

# Holy Fools

## *Monks against the modern world*

**Molly Worthen**

*An Infinity of Little Hours: Five Young Men and Their Trial of Faith in the Western World's Most Austere Monastic Order*

By Nancy Klein Maguire

Public Affairs, 2006

*Into Great Silence*

A film by Philip Gröning

Zeitgeist Films (Germany), 2006

When a fellow passenger on the *Mauretania* asked Bernie Shea why he was leaving New York to join a monastery in England, he answered, "I must be about my Father's business." Yet later on in the Atlantic crossing in 1960, he fell in love with a young woman from Manchester. The ship docked in Liverpool, and instead of going to the Carthusian charterhouse, Parkminster, he took the woman out to a movie. His vocation wavered. Then luck (or God, depending on how you see it) intervened. The last commercial preceding the film was an ad for Chartreuse—the Carthusians' signature green liqueur. Bernie "didn't need any more signs," writes Nancy Klein Maguire. He rose from his seat, bade the young lady goodbye, and caught a bus for Parkminster—where, in the early hours of dawn, he faced the heavy oak doors and pulled the bell rope.

The Carthusians are the most austere monastic order in the Western world. Founded in 1084 by St. Bruno, who fled the corruption of the medieval Catholic Church for the mountain wilderness of the French Alps, the Carthusians have proven extremely resistant to change. Only recently have running water and electric light appeared in their charterhouses, as Carthusian monasteries are known. The monks live in solitude, as Bruno did: but for recitation of the major divine offices, Sunday and feast-day meals together in the refectory, a weekly walk, and Sunday recreation, Carthusians keep to their cells and spend most of their time in prayer. They wear hairshirts and spend more days each year fasting than not.

"*Cartusia nunquam reformata quia nunquam deformat*" a Carthusian slogan reads: "never reformed because never deformed." Over the centuries, church councils and Vatican decrees attempted to modernize the Carthusian rule, but the monks always protested—though they did acquiesce to Urban V's order that they wear hats in bad weather. Vatican II reformed the order's governance and allowed the occasional use of the vernacular. Today the monks receive

their tonsures with electric clippers rather than a dull straight razor, and they have flush toilets in their cells. Still, to those few outsiders who are permitted to visit—even the monks' families may stay in the guesthouse for only two days each year—Carthusians live outside the bounds of time.

The men in the order have chosen the monastic life. That fact, more than any other, may explain a recent spate of interest in the Carthusians, in the form of two new accounts of this ancient ascetic calling. Both are equally compelling, yet wholly at odds.

Last year, writer Nancy Klein Maguire—herself married to an ex-Carthusian—published *An Infinity of Little Hours*, the story of a group of young men who became novices at the Carthusian charterhouse in Sussex on the eve of Vatican II. On the basis of extensive interviews, she reconstructs their motivations, friendships, spiritual crises, and daily routines with novelistic detail. This year, the Carthusians are also a surprise underground hit in movie theaters. Sixteen years after first asking the order for permission to film a documentary (and receiving the answer that the monks were not yet ready), German director Philip Gröning gained access to shoot *Into Great Silence*. The film is nearly three hours long. It has no plot and almost no dialogue. Gröning immerses the viewer in the sensory world of the Grande Chartreuse: the passage of seasons in the French Alps; the rhythm of candlelit Gregorian chant; the regular plunge of monks' fingers into a stone font of holy water. This is the silence of men who wait upon their Father's business.

The monks who appear in *Into Great Silence* ignore the camera even while the voyeur is fixed for long, uncomfortable minutes upon their hands clasped in prayer inside their cells, or the crinkle of their temples as they ponder a strange bit of Latin in the Church Fathers. The film follows two young novices who join the order, and they betray no sign of self-doubt or discomfort, save a fleeting quaver in the first moments of their debut chant at vespers. Gröning's monks are ghosts in their white habits, existing in this world but not of it, trusting in the path that God has laid for them. The only monk who

speaks directly to the camera—a fragile old man with bird's-nest eyebrows and a white cane—assures us that there is no cause to fear death or to worry in life. He thanks God for blinding him: it has done good for his soul. His brother monks pause for silent staring contests with the camera, but no more. Occasionally one purses his lips or permits the faint beginnings of a smile, as if he is on the verge of telling us a secret but thought better of it.

Maguire's book betrays the film, as Bernie and the other men she profiles are much like us, despite their rejection of so many ordinary human pleasures and experiences. They struggle with their new life of constant fasting and little sleep on their straw pallets, complicated by politics between the older monks. The tensions are surprisingly complex, for men who speak so little. One novice never finds his balance, and his efforts to punish himself land him in the hospital, hypothermic and shaking, fingernails white. Another leaves when he discovers he is gay. The monks live in fear of homosexuality and "the sin of self-abuse." To help one young monk resist the latter temptation, the novice master urges him to sleep on his stomach and provides twine so he can bind his hands over his head at night. The novice obeys, but begins to suffer severe headaches. He is advised to leave the order and get married.

No one forces the novices to remain at the charterhouse. On the contrary, if they fail to prove themselves to be Carthusian material, the brothers can vote to evict them at any time. It would be wrong, however, to say that the men stay entirely of their own free will. All but one of Maguire's subjects leave the monastery in the end, but not without protracted battles with their own sense of pride, devotion, and what may only be called a command to the soul. A vocation is a spiritual calling, a natural, almost unconscious tropism toward a particular sort of life. Carthusian monks do not take their solemn vows until five years after beginning their novitiate, for one cannot be certain of his vocation immediately; he must discern it, like a soft but insistent whisper. In an age that glorifies free will and self-determination and requires creativity and celebrity of its patron saints,

we tend to think of these silent, cloistered men as pariahs who have chosen a peculiar lifestyle because no other place will have them. We cannot believe them when they say that they are there because they think prayer is real.

Since the earliest days of the church, vocation has often been a matter of convenience. Monasteries were appealing places for younger sons with no inheritance or prospects. Convents cared for widows. Even extreme asceticism could seem like a pragmatic choice in the Middle Ages: daily life was fraught with brutality and untreatable physical pain, and the desire to escape was perfectly sensible. But no matter a monastery's practical appeal, the medieval religious life demanded the same submission that Carthusian vows do today: the acknowledgment that ultimate meaning is not self-made.

More than the fasting and prayer, this is the vocational principle that makes the Carthusian life seem to modern observers like a species of insanity, or even suicide. After reading *An Infinity of Little Hours* and watching *Into Great Silence*, I left convinced that self-denial is somehow an intrinsic good, that monks must be better people than I am, and I struggled to imagine what the calling that kept them to their cells might sound like. The image of the silent monk kneeling for hours at his *prie-dieu* is unfamiliar—even exasperating—but it sticks. Even though Carthusian monks account for only a small portion of the total population of Catholic religious orders—far more are out in the world teaching, preaching, farming, and helping the needy—somehow the lone ascetic lost in thought, more than any other figure, is the monastic icon that always appears in our mind's eye. He baffles us, yet somehow we want and need him, “like a navigation buoy at sea in order to see where we are,” in the words of Søren Kierkegaard.

On the face of things, Maguire's book and Gröning's film contradict one another. So did Bernie's certainty, that afternoon aboard the ocean liner, that he was about his Father's business—and the loneliness and doubt he later felt in his cell when his mother sent him long underwear with a note saying, “A monk that's warm

prays better,” only to have it confiscated as “indulgent” by the novice master. Perhaps a vocation is both absolutely authentic and a lie that we live until it is true. It is a secret call to an individual, intended also for the eavesdropping of passersby. Meanwhile, the monks who stared us down at Grande Chartreuse meant for us to understand only one thing: if we expect them to explain themselves, then we are missing the point.