read the New Testament. Strange kind of combination, but God works with everything I think...And so reading it, it became very clear to me that God was real...and that God was in love with me. And God wanted to be loved back and that was mindboggling to me...I don’t know how else to say it except to say that I fell in love with God.” After consulting with a variety of priests and even Mother Theresa of Calcutta, he was struggling and waiting “For God to tell me what I was supposed to do.” He was not called to be a parish priest but in a conversation with a young priest he said, “I’m trying to give myself to God and I don’t know how to do it.” This priest suggested he contact the Trappists. He did and visited three Trappist monasteries before coming to Holy Spirit. Another monk had an awakening on a trip to the Californian desert in the late 1960s. This desert experience weaved itself in and out of his life over the next three decades. While on a retreat in the late 1990s he had what he called “a profound experience with the Eucharist” that left him discombobulated and numb. He sought some spiritual direction and eventually determined he had a monastic vocation.

Discussion

Gautier, Wiggins, and Holland noted that, “Catholics do not typically see encouragement of vocations as something that is their responsibility” (2015, p. 16). Nevertheless, what impact have family encouragement and life experiences had on the monastic vocations of the monks interviewed for this project? Family encouragement and life experiences have impacted each of the monks’ journeys, but not always in the same manner. As Bengtson, Putney, and Harris (2013) noted, families do matter in the transmission of faith and values and parents do influence their children’s religious and spiritual lives. This was indicative of what the monks experienced as children since most were raised in religious households. In response to the question about whether they were raised in a religious household one monk stated, “Yes...we were really connected with the parish and everything was religion, parish.” Another monk replied that, “We prayed the rosary regularly, we did centering prayer, went to a contemplative prayer group, and to church during the week.” Still another monk mentioned, “We were very Catholic. Religion was very important to us. I had two Jesuit uncles and my father had considered becoming a Jesuit.” Another monk responded, “Very much so...I am very grateful that I was raised in the ‘50s as a Methodist and not as a Catholic because there was no doubt that God is a loving God. I as a child had no strong teaching about sin, guilt, Hell, any of that.” Still another monk recalled, “Yes, very religious. Dad got us down to saying the Morning Offering and a set of prayers every morning...and we’d pray the rosary every night.” While another monk noted, “We were raised in a religious household in the sense of great reverence

for the Lord...we were taught to behave as good Christians...But spirituality was a word that my mother and father would not have recognized.” While most monks were raised in religious households, this was not true for all monks. As one monk stated, “Nah, not really. It was areligious...I went to church because I went to Catholic school.”

As Bendyna and Gautier (2009) found, some religious (members of religious institutes) received a lot of encouragement to pursue their religious vocation from their families, while others received little if any encouragement. Most of the monks, either initially before they became monks or eventually after they became monks, received encouragement from their families for their monastic vocation. Several families were hesitant about their sons and siblings joining a monastic order because they were fearful that they would not see them again. The monastic vow of stability limits a monk’s ability to leave the monastery. Of course monks leave the monastery to conduct monastery business, for vacations (two weeks every other year), and for medical and other appointments. Monks’ families and friends are welcome to visit them at the monastery, but the monks are discouraged from leaving the monastery grounds unless they have a valid reason to do so and they must also have the Abbot’s permission to leave the monastery. One of the monks noted that since he joined the monastery his family, including his two brothers and their wives along with their children and even grandchildren, “come here every Thanksgiving which is really pleasant. We probably have gathered more as a family since I’ve been here than before because we’d like visit individually but we were not a family that had big family reunions, which we’re able to do here because of the space.”

While some parents and family members were hesitant or had mixed feelings about their sons and brothers following the road to the monastery, only one family was strongly against their loved one becoming a monk. One monk noted that his mother even prayed that he would pursue a religious vocation and another monk related that his mother prayed for him to return to the church after a long absence from it. Several other monks mentioned that their parents were supportive of whatever endeavors they had chosen to pursue, and another monk who had been a diocesan priest prior to joining the monastery stated that his parents had been supportive of his priesthood.

The monks’ life experiences also contributed to their monastic vocation. Some of them were drawn to the monastery because they desired to live in a religious community which fostered a Cistercian monastic spirituality. Others knew at an early age that they were called to the monastic life, while still others were influenced by certain events that navigated them toward the monastery. One of the more revealing comments made by one of the monks about why he became a monk had to do with the lack of community life he experienced as a diocesan priest. He was drawn to monastic spirituality and the monastery largely because of what he called “the life.” He mentioned that the life, “It speaks for itself.” He further elaborated that, “People who develop a certain sensitivity towards beauty and life and God and all that stuff. That attracts.” I was moved by that comment since I have been an academic for over three

decades and I too was drawn to the life, not the life of a monk but that of an academic. There are certainly some parallels between these two lives. I agree with this monk that the life, and in my case, my life as an academic, also speaks for itself.

I also found the following comment by another monk very insightful: "I think life does talk to us. I think things happen in our lives if we have the eyes to see that they point in a direction." Some of the monks' comments implied that oftentimes the meaning(s) of their life experiences went unnoticed or unappreciated. Some of them, for one reason or another, struggled to find their way or path in life. Several of the quotations in the previous section of this paper provide compelling evidence that some of the monks had "the eyes to see" or the ability to stop and think about the direction their lives were taking, and looked for clues about how they should live their lives that pointed them in the direction of a monastic vocation.

Bendyna and Gautier (2009) noted that the most recent generation of religious had more diverse life experiences than previous generations of religious. This is probably because 70% had earned at least a bachelor's degree before becoming a religious. All of the monks who were interviewed for this project had been either employed or recently employed, in school or recently completed school, or had recently completed military service prior to joining the monastery. This number is comparable to the figure found by Bendyna and Gautier (2009) that 90% of the most recent generation of religious had been employed before becoming a religious. Although among the monks I interviewed, 73% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher (some of those with advanced degrees earned them after joining the monastery), and they also had a wide range of life experiences before joining the monastery. This is notable considering the advanced average age of the monks I interviewed.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief glimpse into the lives of the monks at the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit. It noted some of the similarities and differences in their family backgrounds and life experiences. Most were reared in two parent Catholic families, attended Catholic schools, and the overwhelming majority grew up in the mid-west and the northeast of the United States. Family encouragement played an important role in the lives of these monks and in their monastic vocations. Some families were more supportive than others of their family member's vocation, but only one family was originally opposed to their family member's vocation. Some of the monks knew from an early age that they were called to the monastic life, others were drawn specifically to community life and monastic spirituality, while still others were influenced by certain events which motivated them to take the road to monastic life.

My intent has not been to provide an exhaustive rendering or analysis of the role that family encouragement and life experiences played in the monastic journey of these men, but to write more of an introduction to a particular example of lived religion and some of the factors

that influenced their decision to become monks. Hence this paper is certainly not a complete picture of their daily lives. For example, in addition to prayer (Smith, 2014), work is an important part of their lives (see Hillery, 1983, 1992 for a discussion about monastic occupations). This aspect was not addressed here other than acknowledging that the monks support themselves through various ventures.

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