



The Weston Priory Community in 1966.

## Patterns and Growth in Spirituality<sup>1</sup>

- *brother John*

**A** RECENT VISITOR TO THE PRIORY COMMENTED THAT she has been returning for an annual visit for more than thirty years. She said that what attracts her is that she finds that the Priory is always the same and yet is always new. In our times, change is so rapid that for many it is disorienting, threatening, and destructive. In matters of religion, faith and spirituality this has occasioned paralyzing fear of change. Yet, in our experience of life we know that change is essential to growth. In our Community discussions we often ponder the mysterious combination of monastic stability and change.

From the earliest days of the Priory's existence, Abbot Leo taught that the Rule of Benedict inspired by the Gospels is the stable pattern for monastic life. He wisely added that the Community should remain open to the Spirit. Throughout our history, the Weston Community has experienced the wisdom of Abbot Leo's insight.

I came to join the Priory Community in 1957, when it was just four years old. In 1961, after five years of training and living with

<sup>1</sup> The original and extended version of this memoir will appear in the 2012 issue of *The Chrysalis Reader*, volume 15, Lawson & Lawson, West Chester, PA. It will be available at the Weston Priory Gallery Shop in autumn, 2012.



The Weston Priory Community in 2010.

the Community, life seemed quite securely rooted in the pattern of monastic life. At that point I celebrated my solemn monastic commitment with final profession of Obedience, Stability, and Common Life (*Conversatio Morum*).

At that time, applicants to the Community were numerous and young, usually drop outs from college. There was such a continuous coming and going that brothers joked that the front entrance to the Priory was a revolving door! Evidently there was a need for clearer criteria for entrance into the Community. Recent studies in Psychology were addressing this question. It was suggested that insights from the study of Psychology could be of benefit to the Weston Community. In light of this suggestion Abbot Leo agreed to send me off for a few years of study in Psychology. But the Community was economically just about surviving and hardly with the means for such a major undertaking. It seemed a little risky.

A few of us began to search for a solution. We visited William Bier, S.J., at Fordham University where he pioneered in psychological research on religious vocations. He confessed that studies at Fordham in this field were still largely theoretical and recommend-

ed the School of Psychology at Ottawa University as being more practical and suited to our situation.

We had friendly relations with faculty at Ottawa U. since my seminary studies there in the 1940's. At that time I became acquainted with Raymond Shevenel, O.M.I., Director of the School of Psychology. When we approached him from Weston in 1961, he welcomed our community interest in vocational studies and offered free tuition to enter studies there. My earlier seminary experience also provided a solution to the cost of housing. A seminary classmate, Tom O'Rourke, was pastor of the parish in Ottawa East. He offered room and board in exchange for weekend ministry in the parish.

This venture, from 1962 to 1964, proved to be quite a departure from the monastic pattern of life—simple and enclosed, rustic and somewhat secure—that had engaged me at Weston.

Once in Ottawa, on Saturday afternoons and evenings I offered the ministry of Sacramental Forgiveness in the Church confessional and on Sundays celebrated a parish Eucharist, preached, and taught Gregorian Chant to the assembled congregation before the High Mass. (Congregational singing of Gregorian Chant was considered a bit *avant garde* by liturgists during that early period of Vatican Council II.) During the rest of the week I was free to attend classes and study in the comfortable room assigned to me.

Classes and lectures at the university were fascinating and mind expanding. Alongside several notable Canadian scholars, professors with names such as Ramounas, Sidlaskas, Verblosky, and Wyspianski, represented psychological scholarship from Estonia, Latvia, and other countries behind the Iron Curtain. Ottawa University had offered refuge and recognition to extraordinary thinkers fleeing repression and seeking creative social and religious freedom and advancement. Courses in Methodology, Developmental Psychology, Diagnostics and Mental Testing, Personality, Pathology, and dreadful (!) Statistics, opened students to new perspectives on human life and development.

Beside the class work, there were experiences of monitored interviews and testing procedures. Even more significantly, students were encouraged to organize small discussion groups to share insights and pursue questions raised in class. I joined a diverse and stimulating group that met weekly at the home of Truda and Imrich Rosenberg, refugees from Poland under Nazi domination. A Jewish rabbi, an Irish-Canadian school superintendent, a young gay Episcopalian, and I rounded out the circle that became good friends and challenging dialog partners. Differing viewpoints became enriching insights rather than threatening competitors for truth.

New horizons of learning and friendly relationships with persons of differing religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds did not weaken my monastic identity, so strongly etched by the pattern of the Rule

and monastic tradition. Weekly letters to and from the brothers at Weston Priory and joyful holiday visits to the Priory helped to integrate this adventure beyond the set pattern of the Rule into a constructive element in our life and growth as a Benedictine Community. The mutual love, interest, and concern of the brothers made it possible to go beyond fears of difference and to integrate a more inclusive, open, and creative dynamic in Community growth.

Following is a sample of the weekly letters of exchange with the Community that marked this experience of *Pattern and Growth in Spirituality*:

Nov. 25, 1962

Dear Brethren.

Greetings from the Ottawa expedition! .... All is quite well here in Ottawa .... There was considerable excitement in the church the day before yesterday when a couple of little anarchists set fire to one of the confessionals. Father O'Rourke had to form a bucket brigade with the housekeepers to put it out. Fortunately they were able to put it out before it spread any further.

We have been doing some IQ testing in the school lately, and my last assignment was at a Protestant school out in the country. It was very interesting. The teachers pick out special subjects for us—they seem to be little characters that might be causing the teachers to have psychological problems. My favorite this past week was a little lad named Clayton—a nice name but no reference intended to living characters that you may know! [brother Augustine's original name was Clayton.]

Well, Clayton is a little ten year old. The principal was dragging him along the corridor by the arm, trying to convince him that he had not done anything wrong and that she wasn't going to punish him. Finally she was able to shove him through the door of the examining room where I was anxiously waiting, and she introduced us with the words, "This man is going to ask you some questions."

As we were about to start the test, Clayton started to rub his hands together in great glee. "Ya know," he confided, "I just love to get into trouble. It's just so much fun to get into real mischief! I got a big pocketful of balloons and I've been busting em all over the place. Maybe I otta start busting em in here, eh?" Well this is the signal for me to get out a package of lifesav-

ers — these, I have found, are the most powerful psychological tool that has been discovered since the law of specific energies. It was just a matter of getting over each little crisis with poor Clayton. He is really a nice little boy though he doesn't seem to think so. At one point he said, "ya know, I'm a real nasty fellow — real bad." Then he described how his pa had beaten him up till he was all blue on his shoulder for being bad... and how his pa drives like crazy when he's drunk... and how they got in a bad wreck... and how a dog jumped on him once and tore his face and was "gonna rip me to shreds — see the scar?" etc.

By the end of our testing session we were good pals — and I was just about out of lifesavers. But he came back after lunch to visit a while, so I guess the test was not too painful. ...So there's a sample of some of our assignments — really the IQ part is far from the most interesting part of such an experience....

Hoping you are all fine and happy. Please pray for me.

Faternally in Our Lord,  
Fr. John

The above light exchange with the Community, initiated at the beginning of an adventurous experiment beyond the monastic model, highlights both the importance of a valued pattern of spirituality and the willingness to reach beyond the limits of that pattern to continued growth. A sense of humor and the openness to other perspectives, experiences and understandings, made it possible to risk and go beyond the fear of what is different. The courage to embrace newly expanded horizons may not have resolved the problem of the revolving door of vocations coming and going, but it broke down barriers and enriched the spiritual development of the Community.

Fifty years later, the words of Gordon Allport continue to shed light on the connection between Pattern and Growth:

"....Both humor and religion shed new light on life's troubles by taking them out of the routine frame. To view our problems humorously is to see them as of little consequence; to view them religiously is to see them in a serious scheme of changed meaning. In either case a new perspective results."<sup>2</sup> ■

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<sup>2</sup> *Pattern and Growth in Personality*, Gordon Allport, p. 301, Holt, Reinhart, Winston, N.Y. cf. Chapter 12, "The Mature Personality."